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ETHICAL PLASTICITY

INFORMATION DIFFUSION AFFECTING CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

N.KLEE, H. WEIDER, Y. YI, V. SUING



TO SHOP ETHICALLY?

To shop ethically is defined as “choosing goods that are ethically sourced, ethically made and ethically distributed”[1]. It means making a choice regarding the perceived social benefit of a product and investing your money to financially confirm that belief system. However, **what if the perceived social benefit is inaccurately portrayed due to disinformation?** Disinformation online **distorts ethical frameworks by spreading misleading narratives that influence public perception** and decision-making. When people rely on false or biased information, their **ability to make socially conscious choices is compromised**.

We can see this in action when we look at the data. **Research shows that while modern youth vocalize a desire for sustainable options, their purchasing choices show otherwise**[2].

[1]World Vision. (n.d.). *A guide to ethical consumerism*. World Vision. <https://www.worldvision.ca/no-child-for-sale/resources/a-guide-to-ethical-consumerism>

[2]Bemporad, R. (2023, May 19). *Inside Gen Z's conflicting passions for both sustainability and shopping*. Fast Company. <https://www.fastcompany.com/90897239/inside-gen-zs-conflicting-passion-for-both-sustainability-and-shopping>

PROBLEMATIC STATEMENT

Given how vast the information marketplace is, how many influential apps there are and how many ways information interpretation can be shaped semiotically via individual sense-making and biases[3][4], we narrowed our scope to where we felt there was most impact.

We hope to explore and understand **the conceptual model of Gen Z buying ethics influenced on TikTok**



[3]Comes, T. (2016). *Cognitive biases in humanitarian sensemaking and decision-making lessons from field research*. 2016 IEEE International Multi-Disciplinary Conference on Cognitive Methods in Situation Awareness and Decision Support (CogSIMA). <https://doi.org/10.1109/cogsima.2016.7497786>

[4]Majumdar, T. (2025). *The impact of cognitive biases on consumer decision-making in online shopping: Analyzing the role of social proof and scarcity messaging*. International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research, 7(1). <https://www.ijfmr.com/papers/2025/1/34272.pdf>

YOUTH VULNERABILITY

Misinformation is abundant

1 in 5 TikToks contain misinformation[5]

TikTok has great reach for the youth demographic

There are almost 1 billion unique monthly TikTok visits and 1 in 4 TikTok users are under 20 years old[6]

Gen Z purchase habits influenced by ethical reasoning

According to the PDI Business of Sustainability Index, 91% of Gen Z say they want to buy from sustainable companies.[7]

Online environments shape purchasing choices

Youth purchasing behavior is shifting from traditional advertising to influencer-driven content. Trust in influencers and user-generated reviews significantly impacts buying decisions, making brands increasingly reliant on engaging, authentic content to drive sales. This shift underscores the growing power of social media in shaping consumer behaviour.[8]



- [5]Shearer, E., Naseer, S., Liedke, J., & Eva, K. (2024, June 12). *How Americans get news on Tiktok, X, Facebook and Instagram*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2024/06/12/how-americans-get-news-on-tiktok-x-facebook-and-instagram/>
- [6]Duarte, F. (2024, October 11). *TikTok User Age, Gender, & Demographics (2024)*. Exploding Topics. <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/tiktok-demographics>
- [7]PDI Technologies. (2023, July 27). *The green generation: Tracking Gen-Z Trends in Sustainable Purchasing Habits*. PDI Technologies, Inc. <https://pditechnologies.com/blog/tracking-gen-z-consumer-trends-sustainability/>
- [8]Munoz, T. (2022). *TikTok's influence on Generation Z's Buying Habits and Behavior*. Global Strategic Communications Student Work. <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/gsc/10>

FRAMING OUR SYSTEM

Framing **establishes the foundation and context** for all subsequent concepts and models. It is similar to planning a trip—once the itinerary is set, the purpose is defined, and decisions are made, changing direction becomes challenging.

Through framing, we first envision the system as a whole before exploring its individual components. We ask "why embark on this journey?" before determining "where to go." **This process helps define system boundaries and align perspectives. Ultimately, framing involves selecting the guiding paradigm that shapes the direction of a system or change initiative.**[9]

[9] Jones, P. H, & Van Ael, K. (2022). Design journeys through complex systems : ractice tools for systemic design. *Amsterdam: Bis Publishers*.

FRAMING OUR SYSTEM: TOOLS USED

Boundary Judgements

We use this critical process of defining and justifying the scope of a problem situation and the system being studied, ensuring that the analysis remains focused and relevant by taking a look at the larger systems and nested sub-systems to define our area of focus.

The Rich Picture

Used to capture and represent complex situations by depicting structures, processes, people, issues, and conflicts in a non-linear, unstructured way. It captures the essence of a complex situation, providing a holistic overview of the system under consideration.

Iterative Inquiry

Deconstructs a whole system into structures and processes, naming functions and identifying the purposes at each level. Discovers and defines boundaries, including system processes within these boundaries.

Causal Loop

Helps illustrate and analyze the relationships between different components within the system. It is used to understand how variables influence each other over time through feedback loops—either reinforcing or balancing.

Actor map

Used to identify and represent the key stakeholders in the system. Actor mapping helps to also identify rationality and uncover power relations influencing the system.

Influence Map

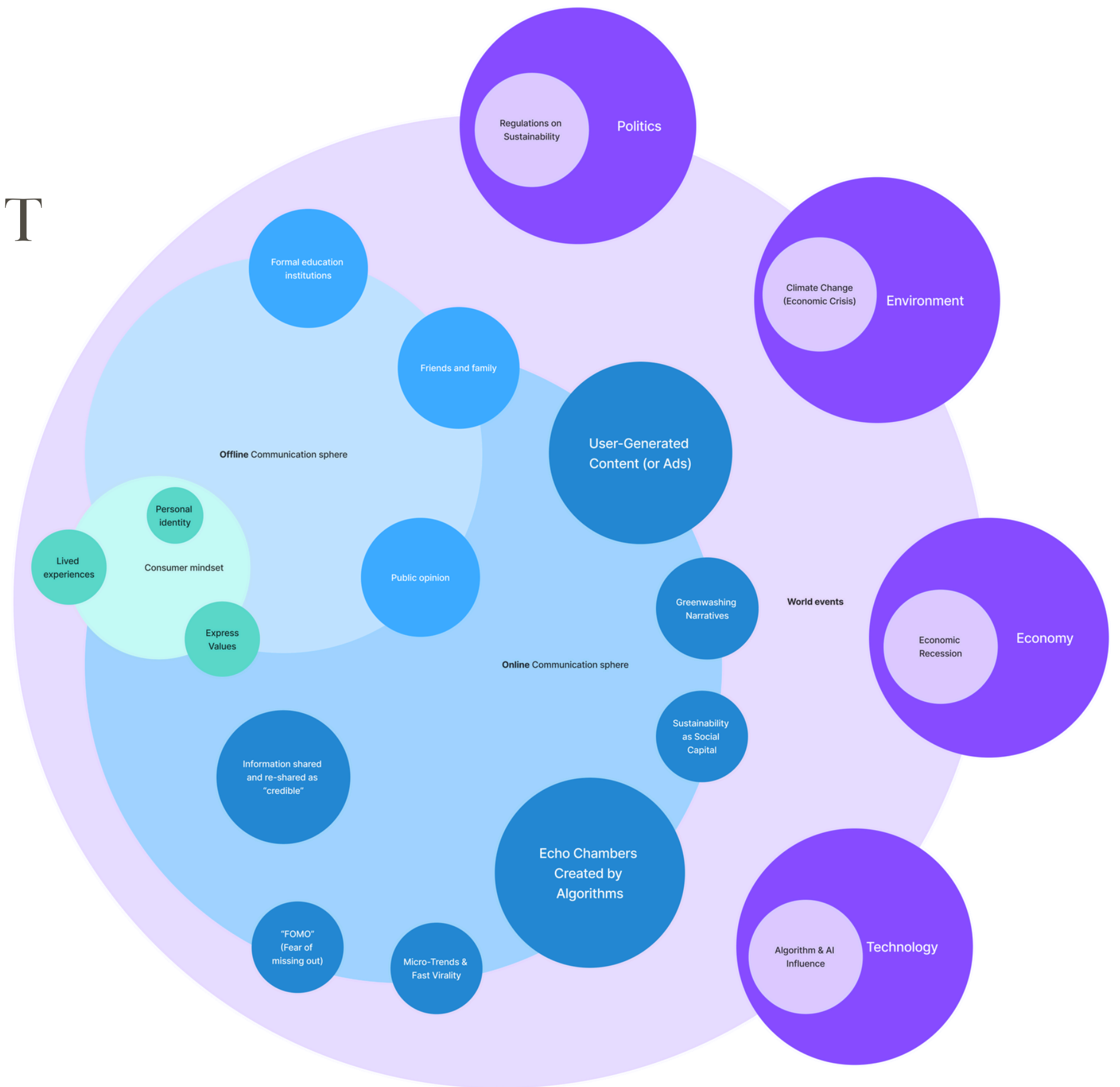
Used to analyze and visualize the power dynamics among stakeholders in a system. It helps identify who has the most control and interest, allowing for strategic decision-making and stakeholder management.

BOUNDARY JUDGEMENT

Information is everywhere.

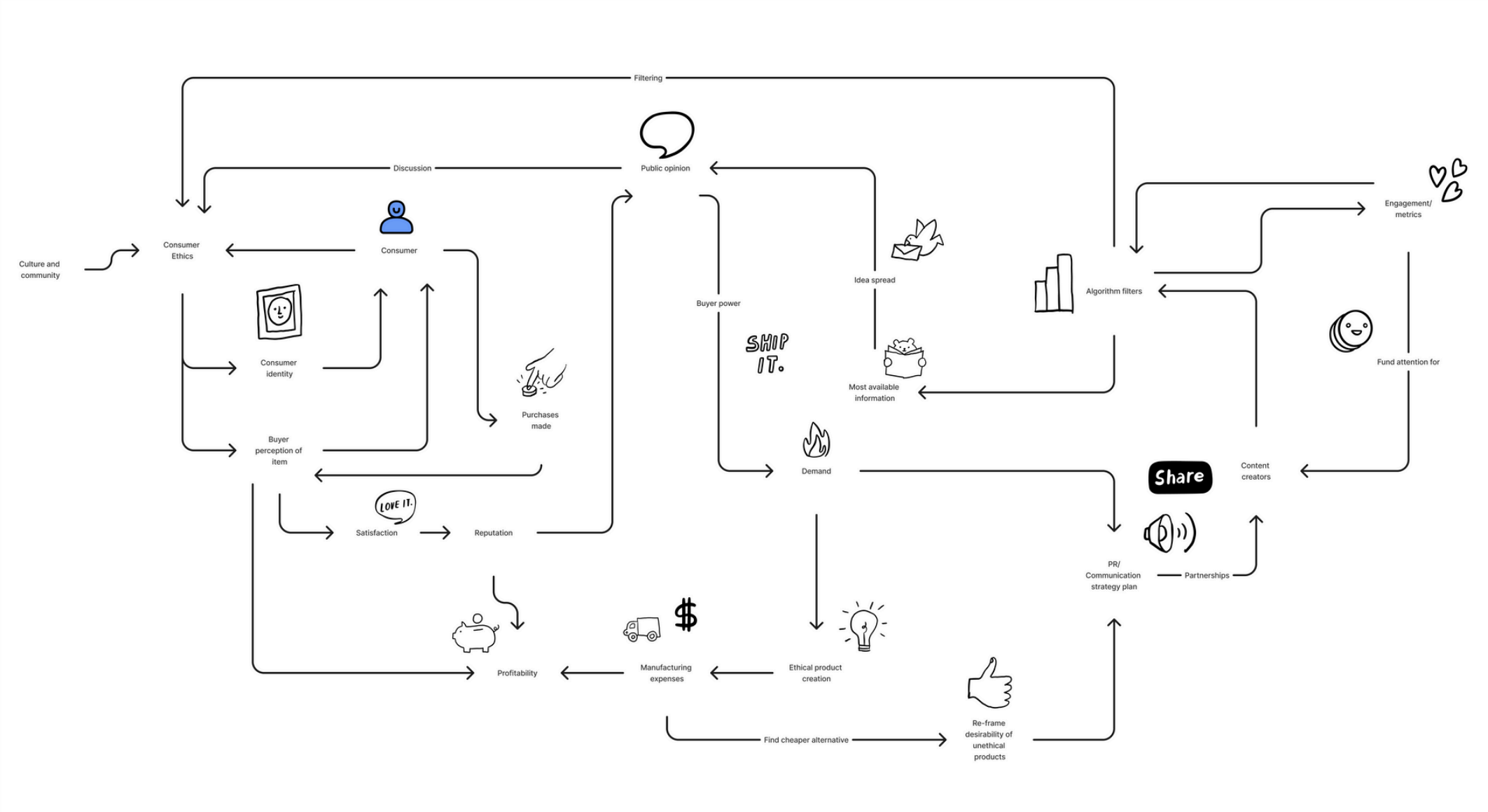
The environment of gathering knowledge and sense-making for consumers is really everything and everywhere due to how connected we are now globally. **No longer are our worlds exclusively shaped by immediate personal connections, but rather through endless virtual network influences**[10].

From perception to interpretation, **there are various social filters at different levels, online and offline, internal and external--all related to one another and continuing to overlap further.**



THE RICH PICTURE

(see appendix for larger version)



Using The Rich Picture to understand the holistic, non-linear relationships within the system, we could better trace our steps through the different influences that make it from business to influencer to consumer and then cycling back again.

We also explored the importance of how public opinion shapes consumer demand and how that consumer demand influences markets-- which in turn influence businesses. Meaning, **when unified, the consumer market gains the power to act as an autonomous force that moves markets.** When poeple are galvanized to act as a unified force, they does not passively do what brands tell them.

However, **due to the influence of social media algorithms and hyper-personalization, that consumer sovereignty is disempowered**[11].

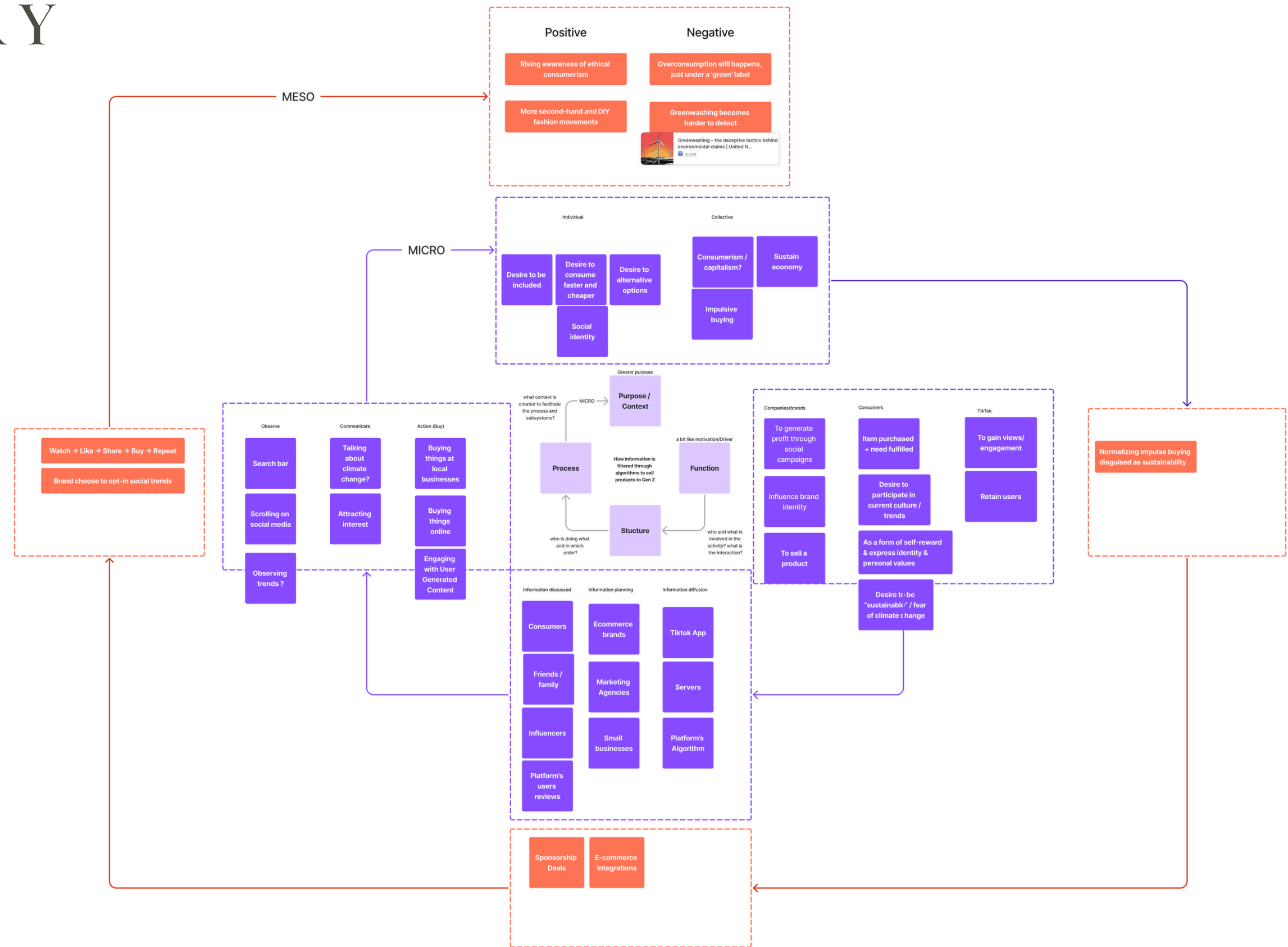
[11]Chirat, A. (2023, July 12). *Consumer sovereignty in the digital society*. HAL Archives Ouvertes. <https://hal.science/hal-04159795>

ITERATIVE INQUIRY

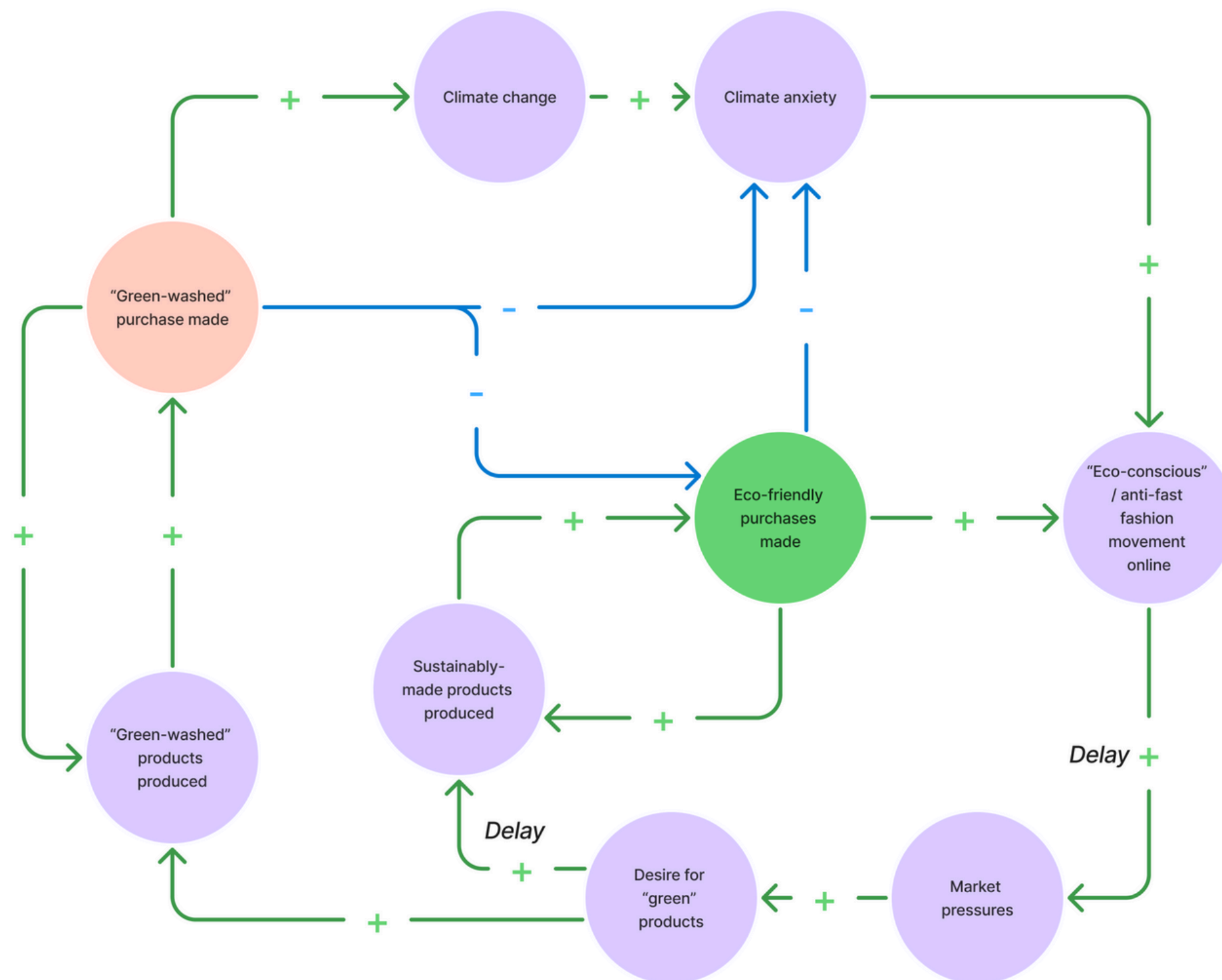
This process helped us make sense of the system at large and begin to break it down

Wanted to understand:

- How function is different amongst stakeholders
- How information travels through the structure
- What actions fuel the system
- Why does the system exist?



CAUSAL LOOP

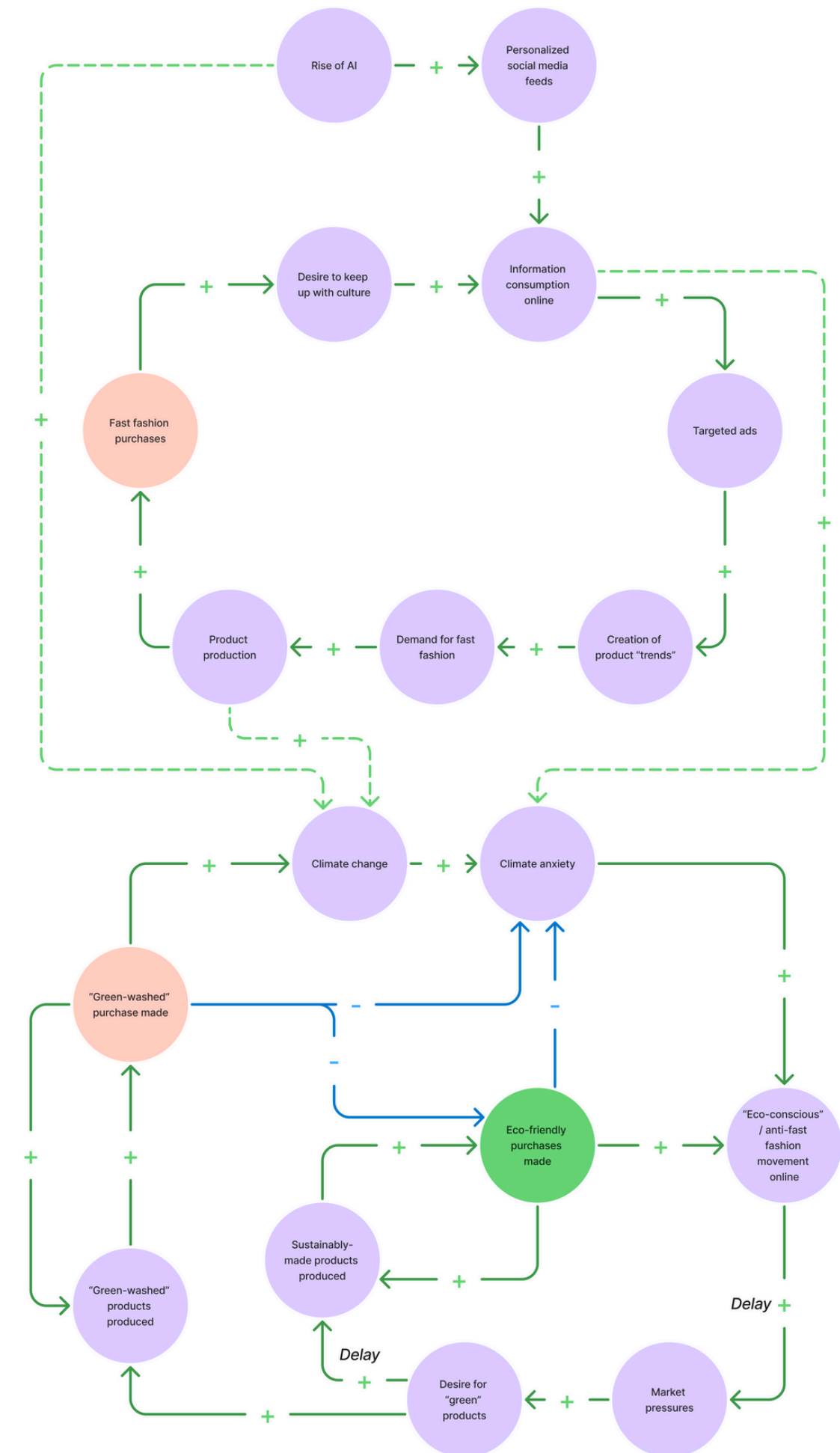


Climate anxiety can lead to better consumption habits ... while also laying traps that continue to reinforce the system.

CAUSAL LOOP

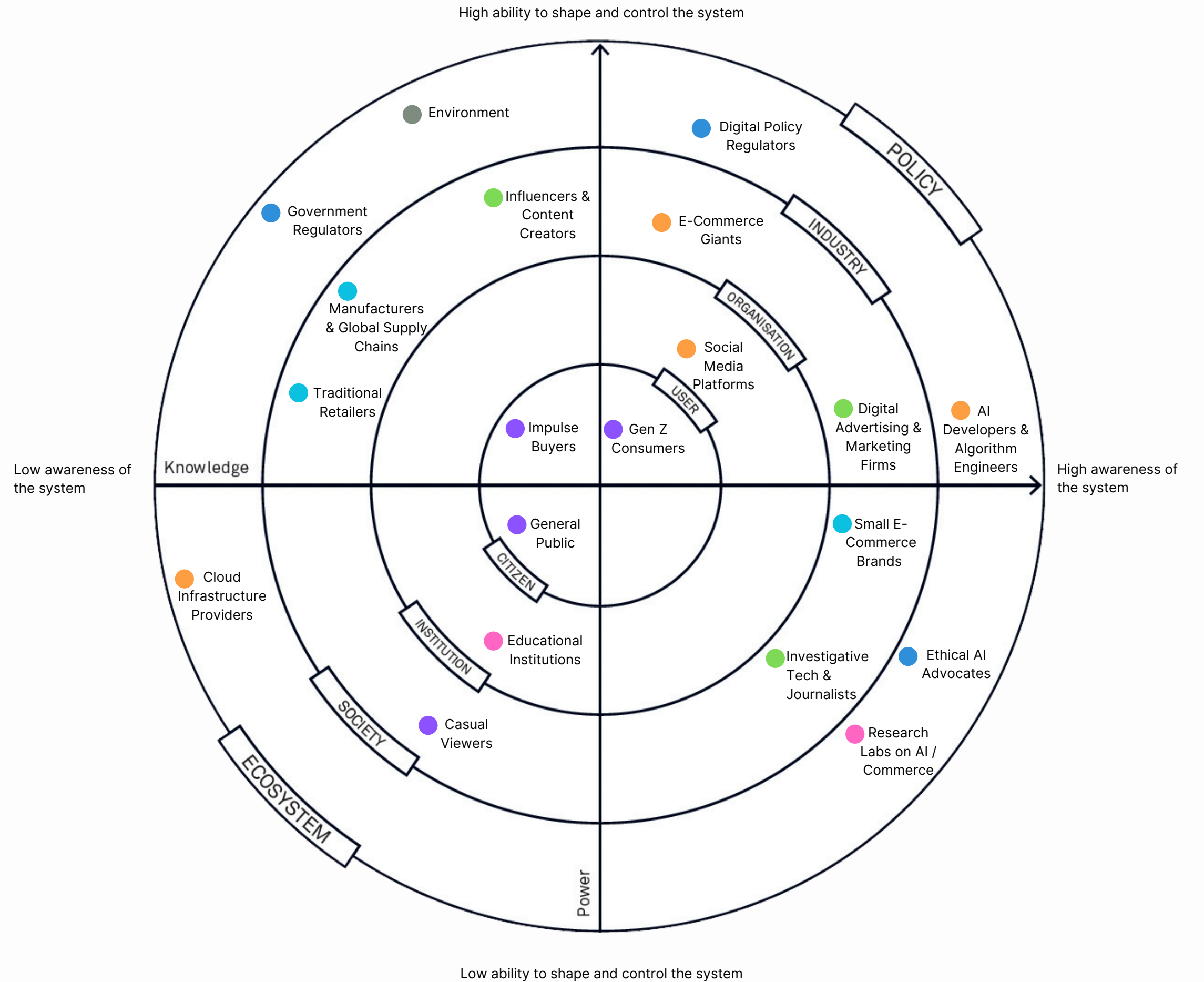
The bigger picture - an adjacent system that fuels the first.

- AI fuelling targeted ads, leading to trends that promote fast fashion
- AI and fast fashion fuel climate change



ACTOR MAP

- Regulators & Policy Enforcers
- Big Tech & Digital Infrastructure Owners
- Content & Advertising Ecosystem
- Retail & Supply Chain Stakeholders
- Consumers & Shopping Behaviour
- Knowledge & Research Institutions
- Environment



CLOSE AND ALLIANCE RELATIONSHIPS

Close Relationship (Mutual Reliance)

- Example: Traditional Retailers & E-Commerce Giants ↔ Suppliers & Factories
 - They rely on suppliers for production cycles, inventory, and logistics.
 - This is a continuous, interdependent relationship.

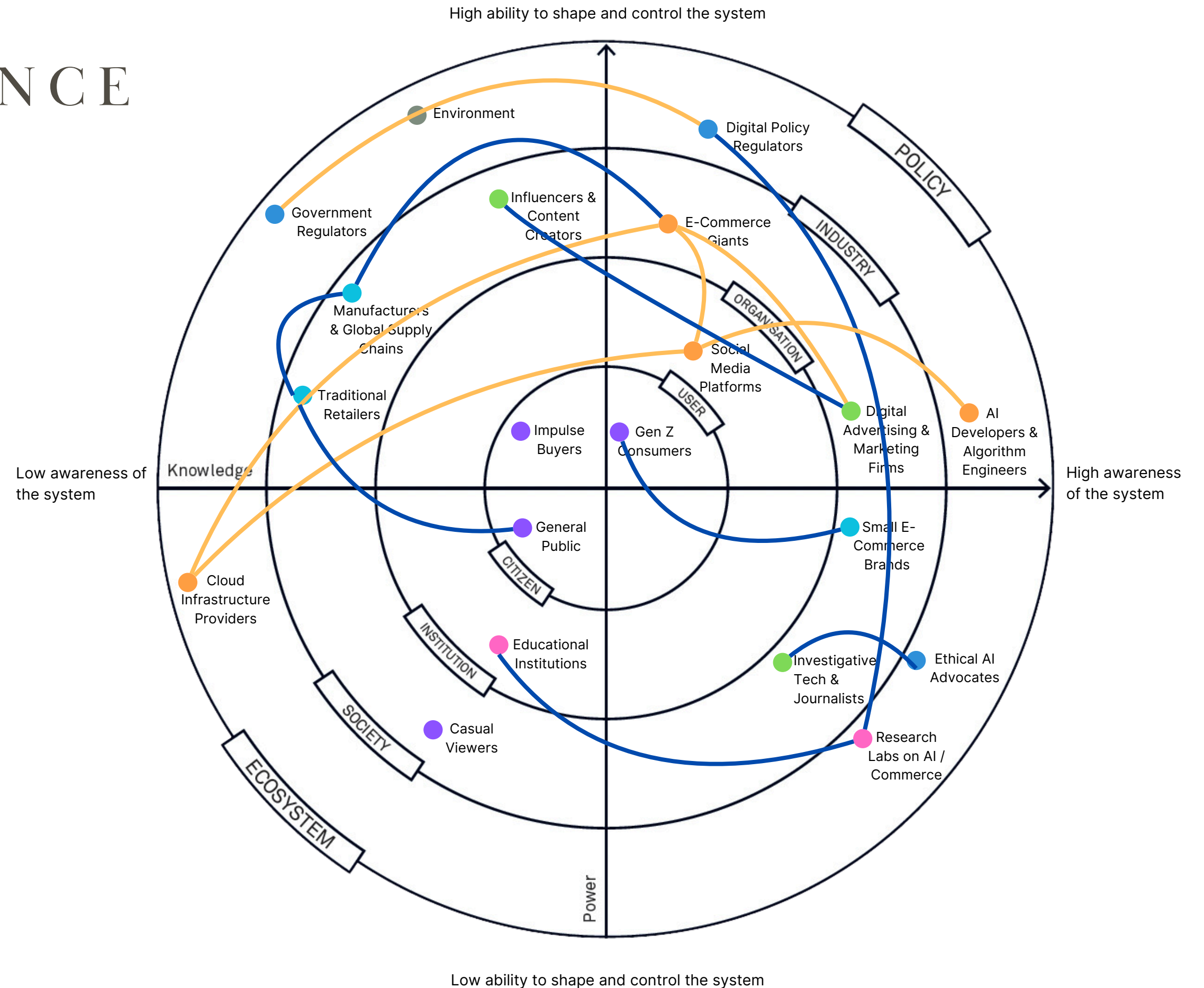
Alliance Relationship (Strategic Partnership)

- Example: E-Commerce Giants ↔ Digital Marketing Firms
 - They share common business interests in ad targeting.

These close and alliance relationships form the backbone of algorithmic shopping, driving engagement and commerce.

● Fairly Close

● Alliance



INFLUENCE AND EMERGENT RELATIONSHIPS

Influence Relationship (Behavior Shaping)

- Example: Influencers & Content Creators → Impulse Buyers
 - Promote emotion-driven purchases through short-form, highly personalized content.
 - Leverage FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) to drive instant buying decisions.

Emergent Relationship (New System Dynamics)

- Example: Gen Z ↔ Environment
 - Growing sustainability awareness is shifting consumer habits.
 - This could challenge fast fashion and unsustainable commerce models.

Influence relationships shape decision-making, while emergent relationships signal future disruptions in the system.

● Influence

● Emergent



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● Influence

● Emergent



OSCILLATING AND CONFLICT RELATIONSHIPS

Oscillating Relationship (Unstable Interaction)

- Example: Influencers ↔ Social Media Platforms
 - Frequent algorithm changes force influencers to constantly adapt.
 - Influencers risk losing income and visibility with each platform update.

Conflict Relationship (Power Struggles & Misalignment)

- Example: Impulse Buyer Culture ↔ Environment
 - Platforms promote fast, unsustainable consumption.
 - Sustainability advocates push for ethical shopping, challenging platform priorities.

Oscillating relationships create instability, while conflict relationships highlight systemic struggles in commerce and sustainability.

● Oscillating

● Conflict

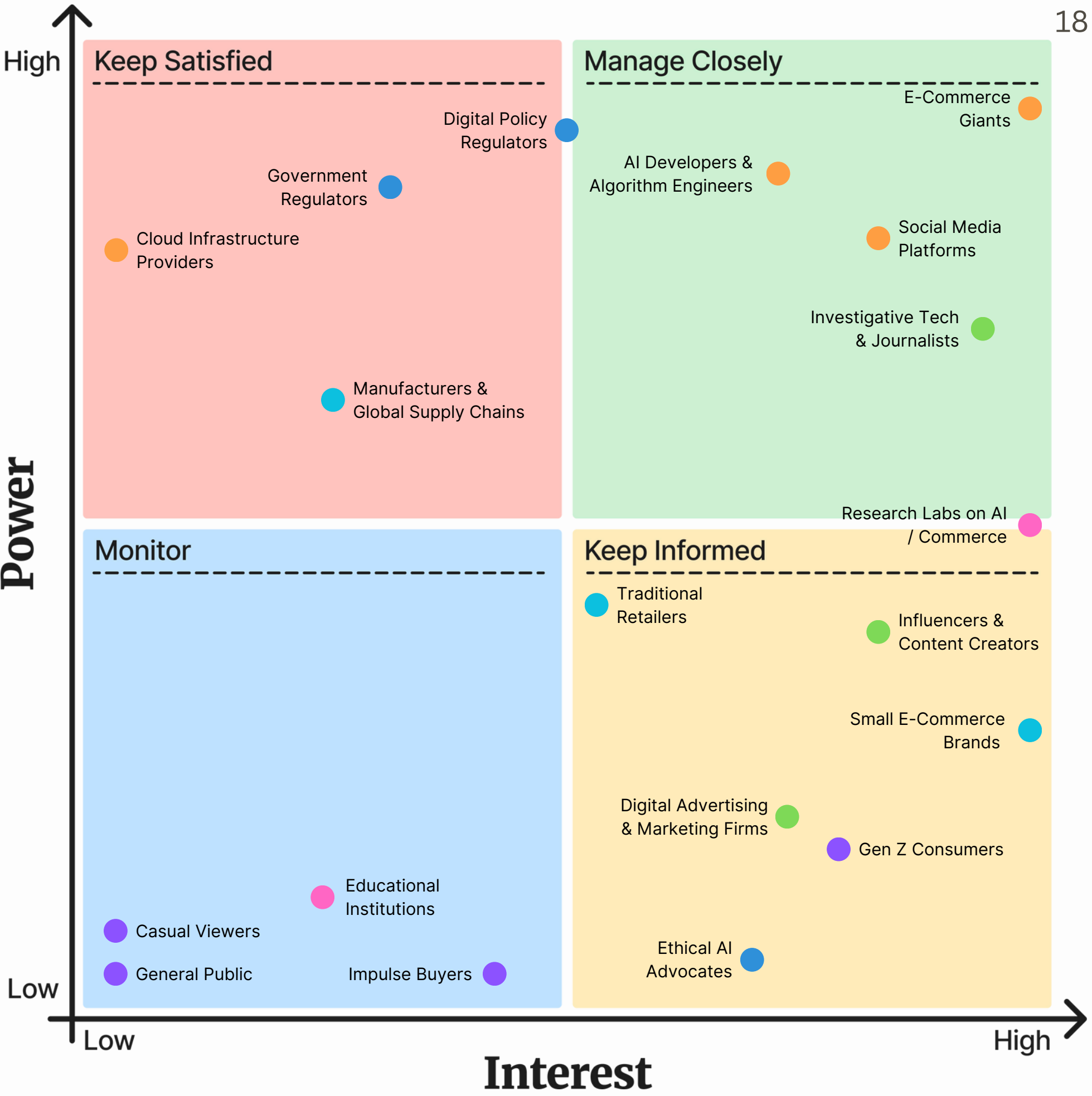


ALL RELATIONSHIPS



INFLUENCE MAP

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MAKING CHANGE

Our system framing has given us many insights into the leverage points and the system stakeholders with the greatest influence. Following this analysis, we suggest 3 potential avenues for making effective change within the current system:

Disrupting Greenwashing Momentum

By acknowledging how the delay in eco-friendly products are produced affects the way businesses are incentivized to act, we hope to redirect the current flow that enables the convenience of greenwashing.

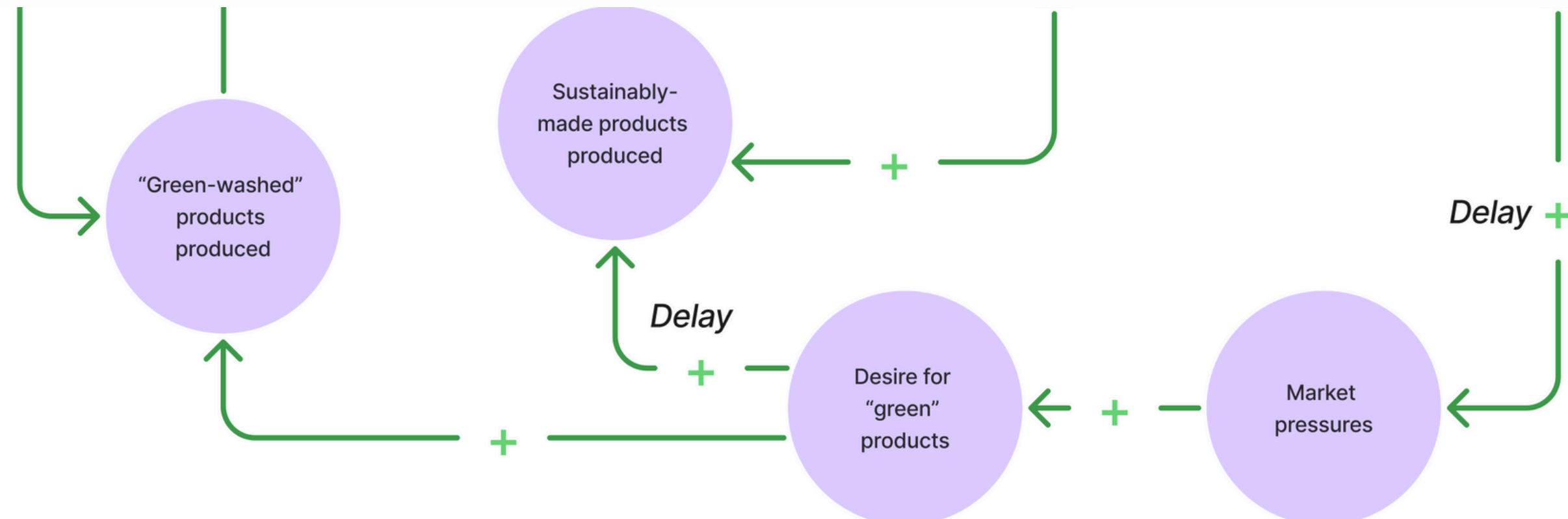
Confronting Algorithmic Trend Cycles

Trend cycles play a significant role in influencing consumption habits for the public, with algorithms facilitating the speed in content consumption and turnover. In order for people to affectively shop more consciously, there needs to be a halt in this area.

Transparency & Consumer Education

Consumers drive the market. Therefore, by educating them on the details surrounding the genuine commitment to ethical manufacturing, we can empower a more informed demand for products people want. Let people make informed choices.

DISRUPTING GREENWASHING MOMENTUM



However,

Sustainable products are often more expensive to produce than "greenwashed" alternatives, making brands more likely to fake it rather than commit to real change.[12]

Therefore, we shall :

- Increase the cost of greenwashing by imposing higher ad fees on misleading sustainability claims, reducing their profitability.
- Lower genuinely sustainable production costs through AI-optimized supply chains and government subsidies.
- Adjust platform algorithms to boost the visibility of truly sustainable products while reducing exposure to misleading "eco-friendly" branding.

Most Influential stakeholders:

- Regulatory and policy makers
- E-Commerce Giants
- Social Media Platforms

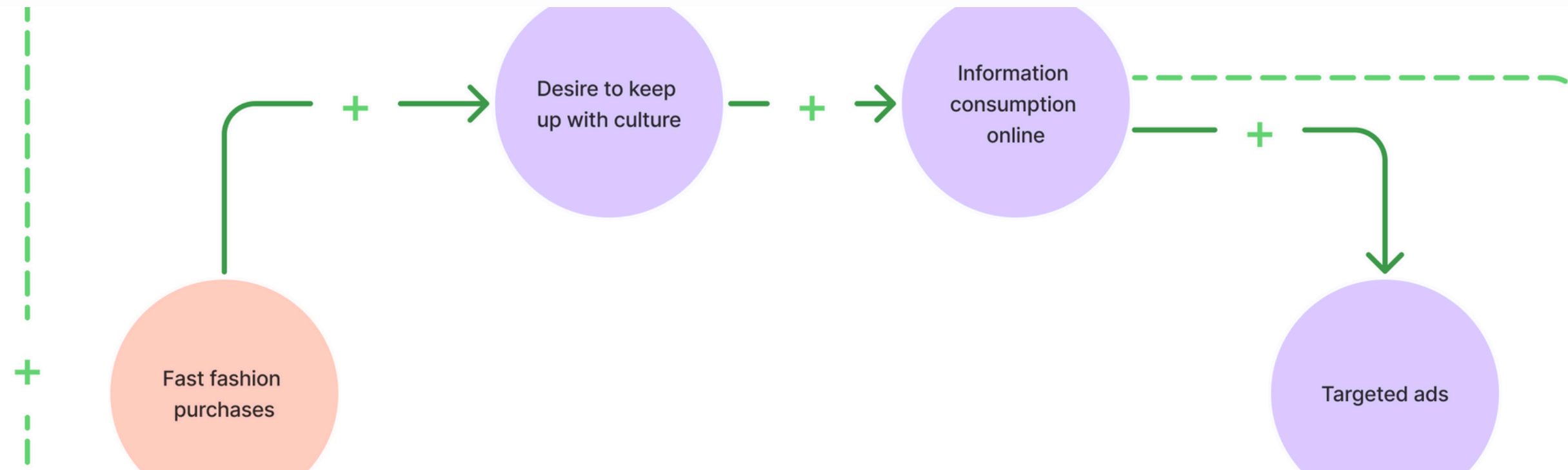
Honourable stakeholder mention:

- Investigative journalists can audit the efforts of regulatory bodies and the effectiveness of change

[12]Wark, C. (2024). Greenwashing vs authentic sustainability . Retrieved from <https://www.greenmatch.co.uk/blog/greenwashing-vs-true-sustainability>

Gerhard, C., Plack, M., & Drost, N. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.kearney.com/documents/291362523/291369552/Why+todays+pricing+sabotages+sustainability.pdf/38b0b917-886d-3d47-c7b7-74dc6d89c636?t=1599751848000>

CONFRONTING ALGORITHMIC TREND CYCLES



However,

Platforms profit from rapid trend turnover, and consumers are conditioned to chase novelty, reinforcing fast fashion cycles.[13]

Therefore, we shall :

- Reduce algorithms' weighting for short-lived viral content, and promote "long-term stable fashion(making clothes from five years ago still 'trendy')".
- Implement "content cooling periods" to slow fast-fashion-driven impulse purchases.
- Develop digital fashion alternatives, like NFT-based wearables, to satisfy trend demand without increasing physical waste.

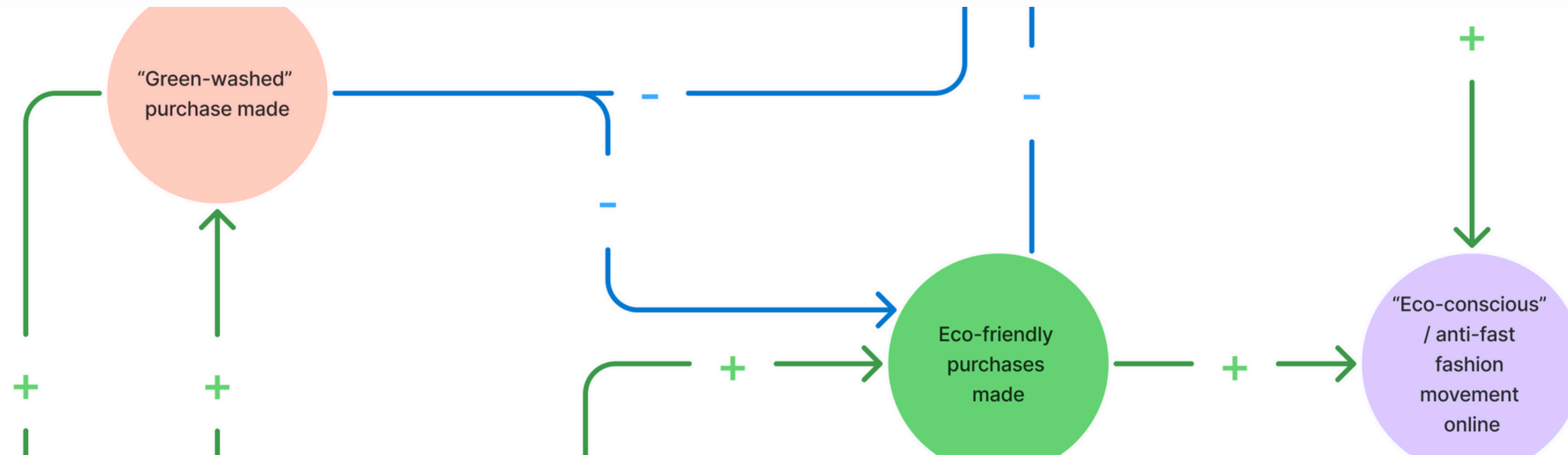
Most Influential stakeholders:

- Digital Policy Regulators
- Social Media Platforms
- AI & Algorithm Engineers

Honourable stakeholder mention:

- Ethical AI Advocates can hold the tech firms accountable and lobby in favour of policy change.

TRANSPARENCY & CONSUMER EDUCATION



However,

Transparency is unprofitable for brands, and consumers lack patience for detailed sustainability info[14].

Therefore, we shall :

- Embed sustainability data at checkout to make it unavoidable.
- Gamify transparency by turning eco-consciousness into a social currency.
- Leverage influencers to make sustainability aspirational.
- Deliver AI-personalized sustainability insights in digestible formats.
- Penalize corporate opacity to ensure compliance is cheaper than deception.

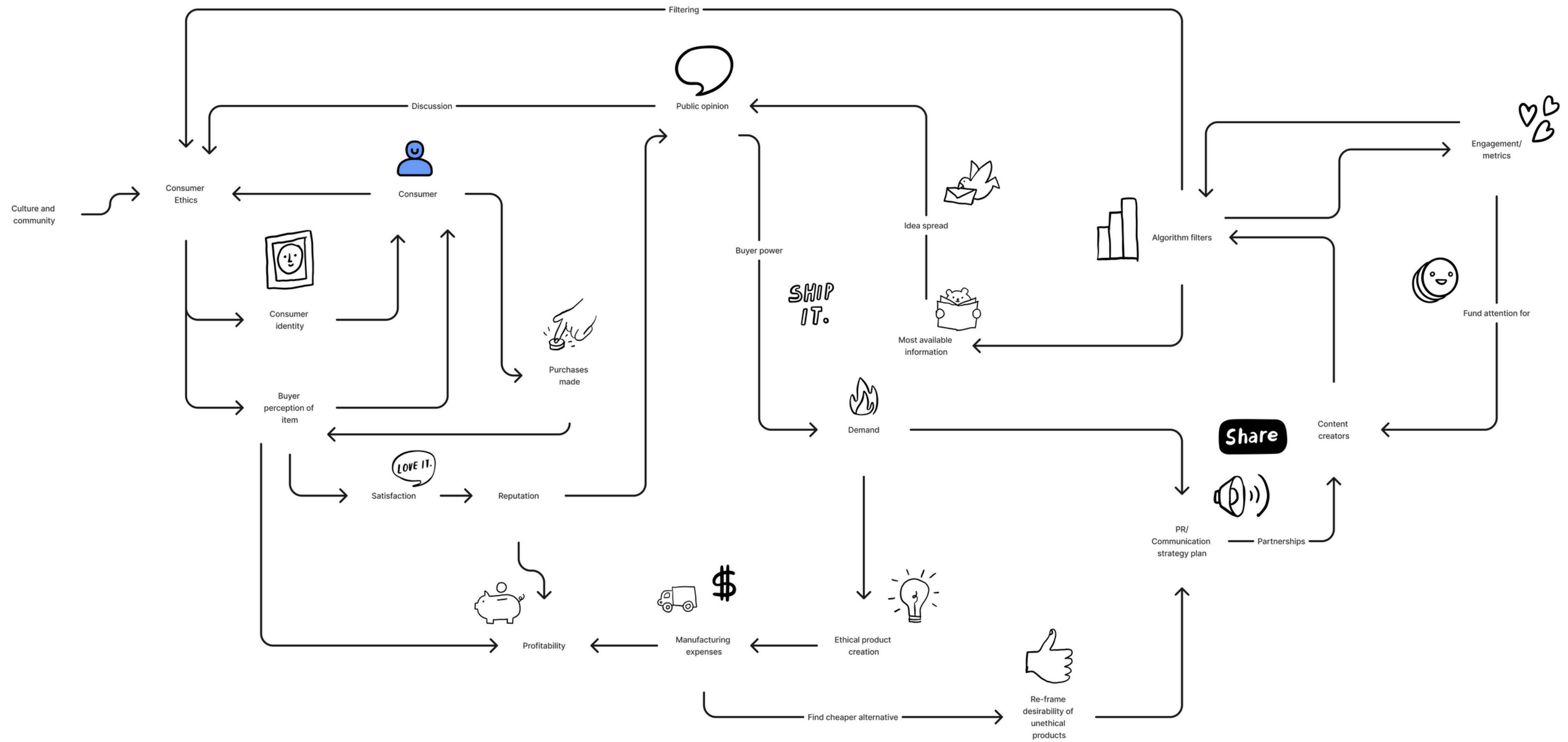
Most Influential stakeholders:

- Influencers & Content Creators
- Ethical Business Watchdogs
- Investigative Tech & Journalists

Honourable stakeholder mention:

- Eco-friendly brands play an essential role in ensuring products exist in order for the flow to reroute their way

APPENDIX



APPENDIX: 1.0 - THE RICH PICTURE

REFERENCES - SIGNALS FOR RELATIONSHIP ANALYSIS

Example: Shein and Temu's streamlined supply chains have disrupted the market, leading to the decline of several brands.

Reference: Stewart, E. (2025, February 26). America's obsession with cheap clothes is killing beloved millennial brands. Business Insider.

<https://www.businessinsider.com/shein-temu-retail-forever-21-billabong-bankruptcy-retail-cheap-shopping-2025-2>

Example: A study highlights that trust in influencers reduces consumer uncertainty, thereby increasing the likelihood of impulse purchases.

Reference: Shamim, K., & Azam, M. (2024). The power of social media influencers: unveiling the impact on consumers' impulse buying behaviour. Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03796-7>

Example: 91% of Gen Z consumers express a desire to purchase from sustainable companies, with 77% willing to pay more for eco-friendly products and services.

Reference: Technologies, P. (2023, July 27). The Green Generation: Tracking Gen-Z Trends in Sustainable Purchasing Habits. PDI Technologies, Inc.

<https://pditechnologies.com/blog/tracking-gen-z-consumer-trends-sustainability/>

Example: The Canadian government has enacted legislation requiring large internet platforms to compensate news outlets for content shared on their sites. Meta chose to block news content on its platforms in Canada rather than comply with the payment requirement.

Reference: Reuters. (2025, February 27). Canada regulator to impose fee on Google for online news law's operating costs. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/technology/canada-regulator-impose-fee-google-online-news-laws-operating-costs-2025-02-27/>