Summary

For marketing scholars, a focus on societal problems is considered to be an instrumental part of the research field. The increase in research interest can be ascribed to the academic obligation to understand the relationship between consumer choices and grave societal problems. A focal area has been the study of individual contributions to societal goals, meaning the engagement of consumers in actions that help to reduce societal problems. There are many different ways an individual can make a contribution to a societal goal, such as charitable donations or sustainable consumption. The Netherlands forms a particularly interesting context to study these individual choices because the field is well established and individuals are able to engage in many different activities.

Research on societal goals covers both the social as well as the environmental domain. The distinction between these two is that the social domain addresses the betterment of people other than oneself and the environmental domain addresses goals of protecting nature, animals and the planet. This thesis consists of three distinct essays that each take a particular approach to shed light on one aspect of the abstract and complex nature of individual contributions to societal goals. The essays are thus related in theme but all have a unique perspective.

In Chapter 2 the conceptualization of sustainable consumption in the academic marketing debate is mapped. The different conceptualizations of the complex construct of sustainable consumption provide insights into the direction marketing literature takes. We employ a structured literature review of 270 peer-reviewed empirical academic journal articles in marketing during the period 1992–2014 based on the conceptualization choices that are made in empirical marketing studies. Our analysis reveals four distinct conceptual frames that structure the current empirical literature in marketing with regard to sustainable consumption: (1) calling for sustainability in society, (2) awareness of power in the market,
(3) letting people enjoy purchases and (4) making people feel responsible for their own impact. These four conceptual frames can serve as a tool for scholars to categorize novel empirical contributions to sustainable development.

Chapter 3 presents the second essay of this thesis. Here, we study the measurement of individual beliefs in making a contribution to environmental goals. The measurement of self-reports for this construct presents a number of challenges. We explore the potential of the anchoring vignettes to measuring participative efficacy in three domains of environmental engagement: (1) energy-reduction; (2) pro-environmental purchases, and (3) environmental activism. A questionnaire is developed that measures people’s self-assessment of their participative efficacy and related anchoring vignettes to correct for scale perception bias. We use a student sample (n=164) and cognitive interviews to develop the questionnaire in our pilot study. Next, the main study presents a nationally representative survey (n=1117), which is conducted to review heterogeneity in answers and explain those by education level, gender and age. Results show both supporting evidence for the worth of our anchoring vignettes as well as raise questions about the usefulness of anchoring vignettes depending on the environmental domain they are developed for.

Chapter 4 presents the last essay of this thesis. We focus on one specific activity of engagement in societally relevant issues, namely donations to non-profit organizations. To remain societally relevant, non-profit organizations (NPOs) look for a structural inflow of donations from individuals. The competitive landscape of NPOs is shaped by donation decisions, which we consider to be related to their personal values. First, we put forward that the value universalism can drive the general decision to donate to any organization. Second, individuals decide to donate to a specific NPO depending on how congruent the values of an NPO are with their own NPO values. For data collection, GfK Dongen enabled us to use several of their large nationally representative consumer panels. We collect a unique data set
to glean insights into an individual’s donation portfolio. We find support for the relationship between NPO value congruence and monetary donations and show differentiation on general donor characteristics reveals the divers NPO values relevant to the donation decision. We present implications for the positioning of NPOs and the relevance for NPO marketing strategy. We discuss the implications for non-profit practitioners who are increasingly using survey data for their fundraising strategies.

In each of these essays I use a distinct approach and method to uncover a different aspect of individual contributions to societal goals and related research questions. I finally propose two areas for future research. First, the complete set of personal values such as in the refined values survey increases our understanding as to how and why people uphold certain personal values. Future research can continue to review the relationships between values and different actions people engage in as an individual contribution. Second, the relationship between gender and individual contributions to societal goals could be a good avenue for future research as this relation has persisted to shape contribution choices.