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Sustainable Consumption: Discourses, Practices, and Inequalities

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Under the supervision of:

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all mothers living in poverty, the ones I met during my data collection and all the others that I did not have the chance to meet. These women have changed my worldview and I am forever grateful they trusted me with their stories.

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Dissertation Overview

Sustainability issues, such as the climate crisis and the related social crisis, are considered to be some of the greatest challenges humanity faces at the moment (Davies 2020; Schor 2014). Research views sustainability as consisting of both environmental and social elements (Lim 2016). It is therefore imperative to study consumption across the various manifestations of sustainability, both to advance academic understanding of the phenomenon and provide practical implications for a better world through marketing (Chandy et al. 2021). Indeed, this is a key mission for marketing, which is defined as the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large (AMA 2025). One way to fully comprehend the processes that apply to society at large is to examine how meanings are developed within the broader ecology as a setting for human activity (Hanssens and Pauwels 2016; Karababa and Kjeldgaard 2014).

This Ph.D. dissertation aims to unpack how the meanings of sustainable consumption, environmental and social, are shaped and provide novel insights and a conceptualisation that engages the key actors, consumers, firms and public policymakers ("Doctoral Degree Examination Policy" 2024). It adopts a Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) perspective, which strives to systematically link individual level (or idiographic) meanings to different levels of cultural processes and structure and then to situate these relationships within historical and marketplace contexts (Arnould and Thompson 2005). In extension, it contextualises the dual dimensions of sustainability, environmental and social, and looks for the systemic and structural elements of sustainable consumption issues as they manifest emically and etically for a specific sociohistorical context. It follows a qualitative research design to allow for

an in-depth exploration of meaning in a context of sustainable practices (Bazeley 2020; Merriam and Tisdell 2015).

To unpack my research question of how the meanings of sustainable consumption are shaped, I will first provide the theoretical background of the dissertation (Marshall and Rossman 2014). This part defines the concept of sustainable consumption, presents the dominant view, develops a critique of the dominant view, and introduces the consumer culture theory perspective on the topic. This is followed by the research approach, research aim, research contributions and the organisation of the three papers in this dissertation. Following the dissertation overview, all three papers will be presented.

Theoretical Background: Sustainable Consumption in Consumer Research

Conceptual Foundations

Sustainability is a multifaceted concept constituting a field of scholarship with many "complexities" (Peattie and Collins 2009, 107). Early work in consumer research introduced the idea that consumption could be connected to environmentalism, discussing both risks and contradictions (Connolly and Prothero 2008). According to Davies (2020, 259), environmentalism is used as "a general term to refer to concern for the environment and particularly actions or advocacy to limit negative human impacts on the environment". The vagueness of environmentalism as a concept makes it versatile, but also contested, with many stakeholders seeking to define it and deploy it for a variety of anterior reasons (Collier, Hidalgo, and Maciuceanu 2006).

Sustainable consumption has entered the mainstream of consumer research in recent years, which means that it reshapes the landscape in which global organizations

compete and interact (Menon and Menon 1997). A key definition stems from the Brundtland report, which states that sustainability refers to "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). The fact that sustainability is deployed by stakeholders as a competitive dimension of the firms' operations to attain profit means that essential features of the original definition are often lost. While the idea of maintaining current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs can be found in most discussions of sustainable consumption literature (Lim 2017), in the industry it becomes hard to identify compromises that contemporary generations are willing to make in the name of future generations.

Sustainable consumption extends throughout the supply chain process, including design, raw material sourcing, production, distribution, retail, consumption, and disposal (Kong, Witmaier, and Ko 2021). However, these features are highly sensitive to context and issues of culture, locality, heritage, exchange and diversity (Kong et al. 2021). For instance, the challenge of climate change can mean drought in one location and inundation in another, challenging firms in very different ways in their delivery of value to the customer.

Although most conceptualisations of sustainable consumption focus merely on environmentalism (Gössling and Humpe 2020), one point of differentiation in the literature is the inclusion of the social aspect (Lim 2016). Recent work has included the notion of "social sustainability" alongside "environmental sustainability" when discussing the issue (Godfrey, Price, and Lusch 2022; Jung, Kim, and Kim 2020). Social sustainability refers to the activities of an organisation or a consumer that aim to make a social contribution (Jung et al. 2020). Adopting a cultural and social

perspective of sustainable consumption promotes harmony between consumers and communities (Jung et al. 2020), rather than just focusing on symptoms of ecological disasters.

A more recent definition that encompasses both environmental and social aspects is provided by Lim (2017, 71) who identifies sustainable consumption as "an adaptive, balanced, and contextualized approach to consumption that (1) meets the basic needs of the current generation, (2) does not impoverish future generations, (3) does not cause irreversible damage to the environment, (4) does not create a loss of function in natural systems (ecological and human value systems; environmental and social responsibility), (5) improves resource use efficiency, (6) improves quality of life, and (7) avoids consumerism and modern hyperconsumption."

The latter definition of sustainability extends the previous one and creates a more holistic conceptualisation of sustainability. Firstly, it emphasises the dynamic nature of sustainability describing is as "adaptive". Secondly, by "balanced", the definition supports the idea of a constant trade-off that takes place and by "contextualised" the embeddedness in the social sphere. In addition, it highlights the dual nature of sustainable consumption, in terms of both environmental and social responsibility. The term balanced gives rise to two further considerations. Firstly, unbalanced social structures with great income inequality aggregate emissions and pollution as hyper-wealthy income groups have an outsized carbon footprint. For instance, 1 percent of air travellers are responsible for 50% of all aviation emissions, due to the use of helicopters and private jets (Gössling and Humpe 2020). Furthermore, low-income groups are consuming in a sustainable manner, with many practices and skills related to implementing efficiencies (Hargreaves, Nye, and Burgess 2008). In this dissertation, I adopt Lim's (2017) definition and

conceptualisation of sustainable consumption, which includes both environmental and social aspects of the practice, as it makes these dynamics visible.

The point of agreement in the consumer research literature on sustainable consumption is that society should be able to meet its current needs in the present and at the same time allow future generations to meet their needs. Thus, time (past, present and future) and reflections of society's responsibility are focal concepts. The greatest differentiation in this body of work appears in the scope of sustainable consumption, as the majority focus only on environmental sustainability, while others also include social sustainability in their conceptualisations.

Sustainable consumption has some specific characteristics that expand the notion of consumption as we know it. The first is the role that the environment acts as an agentic actor in our understanding and study of consumption. The environment is not treated as merely a context where social action happens, but as an actor with the ability to form and influence our practice. At the same time, sustainable consumption calls us to reflect consumption in two different times, the present and the future. While reflecting on consumption at the time it's happening is common in consumer research, the added layer of the future consequences of a present act is new.

In the quest to build a sustainable consumption literature that embraces the complexities of sustainability, scholars should adopt a more critical and reflexive stance. Consumer research is embedded in the social structure, so the meanings and concepts studied are influenced by dominant understandings. A recent Club of Rome report on sustainability for instance finds that social inequality is a key driver of unsustainable practices, since it drives excessive consumption through status competition and undermines the social cohesion needed to implement solutions

(Wilkinson and Pickett 2022). By adopting a more critical and reflexive stance, we can advance our understanding beyond the prevailing narratives of sustainable consumption and imagine alternative patterns of consumption that can help address this issue.

The Dominant View in Consumer Research

Sustainability has been addressed in consumer research since the 1970s (Henion and Kinnear 1976). Scholars noticed that there might be a link between consumer behaviour and how environmentally friendly a product is. Kassarjian (1971) found that people were willing to pay a premium to purchase more environmentally friendly gasoline for their cars during a price war between the major US oil firms. This study focused on air pollution in cities, which was a key issue at the time.

The topic entered mainstream marketing discussions though in the 1990s by addressing environmentalism as a corporate market strategy as a response to the growing regulatory concerns among vote conscious politicians (Menon and Menon 1997). In 1995, for instance, the *Journal of Advertising* published a special issue on "Green Advertising". As the guest editor notes in the preface, the special issue was the result of observing increasing consumer concern regarding the environment (Iyer 1995). The term "green" was introduced "to connote pro-environmental behaviours", such as saving the environment (Iyer 1995, III). At the time, being "green" was seen as a sign of growth and prosperity (Iyer 1995), but also a range of other things like jealousy, or young. This reflects how the term green had at the time not been fully branded into the environmental cause among marketers.

Consumer research on sustainable consumption has mostly focused on two key aspects (Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021; McDonagh and Prothero 2014). The first is

concerned with profiling consumers who engage in sustainable consumption practices (Kidwell, Farmer, and Hardesty 2013; Shrum, McCarty, and Lowrey 1995). A variety of consumer characteristics are investigated to determine why some consumers engage in sustainable consumption while others might refrain. The second part of the literature examines how marketers can influence consumers to act more sustainably (Schuhwerk and Lefkoff-Hagius 1995; White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019). By investigating consumer priming, advertising messages and normative appeals, researchers look into marketing tactics that can influence consumers to consume sustainably.

Profiling Consumers

Shrum et al. (1995) were among the first scholars to profile consumers who engage with sustainable consumption practices. Using psychographics they examined the characteristics of "green" consumers. They define a "green" consumer, as one who is concerned "with the physical environment (air, water, land)" (Shrum et al. 1995, 72), in other words, anyone whose purchasing behaviour is influenced by environmental concerns. They created a consumer profile and linked it to purchase behaviour. Concluding by characterising this type of consumer as an opinion leader, an information seeker, as well as sceptical of advertising, the study falls short of enthusiastic embracement of sustainability as it mainly seeks to increase sales.

Another important objective has been to examine how sustainable consumption relates to specific consumer characteristics, with the aim of identifying tailored strategies to engage diverse consumer segments and shape their consumption behaviours (Olsen, Slotegraaf, and Chandukala 2014). Kidwell et al. (2013) for instance, suggest that liberals respond better to claims about fairness and avoiding

harm to others when it comes to sustainability. Conservatives, however respond to prompts about duty and obligation to authority.

Brough et al. (2016) examine an additional consumer characteristic to profile them, namely the maintenance of gender-identity. Building on the assumption that men are less likely than women to embrace sustainable behaviour, they argue that there is an association between "green" behaviour and femininity which may threaten men's gender identity. Researchers make a number of assumptions or isolate parts of consumers' identities when profiling them. Consumer characteristics are important as they provide a practical approach to priming, which we turn to next.

Priming Consumers

The second part of the literature on sustainability has focused on "how individual consumers should change their behaviours to be more sustainable" (Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021, 45) and what marketers can do to facilitate this change. Scholars often propose marketing interventions that target consumers to adopt more sustainable behaviours (Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021; White et al. 2019). Marketing interventions are actions that can strengthen positive habits (White et al. 2019). To achieve this, they highlight the role of priming (Karmarkar and Bollinger 2015; White et al. 2019). Priming refers to "several external influences" that consumers are exposed to in their consumption fields and affect their practices (Karmarkar and Bollinger 2015, 2). White et al. (2019) provide an overview of the priming literature and develop a framework of five psychological factors that can shift consumers' practices towards more sustainable ones.

Some have explored the influence of one sustainable consumption habit on another as a kind of priming (Juhl, Fenger, and Thøgersen 2017; Karmarkar and

Bollinger 2015; Peloza, White, and Shang 2013). Both positive and negative effects have been noticed in this regard (White et al. 2019). On the positive side, it has been found that consumers want to see themselves as consistent (Juhl et al. 2017; Peloza et al. 2013). Consistency concerns how consumers who commit to a sustainable behaviour in one consumption area, are more likely to act in the same way in a different area (Juhl et al. 2017; Karmarkar and Bollinger 2015). For instance, it has been shown that consumers who bring their own shopping bags when grocery shopping are more likely to also purchase environmentally conscious organic products.

A challenge to priming appears in licensing effects, where consumers who have engaged in a sustainable consumption action will be less likely in the future to act in a sustainable way (Phipps et al. 2013; Tiefenbeck et al. 2013). For example, Karmarkar and Bollinger (2015) show that consumers who brought their own bags when shopping were also more likely to purchase more indulgent foods (such as desserts and candy) as a reward. Similarly, Catlin and Wang (2013) show that consumers will consume larger quantities of resources when presented with the option to recycle. The findings suggest that sustainable consumption is multifaceted, as refraining from purchasing single-use plastic bags for groceries or recycling, may have negative consequences for consumers at a different level, such as indulging in unhealthy snacks.

Consumer priming also addresses information sharing in this process, which is defined as increasing consumers' knowledge on a subject (Winterich, Nenkov, and Gonzales 2019). Research shows that providing information that underscores why an action or a product is sustainable, can persuade consumers into a purchase (Sussman and O'Brien 2016). For example, Winterick et al. (2019) examined how prompting

that recyclables can be transformed into new products may motivate consumers to recycle. In other words, they show that the salience of product transformation can prime consumers to adopt sustainable consumption practices (Winterich et al. 2019). However, the effect of priming can be short-lasting if the interventions are not repeated (Abrahamse et al. 2005; Osbaldiston and Schott 2012).

Specific labelling is one sustainability information sharing strategy. Labels that are comprehensible, noticeable and consistent across product categories motivate consumers to purchase the labelled sustainable products (Borin, Cerf, and Krishnan 2011; Taufique, Vocino, and Polonsky 2017). For example, Mookerjee et al. (2021) offer insights into how the use of an “ugly” label can influence consumer purchases of unattractive produce, that often ends up in landfill. They suggest that the use of a sticker on the unattractive produce calling it ugly, improves acceptance of unattractive produce as it resolves negative expectations of unattractive produce (Mookerjee et al. 2021). However, other work suggests that these labels may have a negative outcome since consumers believe that plastic packaging with some added paper is more environmentally friendly when compared to the same packaging without the paper element, resulting in greater waste (Sokolova, Krishna, and Döring 2023).

Advertising messaging, defined as the script on a marketing communications initiative, has been studied to identify what is the most powerful way to motivate consumers to consume sustainably (Obermiller 1995; Schuhwerk and Lefkoff-Hagius 1995). Persuasiveness, the ability to convince, and deceptiveness, whether messages that are ambiguous or false, have received particular attention (Banerjee, Gulas, and Iyer 1995; Carlson, Grove, and Kangun 1993), showing that sustainability messaging is a powerful way to motivate sustainable consumption across consumer segments. Schuhwerk and Lefkoff-Hagius's (1995) research on advertisement persuasiveness

highlights that even those less involved with sustainability matters responded more favourably to a “green appeal” rather than to a financial appeal.

Finally, prior literature has identified how social norms, defined as expectations about what others are doing or what others think should be done concerning sustainable consumption, can shift consumer practices towards sustainability (White and Simpson 2013). Research has shown that the influence of social norms on sustainable consumption is evident in different behaviours, such as recycling (Oskamp et al. 1991; White and Simpson 2013), saving energy (Dwyer, Maki, and Rothman 2015; Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius 2008), sustainably produced food (Dowd and Burke 2013), and transportation (Harland, Staats, and Wilke 2006). Social norms about what others are doing (Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren 1990) are a strong predictor of sustainable consumption, especially when the reference point comes from a similar background (Fornara et al. 2011).

Research also concludes that consumers are likely to engage in sustainable behaviours if they have a consistent view of themselves to maintain (Juhl et al. 2017; Peloza et al. 2013), but there is the chance that licensing effects come into play (Karmarkar and Bollinger 2015). Taken together, these studies suggest that social norms function as a powerful yet context dependent construct, whose influence on sustainable consumption depends not only on their descriptive dimension but also on the perceived relevance of the reference group.

Overall, this review of the dominant consumer research literature on sustainability highlights that consumer attitudes and preferences, as well as categories and profiles of consumers based on their attitudes towards sustainability (McDonagh and Prothero 2014) play a substantial role at the micro-level of decision making.

However, in this approach systemic issues are side-lined and the complex role of context, institutions and infrastructure on the individual to become sustainable is de-emphasised (Phipps et al. 2013).

There are different views on whether individual consumers can significantly contribute to sustainability goals. Banbury et al. (2012) for instance, identify the absence of public infrastructure at one's place of residence, family composition, and the educational awareness of consumers as key limitations to individual sustainable agency. Others point to a lack of perceived urgency at the micro-level, since such approaches often advocate incremental and reformative strategies (White et al. 2019) that may not garner results in time (Herrington 2020; Lenton et al. 2019) suggesting the need for radical and transformative action (Lim 2016). The first, is the dominant view in consumer research, while the latter could be seen as a critique of the first.

A Critique of the Dominant Consumer Research Literature on Sustainability

The reformative approach to sustainability has been subject to growing criticism (Roux 2025). McDonagh and Prothero (2014) for instance, show that up until 2014, only one paper on greenwashing in marketing campaigns (Chang 2011) was published in the *Journal of Advertising*, and only two papers regarding sustainability strategies of organisations (Banerjee, Iyer, and Kashyap 2003; Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu 2012) were published in the *Journal of Marketing*. Despite research on environmentalism and sustainability going back to the 1970s, the more radical and transformative approach, opposed to the incremental and reformative approach, is still in its infancy.

The excessive focus on consumers at the expense of the systemic and structural forces, has been identified as an instance of ideology in research, where

capitalist and neoliberal logics often ascribe consumers with the responsibility for dealing with sustainability issues exactly to avoid structural change (Giesler and Veresiu 2014). This can be showcased by the excessive focus on building consumer profiles for "green" and "conscious" consumers (Shrum et al. 1995), making them the focal point of the crisis solution (Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021). This has been critiqued by sociologically driven consumer research and has been discussed as consumer responsibilization (Cherrier and Türe 2022; Giesler and Veresiu 2014). Consumer responsibilization is defined as "a governance regime process that constructs responsible subject positions and stimulates certain dispositions to social action" (Cherrier and Türe 2022, 2). Thus, as Giesler and Veresiu (2014, 843) highlight, through a consumer responsibilization process, that "responsibility is shifted away from the state and corporations and reassigned onto the individual agent."

When discussing sustainability Connolly and Prothero (2008), highlight the disciplinary assumption in consumer research, that if consumers are primed or informed enough they will respond to the sustainability issues appropriately and help resolve them. However, many scholars have adopted and called for a more holistic conceptualisation of sustainable consumption (Lim 2017), working on balancing, adapting and contextualising approaches (Lim 2017). As the responsibility to solve sustainability issues is individualised and moved away from society, the contextual meanings are removed from the conceptualisation of the issue (Cherrier and Türe 2022). This approach is based on an "individualistic understanding of both action and change" (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012, 142), that avoids drawing the connections between sustainability and the complexity of the world that is embedded (Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021). Consumer Culture Theory may therefore be ideally situated to inform and supplement mainstream approaches to sustainability.

The Consumer Culture Theory Perspective on Sustainable Consumption

The consumer culture theory perspective broadly adopts a contextualized approach to sustainable consumption and sustainability (Godfrey et al. 2022). To do so, there are three key themes that this field of research considers when discussing sustainable consumption, consumer responsibilization, re-imagining consumption, and ideology of consumption.

Consumer Responsibilization

The first theme in the consumer culture theory sustainable consumption literature is concerned with consumer responsibilization (Cherrier and Türe 2022; Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Thompson and Kumar 2021). Consumer responsibilization has been identified as "a governance regime process that constructs responsible subject positions" (Cherrier and Türe 2022, 2) and stimulates "certain dispositions to social action" (Shamir 2008, 4). Responsibilisation is therefore the moralising process of framing consumer subjectivities such that they feel individually responsible for structural sustainability issues through neoliberal consumer governance (Foucault 2008). Coskuner-Balli (2020) shows how political discourse has reframed consumers as citizen-consumers with responsibility for broad societal challenges. Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria (2021) illustrate the role of affect and emotion in this process, while Cherrier and Türe (2022) unpack the way this gives rise to tensions in households that results in the suspension of waste flows.

Giesler and Veresiu (2014) suggested that there are four parts in the consumer responsibilization process. The first step is called "personalization" and it aims to contrast the ideal responsible consumer practice with the irresponsible other. Then there is "authorization", where the responsible consumer is armoured with expert

knowledge thus gaining respect among others. Next is “capabilization”, the development of a market that enables and provides the tools for responsible self-management. Finally, “transformation” is changing consumers into moral agents who are responsible for finding solutions to social issues. Nevertheless, literature has yet to shed light on how consumers enact and practice their responsibility (Cherrier and Türe 2022).

The literature has revealed that consumers react in different ways when assigned to be responsible agents of sustainable social change, such as accepting, negotiating, rejecting or being indifferent to this role (Eckhardt and Dobscha 2019; Henry 2010). It is also noted that consumers justify their environmentally and socially unsustainable choices by using alternative moralities (Giesler 2006; Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010). In addition, research has highlighted some common difficulties for consumers when trying to act responsibly and adopt more sustainable consumption practices, such as time scarcity (Holt 2002; Thompson 2004) and lack of market literacy and capabilities (Adkins and Ozanne 2005; Bone, Christensen, and Williams 2014). While the position of trying to enact the role of a responsible, sustainability-minded consumer has been seen as causing confusion and struggle to prioritise (Cherrier and Türe 2022; Phipps and Ozanne 2017).

Ideology of consumption

Sustainability is clearly linked to consumerist desires and consumption patterns, wherefore reducing desire is a key component of limiting resource extraction (Wang, Krishna, and McFerran 2017). Consumer research suggests that consumption in contemporary societies is motivated by desire, which is defined as a passionate and fanciful longing for and fantasising about particular goods and services (Belk et al.

2003). The constant desire to consume perpetuates consumerism (Schmitt, Brakus, and Biraglia 2022), which then leads to unsustainable consumption. This paper sees consumption as a form of ideology, which originates from conflicts between consumer desires and the system of consumerism or the market. This is then reflected in consumers' lived experiences and expressed in social representations and communicative actions related to signalling status through brand affinity, performed practices, and political consumption (Schmitt et al. 2022). This process leads to an insatiable exploitation of natural resources which is often overlooked (Soper 2022). Even for intangible and epistemic consumption the ecological costs can be extreme (Zewe 2025).

Belk et al. (2003, 75) insist that knowingly or unknowingly, think and "act as ideologues" because they living in a consumerist society that they "cannot escape." In other words consumers embody this role through what they consume. Defining desire as "desire as energetic, connective, systemic, and innovative" (Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman 2017, 659) reach a similar conclusion. This process of creating resource depleting consumption is supported by vast digital infrastructures such that technology increases the "passion to consume" (Kozinets et al. 2017, 659). In sum, these analyses suggest that incremental approaches to sustainability will not work. One the one hand they are extremely permissive towards further destruction. White et al. (2019, 24) for instance define sustainable consumer behavior as "actions that result in decreases in adverse environmental impacts." Yet this definition would allow Brazilian lumber firms to call themselves "sustainable" by merely cutting down 1 square meter less per year, since they have decreased the adverse impact, however, incrementally. Second, it fails to get to the systemic root of unsustainable consumption as illustrated in the institutional creation of consumer desire above.

Broader recognition of these issues has led to a concerted effort to re-imagine consumption, which follows.

Re-imagining Consumption

Sustainable consumption can be viewed as an "oxymoron" or a figure of speech that combines two words with opposite or contradictory meanings, creating a surprising or thought-provoking effect (Gordon, Carrigan, and Hastings 2011; Peattie and Collins 2009). This is because to "consume" traditionally means to use up or destroy an object, which stands in contrast to "sustain", thus of sustainable consumption. Therefore, there is a need to conceptualise a different way of consuming that comes in as a rupture to the hegemonic ideology (Lloveras 2025). Schor (Schor 2014) for example provides the concept of the plenitude economy to characterise a sustainable and human-scale market beyond the dominant social paradigm. This highlights high-tech eco-entrepreneurialism and green lifestyle creation, emphasizing familial self-provisioning. Similarly, Vicdan et al. (2024) suggest that through technology humanity can reach degrowth in alignment with nature. This re-imagining can include the process of consumption as a whole, including purchasing, usage and disposal (Lim 2017), but also keeping in mind the broad consumption field and market synergies.

Scholars have tried to push the boundaries of traditional consumption to conceptualise new practices that may support sustainable efforts (Godfrey et al. 2022). Focus on extending the life cycle of a product instead of replacing it, either through repairing (Godfrey et al. 2022) or recycling (Eden 2017) provide key lifestyle templates in this regard. Godfrey et al. (2022) argue that repairing processes reduce waste, thus aligning consumer aspirations to be sustainable and consumer practice. At

the same time, it is suggested that recycling and repurposing can be a way to bust out of traditional consumption (Eden 2017).

Extending the idea of repurposing and reusing, conceptualisations of liquid consumption, which is "ephemeral access based and dematerialized" (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017, 582) has spurred some innovations since access-based consumption happens when "transactions that may be market mediated in which no transfer of ownership takes place" (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012, 881). Liquid lifestyles give rise to a sharing economy which leads to far more efficient usage of capital equipment and hence lower demand on material resources (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Perren and Kozinets 2018). On the other hand this may not be a game changer since consumers eventually grow attachments and become scared of losing access leading to renewed processes of solid acquisition (Rosenberg, Weijo, and Kerkelä 2023).

Finally, some researchers have focused on ways consumers could escape the market and consumer logic either through slowing down (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019), adversarial opposition and activism (Kozinets and Handelman 2004), micro-social organisation against brands (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007) or mobilization of heritage for more organic outcomes (Press, Eric J Arnould, et al. 2014). Much of this research has focused on anti-consumption, which addresses how "reasons against" consumption are not always the logical opposite of the "reasons for" consumption and there are important differences between "phenomena of negation and affirmation" in relation to sustainability (Chatzidakis and Lee 2013, 190) or voluntary simplicity (McDonald et al. 2006; Oates et al. 2008) defined as "a lifestyle of freely reduced consumption involving a conscious effort to live a simple life" (Rebouças and Soares 2021, 304).

There are several reasons why consumers might choose anti-consumption and simplicity, including ethical and environmental concerns, consumer resistance and symbolic concerns (Chatzidakis and Lee 2013). However, research suggests that this way of consuming, or anti-consuming is not sustainable in the long run as it cannot be maintained (Chatzidakis and Lee 2013). Anti-consumption is mainly practised by mostly affluent consumers, as they are free to choose their life standards (Alexander and Ussher 2012; Kuanr, Pradhan, and Chaudhuri 2020). Alexander and Ussher, (2012, 68) therefore specify that human communities must "find a way to raise the material standards of living of the world's poorest people" while at the same time "reducing humanity's overall ecological foot-print" in order to achieve a more just and sustainable future.

Research Approach

In this dissertation, I adopt an interpretivist perspective and employ qualitative methods to address the research question. This approach is widely used within consumer research, particularly in the field of Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Hudson and Ozanne 1988).

Every research approach in the social sciences rests on ontological assumptions about the nature of reality and social beings. From an interpretivist standpoint, reality is understood as socially constructed, plural, holistic and context-dependent (Hudson and Ozanne 1988). In this paradigm, we reject that there is only one absolute true and support that multiple realities exist, each shaped by individual perceptions. In other terms, every individual has a view of the world (their reality), which might be contradicting with another's, but both can be real. This is because realities are socially constructed and contextualised, so individuals use their socialisation and contextual upbringing to make sense of the world. Thus, it is crucial

in the interpretivist tradition to understand both the context and the social relationships of the individual.

The axiological goal of interpretivism is to understand. This is done through an elliptical process of moving theoretically upward. This means that collecting data and their interpretation is done multiple times, informing one another. In each elliptical round, a higher level of understanding is succeeded. It is worth noting that the researcher in this paradigm is also part of the understanding, as they are the tool of interpretation and they are themselves a social being within a context.

From an epistemological perspective, knowledge produced in interpretivist research is regarded as idiographic, time-bounded and context dependent (Hudson and Ozanne 1988). The details and individual characteristics of the phenomenon are not to be eliminated but are important to be examined and understood. The researcher is embedded in the process of understanding as they are either part of the social context of the study, or they go through a process of immersion in the field of research. Therefore, generalisation to the whole population or a large part of it is not the primary purpose of this type of knowledge generation. However, this approach can enable generalisation within its specific context and to comparable cases.

In this dissertation, I adopt the ontological, axiological and epistemological stance and assumptions of the interpretivist paradigm. Specifically, I employ phenomenological semi-structure interviews alongside archival data methods. Phenomenology aims to explore and understand phenomena as they are experienced by individuals (Creswell 2013). Within this approach, researchers identify and interpret commonalities across participants who share similar lived experiences.

Research Aim

After critically reviewing the literature on sustainable consumption, the research gap has emerged. There is a lack of understanding of the processes by which the meaning of sustainable consumption is shaped and the lived experiences of consumers affected by it (Connolly and Prothero 2008). While critiques about the current consumerist societies and consumer responsibilization have emerged, the processes that lead to them have yet to be revealed phenomenologically. This Ph.D. project critically investigates how the meanings of sustainable consumption are shaped at both consumer and industry levels.

More specifically, I attempt to address two gaps in prior sustainable consumption literature. Building on theories of sustainability, I examine two aspects of it: environmental sustainability and social sustainability. Regarding the first gap about the construction of meanings around environmentally sustainable consumption, I study in the meso level (industry level) how different systemic forces are in play (Paper I), while I also investigate this in an understudied consumer segment that is heavily affected by the sustainability crisis, consumers living in poverty (Paper III). Additionally, I examine the meanings and practices around social sustainability in consumers living in poverty (Paper II).

Theoretically, examining how meanings of sustainable consumption are constructed at the meso-level is important as it impacts consumers' notions of sustainability and their consumption practices. Additionally, the investigation of the lived experience of sustainability and how people living in poverty build meanings around their practices offers insights into puzzling phenomena until now, such as why consumers living in poverty might spend more to buy from their local butcher instead of going to a large discount supermarket. Finally, the empirical study about consumers

living in poverty, sheds light on social structures and roadmaps of sustainable practices built out of necessity, but that could be adopted by a larger part of the population.

Understanding sustainable consumption is also important for policy makers and organisations embedded in this ecosystem. Sustainable consumption has taken over public discussion, with many demanding policies to protect them (Lim 2016). I derive practical implications from my research to help policymakers better cater to these demands. Throughout my studies, I reveal the systemic forces that are in play regarding sustainable consumption. In particular, I uncover a mechanism of how discourse around sustainability can be used against consumers by companies, highlighting the need for action by policymakers. Moreover, I draw a clear picture of both social and environmental sustainability for consumers living in poverty, showing where support is needed.

Research Contributions

This Ph.D. dissertation contributes to the field of sustainable consumption in consumer research by addressing critical gaps in how the meanings of sustainability are shaped and how they are experienced in everyday life. The research advances theoretical understanding by examining how systemic forces construct and circulate meanings of environmental and social sustainability, influencing consumer practices. At the same time, it offers phenomenological insights into the lived experience of sustainability among consumers living in poverty, a group that has remained largely overlooked in previous studies that tend to focus on more affluent consumers. By integrating both environmental and social dimensions of sustainability, the project broadens the scope of the literature and demonstrates how these dimensions intersect in the practices of marginalized consumers.

Empirically, this research uncovers how systemic forces shape the meanings of environmental and social sustainable consumption, shedding light on the tension between consumer empowerment and corporate appropriation of sustainability discourses. It further explores how consumers living in poverty negotiate both social and environmental aspects of sustainability, revealing counterintuitive practices such as prioritizing purchases from local small businesses rather than discount supermarkets. These findings challenge dominant assumptions about consumption in poverty. In addition, the research highlights how socially sustainable practices often emerge out of necessity, such as community resource sharing or informal repair networks, but in doing so, it illustrates alternative pathways of sustainability that could be adopted more broadly.

The project also carries significant practical implications. By showing how sustainability discourse can be strategically manipulated by companies to the detriment of consumers, it underscores the need for stronger consumer protections and regulatory interventions. At the same time, it provides policymakers with insights into the specific challenges and support needs of vulnerable groups disproportionately affected by the sustainability crisis. For organizations, the findings offer a clearer picture of how sustainability is understood and practiced across diverse consumer contexts, guiding them toward more inclusive and authentic sustainability strategies. Taken together, this work moves beyond individualistic framings of sustainable consumption and instead foregrounds the systemic, cultural, and experiential processes through which sustainability is constructed and lived.

Organisation of the Dissertation

This dissertation consists of three papers. I begin my conceptualization with Paper I, by critically examining the meso-level practices that marketers use to shape the meanings of sustainable consumption. I then focus on the consumer level in Paper II and Paper III. In the latter papers, I examine empirical cases of sustainable consumption among consumers living in poverty. Following, I outline each paper and its contributions to prior literature.

In **Paper I**, titled "*Protection Discourses in Sustainable Fashion Technologies*", I critically analyse how companies use technology in their discourse of sustainability to shape the meaning of sustainable consumption. Though an archival study of sustainable fashion, I uncover three ways in which technology structures the future to establish protection discourses for firms. First, material garments are made salient to temporal processes. Then, multiple alternative pathways towards the future are created. Finally, utopian endpoints in history are established.

Literature on protection discourses has viewed time as an objective framework in which changes in CSR are tracked, while the archival data collected show that time itself has become part of the CSR discourse. Hence, technology is no longer articulated as useful machines designed to implement practical tasks, but as a holistic mechanism for social engineering. This paper contributes to sustainability literature by mapping ways public discourse can build meanings around sustainability, as well as to technology and time literature within consumer research.

In **Paper II**, "*Consumer Resourcefulness: How Mothers Living in Poverty Cope with Enduring Material Constraints"*, I empirically examine a different part of sustainability, consumption in poverty (Lim 2017). Consumers living in poverty face

enduring material constraints, but we have yet to empirically examine how they cope with such challenges. Through a phenomenological study of mothers living in poverty in Greece, collecting both interviews and observational data, I examine their lived experience of resourcefulness.

I define consumer resourcefulness, a way through which consumers are able to provide, maintain and dispose products and services. This study highlights its significance by exploring the lived experience of individuals facing poverty, offering insights that could be embraced more widely across society to foster resilience, sustainability and solidarity. This paper contributes to sustainability literature as it examines an expression of social sustainability, as well as to poverty literature within consumer research.

In **Paper III**, "*Sustainable Consumption in Poverty*", I empirically examine the relationship between sustainable consumption and poverty. Sustainability in consumer research has largely been explored through the lens of middle-class and affluent consumers, often overlooking how individuals living in poverty perceive and engage with it.

Drawing on 36 in-depth interviews with mothers experiencing poverty in Greece, alongside ethnographic observations of their consumption habits, this phenomenological inquiry reveals that sustainable consumption for consumers in poverty is shaped by values of frugality, solidarity, morality, and locality. While poverty is typically viewed as a marginalized condition within capitalist societies, the study suggests that it fosters alternative forms of social support that counteract the fragmentation of modern life and offer valuable insights for advancing sustainability.

Overall, each of my dissertation papers provides contributions to a specific body of literature on sustainable consumption and consumer research. Paper I provides a critical overview of how technology is used in the public discourse to construct meanings of sustainability and protect companies, while Paper II and Paper III address gaps in prior sustainable consumption and consumer behaviour literature.

Currently, the first paper of the dissertation has passed the first round of reviews at the journal of *Marketing Theory*. During the past years of my Ph.D. research, I have presented my studies at several international conferences including *Consumer Culture Theory Conferences (CCTC)* and the *Association of Consumer Research Conference (ACR);* as well as the *Sheth Foundation Doctoral Consortium*, *CCT Canon of Classics* and to an invited research seminar at *Royal Holloway*.

I focus next on each of the three papers that constitute my dissertation.

Paper I: Protection Discourses in Sustainable Fashion Technologies

Abstract

This analysis of sustainable fashion identifies three ways technology articulates the future to establish protection discourses: 1) making material garments salient to temporal processes, 2) constructing speculative pathways into the future; and 3) establishing utopian endpoints to history. While protection discourses have viewed time as an objective framework within which tracks shifts in CSR norms regarding environmental responsibility, this paper finds that time itself has become part of CSR discourse. Thus, sustainable technologies are no longer articulated merely as helpful machines with instrumental functions, but as an overarching medium of social design. The implications are discussed for identifying greenwashing in sustainable fashion.

Introduction

Sustainability, defined as an adaptive, balanced, and contextualized approach to consumption and the environment that meets the basic needs of the "current generation" without impoverishing "future generations," is a core issue in marketing (Lim 2017, 71; Mende et al. 2024). Early research focussed on structural drivers of unsustainable behaviour (Kilbourne, Beckmann, and Thelen 2002), valorising materialism and unlimited growth (McDonagh 1998; McDonagh and Prothero 2014; Press, Eric J Arnould, et al. 2014). Mainstreaming of sustainability in marketing stresses consumer psychology, seeking to nudge behaviours into less damaging patterns (White et al. 2019; Xu et al. 2023).

However, while sustainability is inherently temporal in its focus on future prosperity (Lim 2017; World Commission on Environment and Development 1987), there is little knowledge about how sustainable technology shapes the vision of sustainable futures. Pepperell and Punt (2000, 25) describe technology as "tangible imagination" about the future, since its use is prompted by human desire to "modify the world." Prior marketing research on sustainability has addressed broad notions of technological advances (Kropfeld 2022; Phipps et al. 2013) or "technological triumph" (Humphreys and Thompson 2014, 271). Kozinets' (2008, 870) work on technology and ideology even asserts that green futures are anti-technological, luddite stances, establishing a "social counterforce" to technology. In extension, this paper aims to answer: how does technology shape discourses about sustainable futures?

The paper focuses on sustainable fashion, which has sought reformative, or gradual changes through technology (Alexa, Apetrei, and Pislaru 2022; Fernie and Grant 2015; Valor, Ronda, and Abril 2022). Analysing 4,224 newspaper articles, magazines, and blogs about sustainable fashion from 2002 to 2023, this research

explores how technology discourses are used to shape specific images of the future, a key feature of ideological production (Robinson, Veresiu, and Rosario 2022). Three ways are identified that technology discourses can be used for greenwashing purposes, defined as “selective disclosure of positive information about a company’s environmental or social performance, without full disclosure of negative information on these dimensions” (Lyon and Maxwell 2011, 5), by heightening credibility about their products capacity for changing the future. First, the technological framing of garments as material objects that are salient to temporal processes. Second, sustainable technologies allow fashion to construct credibility about speculative pathways through time for humanity. Thirdly, technology is used in sustainable fashion to establish specific desirable endpoints to history or utopias.

While there is some knowledge about how technology can be used to “deter future accidents” or close down unwanted “daunting threats” to the future, thereby establishing “trust” (Humphreys and Thompson 2014, 882), the paper proposes that the three stages established by technological discourses play a key role in technology as a “protection discourse” (Humphreys 2014, 271) through the ideological shaping of consumer hope as an uncertain but possible, goal-congruent outcome through sustainable fashion choices (MacInnis and de Mello 2005).

The paper begins with a literature review of technology in sustainability research. After the methodology, the findings unpack three stages of technological framing of the future in sustainable fashion. The discussion explores the role of time and technology in establishing CSR norms. I further address the role of technology as part of a greenwashing strategy that perpetuates the ideological maintenance of opportunity and choice as integral aspects of hope in consumer society despite the

irrevocable transgression of earth boundaries faced by the fashion industry (Herrington 2020; Richardson et al. 2017).

Literature Review

Profiling consumer motivations has been a key aspect of sustainability research in marketing (Kidwell et al. 2013; Shrum et al. 1995) to influence consumer behaviour (Schuhwerk and Lefkoff-Hagius 1995; White et al. 2019). Others have studied differences between ideological groups and their reactions to different types of sustainability prompts (Brough et al. 2016; Kidwell et al. 2013).

Targeting individuals' attitudes (White et al. 2019; Winterich et al. 2019; Xu et al. 2023) has been criticised for evading systemic and institutional drivers of overconsumption (Mars, Schau and Thorp 2023; Press et al. 2014; Prothero and McDonagh 2015) leading to ineffectual consumer responsibilization (Cherrier and Türe 2022). Scholars instead aim to re-imagine consumption (Lim 2017; Schor 2014) by extending products' life cycles (Godfrey et al. 2022), promoting less wasteful sharing economies (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Rosenberg et al. 2023), or anti-consumption (Chatzidakis and Lee 2013). Technology plays a key role in the neoliberal governance tactics to reimagine consumption as sustainable (Wichmann et al. 2022).

Technology and Sustainable Consumption

Mick and Fournier define technology as 'artificial things,' particularly 'modern machines' (Mick and Fournier 1998, 124). Kozinets (2008, 865) emphasizes "systems of complex machines" and issues of "science, advanced technique, and mechanistic precision being built into products and services." However, these definitions overlook energy and other resources needed to activate technology,

wherefore sustainability or ecology is 'oversimplified' as a binary: a problem or a solution, with little view to the complicated and ambiguous processes that result (Wilhite et al. 2000, 109).

Productive capacity and market demand facilitated by technological progress causes overconsumption (Connolly and Prothero 2008; Lim 2017). Technology contributes to industrialization, productive scaling, and hence consumerism (Nasrollahi et al. 2020). In these respects technology is discursively associated with harm of the environment (Humphreys 2014). However, sustainability research in marketing frequently frames technology as a protection language, that is "based on a clear separation of nature, which is sacred, from corporate action, which threatens to encroach on its pristine state" (Humphreys 2014, 271). At the same paper, Humphreys (2014) finds that technology is discursively associated with the harm of the environment.

Menon and Menon (1997, 54) suggest that technology is at the "root of the solution" to environmental problems by reducing harmful impacts of production, packaging, delivering, and waste management. Technology is seen as integral to meeting regulatory standards (Gielens et al. 2018) or even in going beyond the regulatory minimum (Dangelico and Pujari 2010). Contemporary approaches to branding also insist that "all firms should maintain sustainability-based corporate branding strategies" that are both pervasive and pragmatic by investing in "technological solutions" that impinge upon environmental issues (Ishaq and Di Maria 2020, 27), or that sustainability marketing must connect with how "technology holds immense potential for greater sustainability" (Lim 2016).

For disposal and waste management, technological innovations appear to cut costs and increase efficiencies thereby incentivising recycling (Sun and Trudel 2017). Technology and management systems have become key to reducing carbon emissions and navigating sustainability issues for instance through better quality products that endure (López, Rangel-Pérez, and Fernández 2023). Ertekin and Atik (2020) similarly see technological innovations in dyeing techniques as integral to sustainable fashion claims. Here technology constitutes an opportunity for incremental, business-led, solutions (Sheth and Parvatiyar 2021), and branding (Sheth and Sinha 2015).

Technological sustainability solutions are reformative in nature, as opposed to an abolitionist perspective, and have had little to no success (Davis et al. 2022). Green technologies for instance have virtually no impact on atmospheric Co2 trajectories (Du, Li, and Yan 2019). Reformative approaches ignore overwhelming "empirical evidence on resource use and carbon emissions does not support green growth theory" (Hickel and Kallis 2020, 469) and that humanity has already crossed six out of nine systemic thresholds that each have the capacity to "trigger non-linear, abrupt environmental change within continental- to planetary-scale systems" (Rockström et al. 2009, 1), while the latest update to MIT's Limits to Growth study predicts "sharp decline" across all measures of productivity and hence consumption brough about by ecological collapse by mid-century (Herrington 2020).

Views of the future are shaped by the potentials in sustainable technology. Firat and Venkatesh (1995, 262) argue that technology, by spurring change, affects and opens a gap between the "future and the past." Pepperell and Punt (2000, 7) see technology as "the tangible expression of desire motivating human imagination to modify reality." Beyond marketing, research in management and organisation studies examine how actors actively construct visions of the future. This literature defines

future making as “the work of making sense of possible and probable futures, and evaluating, negotiating and giving form to preferred ones” (Whyte, Comi, and Mosca 2022, 2). For instance, Van Elk et al. (2025) describe promissory futures as projections of desirable outcomes that appear credible yet remain sufficiently open to avoid moral scrutiny in the present. Such visions can help actors navigate ethical tensions while shaping expectations about possible pathways towards sustainable futures (Comi, Mosca, and Whyte 2025; Gümüsay and Reinecke 2021).

Mick and Fournier (1998, 136) show technology shapes consumers' expectations for the future by giving rise to “great expectations…the freedom to move around, freedom to answer it anywhere, freedom to use...” However, prior research has not mapped the mechanisms through which technology shapes specific expectations towards sustainable futures thereby becoming a fully-fledged “protection discourse” connecting companies to hope (Humphreys 2014). Knowledge about the discursive strategies for establishing a functional protection discourse is important as implementing sustainability often gives rise to resistance (de Gooyert et al. 2016) in its association with reduced future “possibilities” available to consumers (MacInnis and de Mello 2005). In extension, I ask how does technology shape discourses about sustainable futures?

Methodology

Research Context

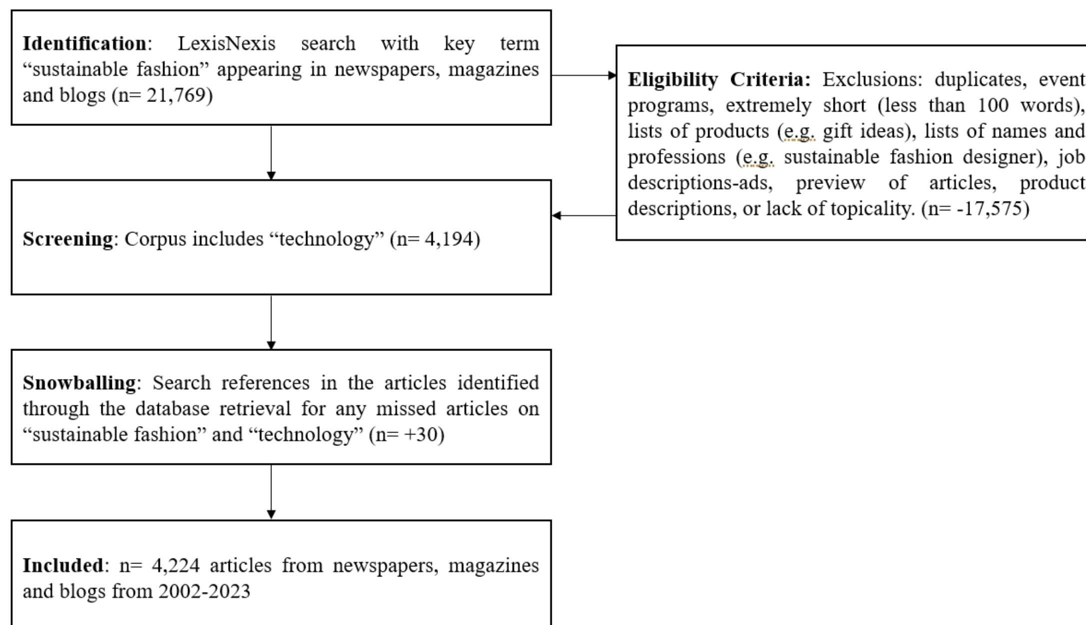
Fashion was long dominated by ready-to-wear clothing (Fernie and Grant 2015) and counterculture trends (Fernie and Grant 2015). However, fast fashion has broadly replaced this cultural system (Alexa et al. 2022), wherefore destructive “disposable fashion” has become the norm (Birtwistle and Moore 2007; Fernie and

Grant 2015). Consumers' complaints for that, led fashion brands to respond by developing or applying innovative technologies for greater sustainability (Alexa et al. 2022; Valor et al. 2022).

Data Collection

To explore how sustainable fashion technology shapes protection-discourses about sustainable futures we sampled newspapers (e.g. The Times), magazines (e.g. Forbes), blog posts (e.g. Fashionista), and company reports (Humphreys 2010). Echoing the internationalized nature of fashion (Fernie and Grant 2015), and the global dissemination of technological innovation (Shishoo 2012), the media sample captures "mega-discourses" or discourses recognized and espoused at the broader societal level, and hence enact taken-for-granted premises across many contexts and countries (Alvesson and Karreman 2000).

Figure 1. Search Strategy



The search term "sustainable fashion" generated a preliminary corpus in Lexis Nexis resulting in 21.769 articles from 2002 till 2023. The search showed no hits prior

to 2002. Exclusion criteria comprised: duplicates, event programs, extremely short entries (less than 100 words), lists of products (e.g. gift ideas), lists of names and professions (e.g. sustainable fashion designer), job descriptions-ads, a preview of an article, or product, or lack of topicality. Thirty articles were added from snowballing, resulting in a final corpus of 4,224 articles (See Figure 1).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was done using NVivo 12 in an iterative process of reading articles, writing memos, coding, patterning codes into nodes, and then theorizing relationships between nodes (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2014). We coded emic understandings of technology and time within the corpus. Locating differences and similarities across multiple articles, we grouped data according to dominant themes (see Table 2) observing that technology engaged with time in diverse ways. Each of these coding themes constitute a part of the protection discourse about the role of technology in sustainable fashion as illustrated in Table 1, capturing what Thompson, Pollio, and Locander (Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994, 435) term a "nexus of assumptions, concerns, values, and meanings that systematically emerged throughout" in relation to the techno-material maintenance of hope as a creation of desirable futures within the sustainable fashion industry (MacInnis and de Mello 2005).

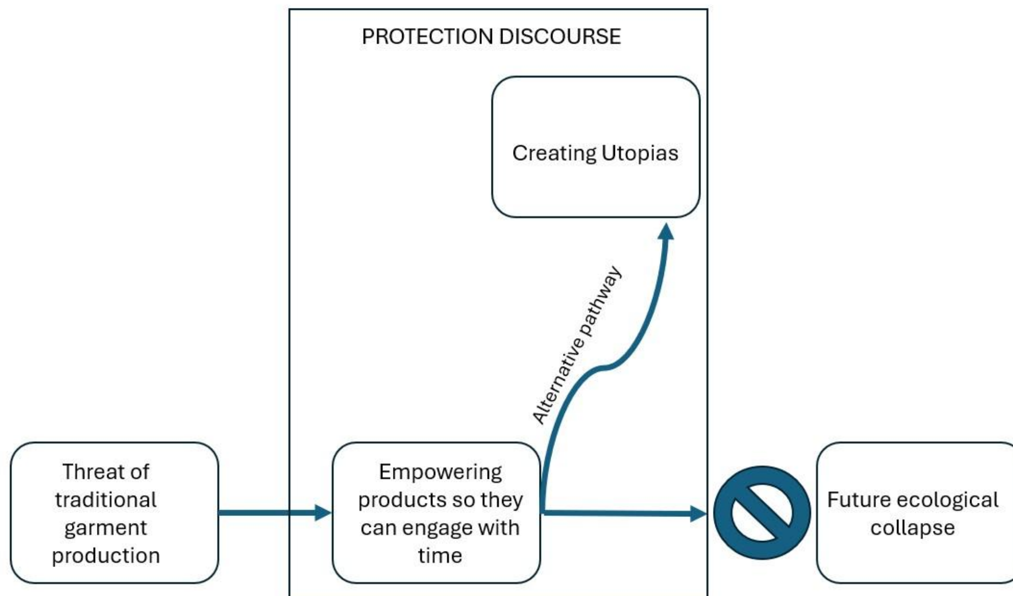
Table 1: Coding Categories for Technological Protection Discourses

Coding Categories	Definition	Exemplar Quote
Empowering Products	Capturing how fashion garments, as material objects, are made temporally salient through technology	"*Sustainable fashion doesn't have to be about eschewing the self-expression, not to mention empowerment, that comes with dressing well, dressing "you". What we need to develop is a new kind of double vision. We need to look backwards, to how our mothers and grandmothers shopped. First, we need to buy with the long view, to shake off the fast-fashion-fuelled desire for novelty, for a quick fix..... Second, we need to look to the future, to the state-of-the-art technology- be it in materials or processes….*" (Murphy 2020)
Crafting Alternative Pathways	The discourse in which companies craft a believable pathway towards a utopia of sustainability through technology and its applications	*"Celine Semaan, who sees the pandemic as "almost a fire drill," for a world upended by climate crisis. "It has also showed necessity of embarking on sustainable journey because we have no other choice." It has also caused us to question what's important and will surely spark a change in culture."* (Marriott 2020)
Creating Utopias	Utopias are unachievable temporal promises about how the future could be, a future that sustainability issues in fashion will be resolved	*"Over the next 12 months, brands are expected to announce partnerships with businesses that have figured out ways to make leather without cows, silk without worms, fur without animals and fabrics from recycled waste." (Wendlandt 2017)*

Findings

Exploring protection discourses about technology driven sustainable futures in fashion, our analysis reveals three elements: 1. Empowering products to interact with time, 2. Crafting alternative pathways in time, and 3. Creating Utopias or specific endpoints in time that avoid ecological collapse (see Figure 2). The protection discourse offers a technologically driven alternative pathway into the future through the technologically facilitated materiality of the product.

Figure 2. The Structure of a Protection Discourse



Empowering Products

Empowering products captures how fashion garments are made temporally salient through technology. The temporality of sustainable products and materials lies in their capacity to link past, present and future. Through technological processes past resources are transformed into future-oriented products, extending the temporal horizon of those garments beyond immediate use. The article "how to be a queen of green" (Murphy 2020), for instance raves over a "multifloral cotton kaftan dress" from the sustainably positioned "H&M Conscious collection." The writer comments how the dress "would see you through myriad summers," assisting the transformation of "a vague future into a concrete present" through the garment's sustainability. The dress incorporates a prospective green world in its materiality and the author imagines a future where she can still wear the present dress. Garment empowerment in relation to time highlights a multifarious and complicated discourse about the relationship between materiality and temporality:

“*Sustainable fashion doesn't have to be about eschewing the self-expression, not to mention empowerment, that comes with dressing well, dressing "you". What we need to develop is a new kind of double vision. We need to look backwards, to how our mothers and grandmothers shopped. First, we need to buy with the long view, to shake off the fast-fashion-fuelled desire for novelty, for a quick fix..... Second, we need to look to the future, to the state-of-the-art technology- be it in materials or processes…”* (Murphy 2020)

This quote captures how technology empowers both the individual and the garment, by expressing personal and social change, making the products concordant with time. Product durability pushes consumers to reflect on the past and the future. Durability concerns whether an object will last and how it will be transformed as time passes. Other articles highlight that these products are called a “wardrobe staple” (The Sunday Independent 2014) or how some children’s clothing “expands with children as they grow” (Williams 2017), pointing out that these objects are made for time and can be used over years. This locks materiality into temporality and challenges reckless and unsustainable consumption logic, which only thinks of the present use of a product. The “double vision” that the garment provides is about looking “backwards” in time and forwards at both individual and collective levels. Through actions enabled by such thinking the dress can take us to a “sustainable future.” The dual vision made possible through these clothes is grounded in “materials” brought into existence by “*state-of-the-art technology”* – herein lay they key to product empowerment.

Murphy (2020) hints at how materials in sustainable fashion are made temporally salient through networks of technology. The article Moral Fibre (Chen 2010), for instance discusses the use of sustainable clothing materials derived from “soybean yarn, yak fibre and recycled silk” through a transformation of “outdated”

technological infrastructures such as “factories” and their resultant “chemical effluent.” Better materials are made possible through a network of “mulberry farms, silk mills and garment workshops” and scientific “experiments with natural dyes.” These quotes capture how sustainable garments that can change the future are not isolated objects but embedded in technologically informed infrastructures and scientific techniques that bring textiles with specific temporal qualities into being. The fashion product therefore suddenly becomes endowed with new potentials the “moment in the process…colours change as she dyes the cloth.”

The garment engages with temporal processes, since it is the basis of a “purist venture,” where ventures are future oriented undertakings (Chen 2010). Ma Ke, who is the initiator of a textile brand, has “mixed feelings about the future” which was inspired by a rejection of old technologies. The new textiles must be “good” and are seen as inspired by how she once “dreamed of becoming a zoologist,” thereby connecting the material qualities embedded in the fabric by technological infrastructures with nostalgia and past feelings of hope towards the future. Technological framing of materials such as textiles and their component fibers therefore allows Chen (2010) to highlight an “obvious link” to “change” embedded in the clothes.

The dataset is replete with examples of how technology is used to empower sustainable clothes with the capacity to engage with time. *The New York Times* article Fashion’s Interest in Alternative Fabrics Keeps Growing (Wendlandt 2017) presents a list of unconventional materials, such as laboratory-made silk and mushroom leather. The author notes that “cool materials of tomorrow could be something people want to buy today.” What makes these fabrics “cool” is the way they are transformed and

empowered through technological processes, making them future-looking in the present.

Technological disruption in the world of garments and textiles offers consumers a new material way to think about time. In “Eco-friendly bionic denim” (The Sunday Independent 2014), the author writes about jeans “made from ground-breaking bionic yarn” using plastic bottles, showcasing how a common object can be empowered and given new temporality through technology. They are “using ground-breaking technology” to “retrieve plastic from the oceans” and convert it into “a new generation of denim”, making a clear connection between the past and future as the past state of a plastic bottle can be changed into a futuristic new material. The notion of generations - or threefold realm of contemporaries, predecessors, and successors – is inherently temporal. The succession of generations captures a biological basis for measuring and making sense of time and historical continuity, but also rhythm, tradition, and innovation under one concept embedded in the garment. Thus, garments made as the latest “generation” of a material are empowered to show consumers a possible sustainable future.

However, while material garments are discursively positioned to engage with time in the figure that we term empowerment, this temporal capacity of the wearable object does not in and of itself provide specific direction and guidance in time, i.e., where this garment driven journey is taking us. We address this discursive function in the next section.

Crafting Alternative Pathways

Temporally empowered products hint at a pathway into an alternative future, where sustainability issues are resolved (see Figure 2). It is the current dangerous

future that gives rise to the need for protection. The capacity of fashion products and garments as physical objects of possession to affect time gives rise to the notion of different routes into bad and good futures, "embarking on [a] sustainable journey" (Marriott 2020) into a new time. This discourse is illustrated in the following quote from the Guardian article "Could the Covid pandemic make fashion more sustainable?":

"*Celine Semaan, who sees the pandemic as "almost a fire drill," for a world upended by climate crisis. "It has also showed necessity of embarking on sustainable journey because we have no other choice." It has also caused us to question what's important and will surely spark a change in culture.*" (Marriott 2020)

Sustainable journeys kicked off by the temporal potential of garments, as expressed in this quote, provide a spatial metaphor for thinking about time. Thinking of timelines as something on a map (see Figure 2) is useful as it allows stakeholders to visualize the idea of switching routes, evaluating directions, and implies forks in the road, and alternate trajectories. In the article "Sustainable fashion" in the Evening Standard, Blanchard (2019) illustrates exactly such alternate routes through time as key to the protection discourse:

"*a luxury jumpsuit exquisitely woven from defunct cassette tape and deadstock yarn otherwise destined for landfill; a pair of trainers grown from cellulose bacteria; jacket woven from wool made from discarded pineapple leaves*" (Blanchard 2019)

The phrase "otherwise destined" provides the key temporal reference point to the reader, hinting that there are multiple possible journeys through to an endpoint in history that must be navigated. Cassette tape and discarded plant leaves need no longer be considered waste in a landfill, but materials that can function as

metaphorical pavement for a new and different road into the future. The Guardian article describes how the designer "Benjamin Benmoyal takes a different approach to his cloth, also woven from waste" (Blanchard 2019). The term "different approach" captures ambivalence about the object's route into the future; one being considered waste and the other a sustainable raw material, which showcases how alternative timelines into different futures is the natural outcome of making design choices.

To follow an alternative pathway, disruption becomes the key enabling event, whereby "companies consider" the world "in a way they didn't before (Marriott 2020). Technological disruptions through fashion production create critical moments where the future is up for grabs and multiple routes through time become evident. In the article "Could the Covid pandemic make fashion more sustainable" (Marriott 2020), the pandemic played the role of the disruptor, since it provided a "moment of truth," where stakeholders gained "awareness" that an alternative outcome was "inescapable". The idea that there is a critical turning point signals that there are multiple pathways the fashion industry can follow that lead to alternative futures for the environment. Blanchard's (2019) article on lab grown textiles captures exactly this offering of multiple timelines that appear from design choices made in relation to compostable sequins and embroidery which change the "convoluted journeys that materials… go on." These alternative pathways can have specific milestones that mark the trail.

Milestones and points of reference assist in navigating an alternate journey through time, as they mark the road step by step until reaching a destination. Accordingly, the seemingly abstract alternative journey towards sustainability shores up the metaphor with specific time references and milestones. Blanchard (2019) writes for instance:

"*The materials we use for our clothes and interiors are undergoing a radical rethink. This is urgently needed if we are to meet our 2050 net zero carbon emissions target"* (Blanchard, 2019)

She stresses the year 2050 as the point in the future we should reach net zero carbon emissions, setting a specific point in time and a goal. She also reflects on the actions to be taken to reach this milestone, which is a "radical rethink" of the clothes used. In other cases, the time reference is not set in the form of a year but in relation to the point we are now and as a speculation, as a designer "estimates it could be at least five years before her sequin is a commercially viable product ready for use on an industrial scale" (Blanchard, 2019).

Milestones imply a gradual moral improvement over time, rather than being completely good right now. As Blanchard (2019) writes "this shift into a more sustainable future is not going to happen overnight", stressing that the change requires both time and actions towards sustainability. Similarly, the brand "Slow Factory" (Marriott, 2020) signals the length and pace of the sustainability journey in its name. The authors put consumers at ease by reminding them that the journey is long and small changes will lead us to the end goal. Marriott (2020) writes about the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic: *"Here are five promising developments – from mindset shifts to disruptive technology– which could help use merge from this wearing something we can feel good about."* The journey through the "developments" into the far future is charged with moral meanings as stakeholders are gradually given the opportunity to evade shame through technology.

The alternative pathways are a way to connect the present state with the future ideal for sustainability. It often includes milestones, steps and guidelines to be

completed through the technological facilitation of the garments' materiality. The length of the pathways varies, from a few months to decades, and are usually presented as linear and simple. The change promised is described as gradual. However, these transitional journeys through time embedded in the protection discourse hint at a desirable end goal to history.

Creating Utopias

Technologically driven sustainability utopias of the future are described as free of the restrictions imposed on consumers and markets in the present. This part of the technological protection discourse focuses on evoking the impossible made possible at a later stage in time. The New York Times article "Fashion's Interest in Alternative Fabrics Keeps Growing" provides an example of such speculative futures:

"*Over the next 12 months, brands are expected to announce partnerships with businesses that have figured out ways to make leather without cows, silk without worms, fur without animals and fabrics from recycled waste.*" (Wendlandt 2017)

The repetitive use of antitheses showcases impossible trade-offs leading to a dreamy situation that only technology can create. Opposing concepts like "leather without cows", "silk without worms" and "fur without animals" convey to consumers that the impossible could be possible with the use of science. At the same time, these opposing schemas are prefaced by the future facing verb "expected." The protection discourse therefore involves making promissory notes on the future with technology as security. The materials are described as "unusual" adding to the surreal storytelling of a dream, where materials such as oranges, mushrooms and spider webs are transmogrified into magical compositions through the spell of future technology. In

fact, the contrast between everyday items and the elaborate end-result, extends the idea of a utopia in that technology can sustainably turn anything into fashion.

Marriott (2020), for instance, sees a dress representing “a *vision of actively doing good, rather than striving to be less destructive. A dress made of algae sequins points to a future where fashion can be a negative emission technology*.” She imagines a utopian future, where consumers won’t be puzzled by whether their clothes are harming the environment, but they will be reassured that they are actively helping it. Creating a technological sustainability utopia connects with a major social ideal - as the democratisation of the fashion industry. As Cartner-Morley (2018) notes:

“*An artificial intelligence takeover of the power traditionally held by the population of magazine mastheads and the fashion week front row to anoint the "best-dressed" could bring about a democratic revolution in an elitist industry*.”

The use of the word “revolution” as opposed to “an elitist industry” makes a powerful statement, that technology could lead to a fair, just, and sustainable world. The possibility of a future transformation from an “elitist” to a “democratic” industry and society, where social justice and equality are central, builds a vivid utopian social imaginary. The future flattening of power structures is described by Livia Firth after hosting the first Green Carpet Fashion Awards (Moore 2017), who hopes for *“a new era."* The article highlights that such a technology driven sustainable fashion industry would mean clothes were *“not made by invisible people and not made by untraceable supply chains. We have a beautiful future ahead of us."*

In this statement, Firth anticipates futures brought about by sustainable fashion where all are equals in the fashion industry, “from CEOs to seamstresses.” Ultimately this allows standards for clothes and fashion, such as being “beautiful” to transfer to

future social structures and polities. The utopian discourse is not just about social spaces without hierarchies, but a change in practices altogether across organizational structures, which would lead to a future situation where fashion companies *"won't need the environmental team any more."* (Centeno 2009)

Ultimately an ongoing drone of optimistic descriptors and adjectives across the corpus of data is key to illustrating the protection discourse and particularly crafting utopias. On the one hand the discourse pushes reader to address the question of "So what does that future look like?" (Newall 2017) or nudging the reader to do "Future-gazing" (The Times 2009) and "explore the future" (Yorkshire Evening Post 2005), only to supply the inevitable answer in rose-tinted anticipation that "We have a beautiful future ahead of us." (Moore 2017)

Technology driven sustainable fashion means consumers will have a "secure future… [a] safe future" (Menon and Poti 2017). This ideal state is described as a "bright future," which is capable of further, indefinite "future expansion" (Blanchard 2019), while ensuring "many species, one planet" who share in that "one future" (Coolum and North Shore News 2010). This wonderful end outcome promised will be a "cleaner and healthier future for us all" (Markham 2020) full of "joy and hope," which has left behind this "grey world" and instead allows humanity to inhabit a world "with beautiful, cheerful colors and see the possibilities of a vibrant future," (Business World 2011). In this perfect future world, the consumers of today will have been saviours and the denizens of utopia, the "future generations will thank us" (Perfect Sourcing 2017). This is not just any future made possible by technologically enabled sustainable fashion garments, but "the great future" (Meegan 2018).

Across the data, these utopian visions seem to vary in content and scale. In terms of content, the imagined futures move between technological, environmental

and social ideals, from novel materials such as "*leather without cows*" (Wendlandt 2017) to garments that promise to repair environmental damage. The scale of these visions also expands throughout the discourse. Some focus on innovations at the level of fabrics and products while some see extended transformation of the fashion industry and even the societal future.

Discussion

This paper explores how technology shapes discourses about sustainable futures. Previous research in marketing sees technological progress as enabling the productive capacity leading to overconsumption (Phipps et al. 2013). On the other hand, technology is more often presented as part of the solution to sustainability challenges (Lim 2016; Menon and Menon 1997). And while technology is at least a part of "shaping consumer expectations for the future" (Mick and Fournier 1998, 136) studies have not yet addressed the discursive mechanisms when technology frames and presents the future in sustainable fashion.

This finding extends Humphreys' (2014) concept of protection discourse by identifying specific patterns of language about technology that stakeholders employ to structure the market of sustainable fashion. The future egalitarian, affluent, cheerful, colourful world full of joy suggested sustainable technology in fashion connects with hope as an uncertain but possible, goal-congruent outcome (MacInnis and de Mello 2005). For this reason, industry stakeholders promote technology as a strategy of gradual reform despite mounting evidence that this approach is already too late (Hickel and Kallis 2020; Rockström et al. 2023). This is done with the three discursive stages of protection identified.

Empowering products refers to material objects that are made temporally salient through technology. They offer consumers the notion that time is something that can be influenced, controlled and directed through material possessions. The second discursive strategy, crafting alternative pathways, seeks to head off dangerous, impending catastrophes and instead pursue and alternative direction into the future. Ironically the alternative path is always reformist, full of milestones and progression checkpoints, implying a gradual rather than radical improvement despite the serious challenges being faced. Finally, the protection discourse foregrounds utopia, makes it concrete with ample use of adjectives, and highlights the intersection of ecology and social structure. It describes a desirable sustainable future, where impossibility is turned into possibility and delivers a more tangible engagement with distant times in the present.

While it has typically been assumed that technology is used to open a gap between the "future and the past," (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, 262) this study shows that technology can also be used to close that gap by imaginatively bringing prospective utopia discursively into the present (Wright 2010). These findings extend previous work on sustainability in marketing. Particularly, Humphreys' (2014: 265) work on the discursive life of environmentalism explores the growing role of sustainability in Corporate Social Responsibility (CRS), or the "set of expectations for appropriate conduct in dealing with customers, making products, and following the law." This research tracks changes to the role of harm and protection, focusing on the shift in norms regarding environmental responsibility "over time" (Humphreys, 2014: 265). Our research illustrates how time is not only an independent variable providing a backdrop to track and map institutional processes, but that time itself has become a

part of the discourse of sustainability and environmentalist CSR, or a dependent variable shaped by stakeholder interests and institutional positions.

While some studies on individual preferences relating to green consumption and sustainability show that consumers favor cyclical time (Xu et al. 2023), the findings suggest that such a construct of recurrence is difficult to merge with future oriented hope as a central aspect of consumerism. Circularity would be "time-inconsistent" as the immediate behavior that consumers want to engage in is inconsistent with the longer-term goal they would like to achieve (MacInnis and de Mello 2005, 11). Beyond chronological timelines or events logged into a calendar, the findings suggest that market stakeholders work hard to use and shape discourses about the linear progression of time and thereby frame the "set of expectations [about future behaviour]" that constitute CSR (Humphreys 2014, 266) to their advantage, namely gradualism over radical reform. The discursive positioning of time is therefore itself a part of the "socio-cultural forces behind expectations for corporate action" on sustainability and not just a framework for articulating those forces (Humphreys 2014, 266). This is an important instance of how the negotiation of ideas about time among consumers and firms is in fact an ideological struggle waged by fashion companies (Robinson et al. 2022). This is a change from previous studies on ideology and technology which find that sustainability, ecology and green stances in the market are mainly anti-technological and luddite (Kozinets 2008).

The findings also highlight a substantial change in the discursive role of technology in sustainability since Humphreys' (2014) findings. This is due to the novel role of time as a cultural resource. Humphreys (2014, 271) points out that "the technology frame emphasizes the controlled management of environmental resources." The main purpose of technology is therefore "the control that companies

have over the environment" (Humphreys 2014, 273). This is a material, reductionist reading of what technology is in green markets, as its main function is to ‘‘reduce harm to the environment … through the idea of efficiency" and "control the externalities of industrial processes" (Humphreys 2014, 274). The findings reveal the appearance of a far more ephemeral and perhaps even metaphysical notion of technology that controls the externalities of historical processes. Sustainable technologies are no longer articulated as merely "this machine" or "that production process," or a specific car model with lower emissions, but rather an overarching medium of social design and change. In sustainability discourses about fashion, technology is the medium through which future history unfolds.

This paper reveals a way the fashion industry could commit greenwashing (Lyon and Maxwell 2011, 5) through fanciful speculation about the capacity to change the prospective world we face. This research proposes that an industry shift to prospective outcomes driven by hypothetical technological capacity, rather than documentation about the effectiveness of past actions, is key to reducing transparency in the industry. Technology allows the industry to write comprehensive promissory notes without much backing and with little reference to reality. Hickel and Kallis (2020, 486) for example, point out that all calculations show how green growth is a fundamentally failed concept and that decisions should be made based on "robust empirical evidence, rather than on the basis of speculative theoretical possibilities." The viability of reform-oriented discourse in the industry likewise runs counter to the MIT Limits to Growth calculations which suggest draconian intervention is needed to head off abrupt civilizational decline by mid-century (Herrington 2020), which makes changes to the fashion industry far more "urgent" than suggested in the industry's own pedestrian reform discourse (Niinimäki et al. 2020, 189).

Future research could investigate how sustainable technologies are used to articulate the future in other technology focused industries. The automotive industry (Aurand et al. 2018; Mitchell and Harrison 2012) as well as the tourism industry (Self, Self, and Bell-Haynes 2010; Smith and Font 2014) both rely on technology to engage in gradualist approaches to environmentalism, each with unique potentials for envisioning futures. Critical engagement with such industries is seen as key to revealing greenwashing practices. With growing awareness of emissions related to internet usage and AI, the tech industry's own effort to green the web could also provide a context for further exploration of how protection discourses envision the future. Furthermore, future studies should explore the intersection of sustainability, greenwashing and segmentation. How are protection discourses developed to appeal to specific income classes, genders, geographies, lifestyles and age groups. We propose that variable engagement with technology across these segments might provide a more precise picture of how protection discourses leverage the future to stall radical change in specific markets.

Ultimately all consumption and marketing engage with hope for the future and the prospect for personal and societal improvement (Campbell 1987). Alas, the state of the ecology suggests that worse, much worse, is to come over the next decades and markets face constraints across all industries and markets. A key challenge for the discipline of marketing will be critique of fanciful or magic thinking and to force the debate into the world of scientific consensus. Marketers should ask: if not hope, then what alternative concept could inform market logics as we try to head off catastrophe.

Paper II: Consumer Resourcefulness: How Mothers Living in Poverty Cope with Enduring Material Constraints

Abstract

Consumer resourcefulness, an important topic of consumption, remains widely underexplored in consumer research. This paper examines consumer resourcefulness among mothers living in poverty in Greece through 36 phenomenological interviews and field observations. Findings reveal that consumer resourcefulness is learned, creative, and networked, enabling consumers to provide, maintain, and dispose of products and services under conditions of scarcity. Beyond individual adaptation, resourcefulness also generates collective outcomes, fostering resilience, solidarity, and sustainable practices within communities. By defining consumer resourcefulness and distinguishing it from related constructs, this study advances theoretical understanding of resourcefulness in consumer contexts while highlighting the value of poverty as a critical site for its development.

Introduction

Resourcefulness, or the set of skills individuals cultivate to navigate and cope with personal or collective challenges (Li et al. 2018), is an understudied phenomenon. Resourcefulness has been mentioned in passing in the context of poverty, relying mainly on emic understandings of the term, describing it as a static trait, rather than the outcome of a sociocultural process (Witkin 2020). Studying the contradictions of infrastructure, governance and institutions, Diamond et al.'s (2009) work on holistic branding for instance relates resourcefulness to survival in extreme sociocultural crises such as the Great Depression. Iyer et al. (2012) likewise note in passing for micro-entrepreneurial classes. Bradshaw and Tadajewski (2011, 317) show that the lower middle class is "characterized by its resourcefulness" when it comes to finding resources to earn money. However, resourcefulness remains an understudied phenomenon in consumer research.

Beyond marketing, numerous academic disciplines have extensively examined resourcefulness, with agreement that it represents a set of skills individuals develop to cope with adversity (Zauszniewski 2016). What remains contested, however, is whether resourcefulness should also encompass social dimensions, such as reliance on social networks and help seeking, as integral to overcoming difficulties (Nadler 1990). While management and entrepreneurship research has largely explored resourcefulness as narratives in relation to entrepreneurs (Fisher, Neubert, and Burnell 2021), its relevance to consumers is limited. Entrepreneurs employ resourcefulness in order to mobilize resources for new ventures, while consumers usually engage in resourcefulness to meet basic needs, suggesting fundamentally different assumptions about its nature and implications, as well as its practices.

Consumer research has largely neglected the experiences of individuals living in poverty (Vieites and Mittal 2024). The limited studies that exist examine specific practices such as money-saving (Gallagher 2020), energy use (Butler et al. 2016), shopping (Greenacre and Akbar 2019), and technology adoption (Hasan, Lowe, and Petrovici 2019).Yet consumption in poverty should not be reduced to isolated practices or the management of scarce resources. It involves complex strategies, with resourcefulness being key for consumers to navigate scarcity and uncertainty. In extension, I ask: What is consumer resourcefulness? From this inquiry, a further question emerges: how does resourcefulness structure consumption in poverty?

This paper explores resourcefulness among Greek mothers living in poverty. Due to prevalent family patterns in this context, mothers are usually in charge of the household consumption decisions confronting them with a misalignment of material, capital and service needs and resources, driving an intense need for resourcefulness (Caesar 2024). Furthermore, evolving needs for new products and services over the course of the family lifecycle likewise spur mothers to pursue resourcefulness in a variety of ways over time (Cattan 2025). Analysing 36 phenomenological interviews and field notes from mothers living in poverty around Greece (Thompson 1997), I explore what consumer resourcefulness is.

Firstly, the key trigger is identified that leads to consumer resourcefulness, as enduring material constraints. Through rich descriptions of common practices about provisioning, maintenance and disposal of goods and services, data reveal that consumer resourcefulness is characterised by being learned, creative and networked. Finally, I highlight the outcomes of consumer resourcefulness for consumers and their communities, namely resilience, solidarity and sustainability.

This paper begins with unpacking consumer resourcefulness, highlighting the limitations of the existing emic definitions. Next, the literature review broadens to consider how resourcefulness has been theorised beyond marketing, highlighting the value of poverty contexts as a key site for advancing and refining the construct. Finally, the next section critically reviews how consumer research has studied poverty. After the methodology, the findings unpack consumer resourcefulness, revealing the key features of resourcefulness as: learned, networked and creative. In the discussion: 1) consumer resourcefulness is defined, 2) I show how consumer resourcefulness is distinct from resilience, 3) how consumer resourcefulness extends current understanding of resourcefulness in academic research, 4) practical relevance by illustrating how consumer resourcefulness in contexts of material deprivation are transferable across multiple domains and may inform sustainable practices, community resilience and solidarity.

Literature Review

Consumer Resourcefulness

In consumer research, scholars link resourcefulness to economic hardship and adverse situations. For instance, when talking about Peruvian social structure, Bradshaw and Tadajewski (2011, 317) mention in passing, that there is a large lower middle class “characterized by its resourcefulness to appropriate and mix whatever resources are available in order to make a living.” However, this paper stops short of providing a consumer research definition of resourcefulness, let alone and empirical operationalization. Discussing consumption and economic growth in India, Iyer et al. (2012) mention resourcefulness as a prominent part of the Indian society, being shaped by adverse circumstances. Yet this work relies on an emic understanding of resourcefulness, which falls short of actionability in further research. Additionally, in

their work on the American Girl doll, Diamond et al. (2009) use the term resourcefulness, without providing an explicit definition, to capture how consumers make it through periods of deprivation such as the Great Depression. Thus, while resourcefulness has been brought up in the marketing literature, scholars often use it hint at a skillset mobilized to cope with adversities (Diamond et al. 2009).

Resourcefulness and resilience might appear to have similarities, it is important to consider how resourcefulness relates to, and differs from, the more extensively examined concept of resilience. In consumer research resilience is referred to as the ability of an individual to bounce or spring back from stress and adversity (Price et al. 2018). It is often examined in contexts such as financial hardship (Mimoun and Bardhi 2022; Szmigin et al. 2020), health crises (Maddi 2012), or environmental disasters (Rew and Minor 2018), where consumers develop coping mechanisms and adaptive behaviors. For instance, resilience informs how consumers maintain consumption routines or develop new ones amid economic downturns (Szmigin et al. 2020). Recent studies also explore how the pathways to resilience can have ongoing effects on consumers (Maddi 2012).

While resourcefulness is usually regarding a long-term, established state of an individual or a community, resilience is about the response of an individual to a sudden and external shock. At the same time, resilience is described in the literature as an ability, whereas resourcefulness is a skill, that could help an individual be more resilient.

Resourcefulness in consumer research has often been seen as survival and coping in contexts of scarcity and crisis. Wells et al.'s (2023) work on consumption during COVID-19 pandemic describes how resourcefulness was mobilized for

foraging to provide food under disrupted supply chains. Studying low income consumers, Mason et al. (2013) similarly note that consumers in subsistence marketplaces, though lacking even basic resources, display an “abundance” of resourcefulness. Cheded and Liu (2022) further illustrate how resourcefulness manifests individually, as an informant used sewing skills to save money in the pursuit of gender transformation. In these cases, resourcefulness is an emic term describing how to stretch limited means, enabling survival and adaptation. While Firat and Dholakia (2006) discuss how the market exhibits great resourcefulness in co-opting cultures that are resisting modernity. Resourcefulness here becomes a metaphor for the marketplace, ensuring its persistence against critique.

Resourcefulness has also been described as collective practice, highlighting how it is not confined to individual ingenuity but often emerges through cooperation. Wells et al. (2023) for instance point out that resourcefulness in pandemic developed as a result of cooperative behaviors, showing how communities pooled knowledge and support to manage scarcity. Patsiaouras et al. (2017) offer a different example, locating resourcefulness in the collective occupation of urban spaces by protesters who creatively reimagined these sites for artistic expression. In both cases, resourcefulness is enacted through shared effort, generating new social possibilities, but stops short of specific definition in a wider framework.

Resourcefulness is also used to describe sustainable practices. Lloveras et al. (2020) associate resourcefulness with practices of repairing, recycling, reusing, and self-production, positioning it as a form of ecological wealth that fosters sufficiency, autonomy, and resilience. Resourcefulness here is not only a pragmatic response to scarcity but also a deliberate ethical stance that challenges consumerist definitions of

prosperity. Discussing rasquache consumption, which concerns the cultural sensibility of the “underdog”, Zavala and Arias (2025) use resourcefulness as identity and pride positions. Resourcefulness is expressed through extending the life of materials and asserting personal values and tastes that resist consumer culture. In this framing, resourcefulness is not only instrumental but largely symbolic.

Taken together, these consumer research accounts show that resourcefulness has only been described in emic terms, being treated as a descriptive characteristic emerging across diverse contexts, yet it has not been systematically theorized or subjected to focused analysis. Extant research beyond marketing and consumer research provides more focused and explicitly theoretical constructs that may progress the conversation.

Resourcefulness beyond Consumer Research

Resourcefulness has been defined as the ability “to meet situations: capable of devising ways and means" (Merriam-Webster 2025). In psychology, resourcefulness is defined as the ability to employ cognitive, emotional, and behavioral strategies to cope with stress and adversity. Meichenbaum (1979) for instance identified three key components of resourcefulness: (a) self-monitoring, (b) problem-solving, and (c) emotion regulation.

Across multiple fields, including psychology, sociology, healthcare, education, management studies and entrepreneurship, and a range of other fields, resourcefulness has received ongoing interest (See Table 1).

Table 1. Definitions of resourcefulness

Author, date	Discipline	Concept	Definition
Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2025)	-	Resourcefulness	Being able to meet situations: capable of devising ways and means
Meichenbaum (1979)	Psychology	Resourcefulness	The ability to use effective coping strategies in response to stress or difficult situations
Kanungo and Misra (1992)	Management	Managerial Resourcefulness	The competencies to self-regulate and direct ones behaviour to successfully cope with difficult, stressful, and challenging situations
Misra and Kumar (2000)	Entrepreneurship	Entrepreneurial Resourcefulness	The ability to identify opportunities in the environment and regulate and direct behaviour to successfully cope with the task of creating and managing an organisation to pursue the opportunity
Williams et al. (2021)	Entrepreneurship	Entrepreneurial Resourcefulness	A boundary-breaking behaviour of creatively bringing resources to bear and deploying them to generate and capture new or unexpected sources of value in the process of entrepreneurship
Fisher et al. (2021)	Entrepreneurship	Resourcefulness Narrative	A resourcefulness narrative is a discursive, temporal account of past or ongoing entrepreneurial actions, whereby an entrepreneur is presented as using, assembling, or deploying resources in creative ways in order to overcome an impediment
Zauszniewski (1995)	Nursing	Resourcefulness	A characteristic acquired throughout life, focusing on attaining, maintaining, or regaining health, encompassing both personal (self-help) and social (help-seeking) skills
Ganz (2000)	Sociology	Resourcefulness	Is a creative strategy, which is a function of access to a diversity of salient information, heuristic facility, and motivation
MacKinnon and Driscoll-Derickson (2013)	Human Geography	Politics of Resourcefulness	A politics of Resourcefulness highlights the material and enduring challenges that marginalized communities face in conceiving of and engaging in the kinds of activism and politics that are likely to facilitate transformative change

In his study of college students Rosenbaum (1989) contrasts “learned helplessness” with the concept of “learned resourcefulness”, describing it as and acquired "repertoire of cognitive-behavioral self-control skills" that individuals develop throughout their lives to effectively cope with stressful life events and to successfully execute self-control behaviours. He initially proposed four components:

(a) positive self-statements, (b) problem-solving, (c) delay of gratification, and (d) perceived self-efficacy. Specifically, this framework "does not refer to intellectual, motoric or social resourcefulness" (Rosenbaum and Jaffe 1983, 216). However, Rosenbaum and Jaffe (1983) revised their framework to three dimensions, emphasizing self-control, where individuals consciously decide to take charge when habits fail due to contextual uncertainty. The dimensions are therefore: redressive self-control (restoring disrupted functioning), reformative self-control (adopting new helpful behaviors), and experiential self-control (active engagement in personal growth). This conceptual paper also stresses innate traits over social dynamics of resourcefulness, since "resourceful individuals possess a repertoire of behaviors" (Rosenbaum and Jaffe 1983, 216).

Focusing on family level outcomes, Li et al. (2018) take a slightly broader view where resourcefulness becomes a skill set enabling small groups to navigate challenges effectively. These skills help individuals remain composed in adversity and enhance their problem-solving abilities by leveraging available resources (Akgun and Ciarrochi 2003; Zauszniewski et al. 2022). While a resourceful person is better able to approach a problem from different angles, tends to think objectively, and is more likely to solve problems effectively by utilising the resources around them, Li et al. (2018, 435) find that "high quality social support system was indicated as a strong predictor of caregivers' positive cognitions and resourcefulness". While this approach characterizes resourcefulness as a set of learned skills, it therefore still focuses on personal resourcefulness—the ability to achieve goals independently using one's own efforts and internal resources. Later developments of this approach have sought to moderate the individuated nature of resourcefulness by including knowledge about when a person should be "seeking help from others" (Zauszniewski 2016, 1552).

The networked approach to resourcefulness was developed into an independent perspective known as social resourcefulness based on the work of Nadler (1990). In the context of nursing and elderly adults, Zauszniewski, Lai, and Tithiphontumrong (2006) developed a scale to connect the individual and social orientation of resourcefulness. This gave rise to the observation that social resourcefulness involves various external help-seeking strategies from both formal and informal resources.

This more dynamic approach does not view resourcefulness as a fixed trait or measurable skill, but as a sociological perspective that situates the individual within socially and environmentally resourceful contexts. MacKinnon and Driscoll-Derickson's (2012) theoretical work therefore, argues that resourcefulness is a relational, place-based process that evolves within communities rather than a condition or characteristic that communities may or may not possess to some degree. This perspective emphasizes long-term relationships that adapt to changing circumstances, supporting the idea that resourcefulness is shaped by social and environmental factors. Peters et al.'s (2022) work on health in communities develop this perspective and point out that unequal distribution of resourcefulness can lead to social tension.

Witkin (2020) further explores this notion, discussing how informal support networks among low-income families foster resourcefulness. However, he also notes that while resourcefulness helps individuals manage poverty, it can also hinder upward mobility. In order to follow a different path and climb the social ladder, resourceful individuals often have to distance themselves from their community, where they usually receive help (Stack 1974). At the same time, Witkin (2020)

suggests that non-traditional family structures, such as cohabitation among friends, could be a source of flexibility and resourcefulness in the face of economic uncertainty, stressing the importance of networks in resourcefulness.

Resourcefulness has also been explored in management studies and entrepreneurship. In the context of human geography and natural resource management, Robinson and Carson (2016) link resourcefulness to social justice, emphasizing local autonomy, indigenous knowledge, and cultural recognition in fostering sustainable development. As a result the authors emphasize "the socio-cultural context in which individuals" link to "community development pathways" and "particular economic and social circumstances" when individuals become resourceful. Providing an example of this, Williams et al.'s (2021) work on entrepreneurial resourcefulness shows how business owners creatively mobilize resources to overcome constraints. These authors point out that resourcefulness research is fragmented across disciplines, theories, and levels of analysis, and yet illustrate how entrepreneurial resourcefulness is a "social-cognitive process of bringing resources into use for an entrepreneurial schema that challenges and extends normative boundaries," suggesting that it can lead to a change in trajectory for a community.

Stressing social capital, social relationships and social repertoire, Fisher et al.'s (2021) conceptual work further argues that entrepreneurs can transform their resourceful actions into narratives, which, when shared, elicit support from resource providers. These narratives are a discursive, temporal account of past or ongoing entrepreneurial actions, whereby an entrepreneur is "presented as using, assembling, or deploying resources in creative ways in order to overcome an impediment" (Fisher et al. 2021, 1).

Extending this perspective beyond entrepreneurship, it becomes important to study resourcefulness at the consumer level, where similar practices and narratives can yield valuable insights into how individuals navigate constraints and mobilize support. Given that the literature as seen often frames resourcefulness in relation to material constraints, the context of poverty provides a particularly fertile ground for examining how resourcefulness shapes consumers' experiences.

Poverty in Consumer Research

Consumer research has historically overlooked individuals living in poverty and their distinctive experiences of consumption (Vieites and Mittal 2024). Until 2006, research on this demographic remained limited (Goel, Sharma, and Saha 2024). Yet poverty constrains accessibility, marginalizes wealth, and frequently restricts literacy (Viswanathan, Rosa, and Harris 2005), resulting in consumption behaviors that diverge significantly from those of more privileged groups.

Existing scholarship has primarily examined specific aspects of consumption in poverty, including money-saving behaviour (Gallagher 2020), energy-saving intentions (Butler et al. 2016), shopping practices (Greenacre and Akbar 2019), technology adoption (Hasan et al. 2019), food choices (Andretti et al. 2025), and health-related practices (Vieites and Mittal 2024). However, consumption in poverty cannot be reduced to the management of scarce resources, as it encompasses a high degree of complexity. For example, impoverished consumers are not always price sensitive, as brand loyalty may supersede cost considerations (Costa Filho and Falcao 2021).

The impact of poverty extends beyond material deprivation to cognitive and emotional domains. People living in poverty experience low life satisfaction

regardless of other more positive aspects of their lives (Kasser 2003). Also, consumers living in poverty frequently exhibit short-term orientation and risk aversion in consumption (Haushofer and Fehr 2014). Mani et al. (2013) argue that poverty also generates cognitive load, impairing performance in tasks that require deliberation and decision-making. Within this context, conspicuous and symbolic consumption, such as the acquisition of branded products, functions as a means of shielding against social stigma, fostering inclusion, and constructing identity (Castilhos and Fonseca 2016; Elliott and Leonard 2004; Hamilton 2012).

In marketing literature, two dominant research streams address poverty. Firstly, the Bottom of the Pyramid (BoP), which studies impoverished consumers, was introduced by Prahalad (2010). It emphasizes how firms and organisations can develop business models targeting low-income consumers, with the dual aim of creating market opportunities and alleviating poverty. As this approach adopts a managerial perspective, it mostly focuses on companies' initiatives to design solutions in contexts of poverty that could create both economic and social value (London and Hart 2004). Thus, a large part of this literature focuses on technological adoption within this demographic to give consumers in poverty access to financial support (Hasan et al. 2019).

In contrast, subsistence marketplaces research focuses on consumers that their ability to meet basic needs is under chronic threat (Venugopal and Viswanathan 2017). This approach avoids reducing poverty to resource scarcity and allows for a rounded conceptualization of the subjective experience of poverty (Venugopal and Viswanathan 2017). In this stream of research, marketplaces are perceived as systems that are shaped by groups of practices evolved and adopted by market actors

(Kjellberg and Helgesson 2007). Through this bottom-up scope, people engaging in subsistence marketplaces can create their own marketplaces that enhance their well-being (Chakravarti and Manson 2014). This approach is different from BoP as it doesn't rely on external interventions that are imposed in these contexts (Venugopal and Viswanathan 2017).

Consumers living in poverty are often "responsibilized" through narratives that reframe poverty as an individual responsibility, legitimized by expert knowledge, and operationalized through market-based solutions (Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria 2021; Giesler and Veresiu 2014). Such discourses translate the structural complexities of poverty into individualized entrepreneurial stories, while economic elites, policymakers, and intermediaries shape moral responsibilities and consumer subjectivities by deploying affective interventions and market mechanisms (Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria 2021).

Our knowledge about the lived experience of consumers in poverty remains limited. While we know that low-income households struggle to meet basic physiological needs (Vieites and Mittal 2024), and that their consumption practices are marked by uncertainty (Viswanathan et al. 2025), there are not many rich descriptions of the subjective experience of poverty. Viswanathan et al. (2025) share that common strategies among consumers living in poverty include self-production, bulk purchasing, and stockpiling essential goods. Other practices that have been identified include reusing and reducing usage, foregoing consumption, harvesting, and sharing in communities (Viswanathan et al. 2014). Hill and Stamey (1990) provide excellent insights into homeless consumers through an ethnographic study. Through this extreme case of poverty, they add to our understanding of how consumers in

poverty acquire possessions, through scavenging and purchasing. Scavenging takes place when others see things as garbage, while consumers living in poverty still see value in them. Hill and Stamey (1990) also highlight the importance of being part of a group, both for protection and benefit from sharing.

Beyond material practices, poverty shapes social and moral behaviour. Research shows that people in poverty often display stronger prosocial orientations than more affluent individuals (Chen, Zhu, and Chen 2013; Guinote et al. 2015; Piff et al. 2010). However, when it involves donation of organs, they are less likely to consent given the body's central role in their sense of self (Vieites and Mittal 2024). Social connections play a crucial role in mitigating poverty's effects. Belonging to communities and networks enhances resilience to economic shocks (Knack and Keefer 1997; Narayan and Pritchett 1999; Viswanathan et al. 2025). Likewise, poor families often maintain consumption through a complex array of relationships that stand ready to contribute resources when setbacks occur (Ruth and Hsiung 2007).

Social ties often substitute for material resources (Martin and Hill 2012), although they require significant investments of time (Collier 2002). Relationships offer a way to multiply value in exchanges and lower uncertainty, often leading to interdependence (Viswanathan et al. 2014). As Saatcioglu and Ozanne (2013) show in their ethnography of a trailer park neighbourhood, among poor consumers there are multiple social hierarchies and social resources are essential. These practices, alongside the reliance on community ties, reflect the resourcefulness of consumers living in poverty, who mobilize both material and social strategies to cope with scarcity and uncertainty. Thus, I ask: What is consumer resourcefulness? From this inquiry, a further question emerges: How does resourcefulness structure consumption in poverty?

Methodology

In order to answer how does resourcefulness structure consumption in poverty, I conducted 36 semi-structured, in-depth, phenomenological interviews with a purposive sample of mothers living in poverty in Greece. Greece was chosen as it has one of the highest rates of people living in poverty in Europe, consisting of almost 30% of the population ("Living Conditions in Europe - Poverty and Social Exclusion" 2023). Two upper thresholds of annual income were set, one for single mothers and one for two-adult households, €6,000 and €12,000, respectively. These cutoff points were based on the latest report about poverty in Greece (*Greece Poverty Watch* 2024).

I chose to sample mothers with children aged 0-12 years old, for two reasons. Firstly, women in both one-adult and two-adult households are usually responsible for their household consumption decisions (Caesar 2024). In addition, being mothers with younger children, thus the age limit, assures that their consumption needs are accelerated. The number of participants was determined by theoretical saturation.

Table 2 provides a summary of our informants. The sample consists of women aged from 25 to 51 years old with 1 to 4 children, aged from 3 months to 11 years old. 18 of our informants are unemployed, while five of them are cleaners and the rest do various occupations. The majority of our informants are married and share the household with their spouse.

Table 2: Participants' Information

No.	Participant	Age	Education	Profession	Children's age	Household Income
1	Aggeliki	25	Elementary School	Unemployed	5yr, 3yr, 2yr, 3months	€4000 (2 adults)
2	Andriana	35	Technical Educational degree	Beautician	6yr	€4500
3	Niki	37	Technical Educational degree	Unemployed	9yr	€10000 (2 adults)
4	Ioanna	33	Technical Educational degree	Cleaner	9yr	€2500
5	Evi	29	Technical Highschool	Unemployed	6months	€4800 (2 adults)
6	Kaiti	33	BSc	Unemployed	2yr	€5000 (2 adults)
7	Gogo	46	Highschool	Unemployed	8yr, 5yr	€10000 (2 adults)
8	Katerina	35	Highschool	Unemployed	3yr	€4500
9	Olga	31	Technical Highschool	Waitress	3yr, 2yr	€9000 (2 adults)
10	Lena	36	Technical Highschool	Unemployed	2yr	€3000 (2 adults)
11	Christina	29	MSc	Translator	2yr	€11500 (2 adults)
12	Stella	28	Technical Educational degree	Supermarket cashier	3yr	€11000 (2 adults)
13	Giota	33	MSc	School teacher	11months	€8500 (2 adults)
14	Maria	36	BSc	Store employee	5yr, 2yr	€9000 (2 adults)
15	Zoi	37	High School	Cleaner	1yr, 5yr, 10yr, 11yr	€11900 (2 adults)
16	Marina	29	High School	Store Employee	2yr	€5000 (adults)
17	Koula	25	Elementary School	Cleaner	11months, 2yr, 9yr	€11900 (2 adults)
18	Fofi	41	Technical Educational degree	Cleaner	7yr, 7yr	€5700

19	Lina	30	Technical Educational degree	Acupuncturist	4months	€10000 (2 adults)
20	Dimitra	39	Technical Educational degree	Assistant Accountant	4yr, 6yr	€11500 (2 adults)
21	Natasa	24	Elementary School	Unemployed	2yr, 4yr	€3000 (2 adults)
22	Efi	35	MSc	Philologist	17months, 5yr	€11900 (2 adults)
23	Silia	29	High School	Waitress	11yr, 10yr, 4months	€4500 (2 adults)
24	Mara	35	Technical Educational degree	Unemployed	3yr	€10000 (2 adults)
25	Chara	51	BSc	Unemployed	10yr	€2000
26	Kalli	35	Highschool	Unemployed	3yr	€11000 (2 adults)
27	Eleni	35	MSc	Unemployed	4yr, 2yr	€12000 (2 adults)
28	Charis	30	Technical Highschool	Unemployed	11yr	€2000
29	Urania	26	Elementary School	Unemployed	4yr, 3yr, 2yr, 2 months	€11000 (2 adults)
30	Theodora	43	BSc	Unemployed	5yr	€10000 (2 adults)
31	Stefania	39	BSc	Unemployed	3yr	€12000 (2 adults)
32	Athina	33	Technical Educational degree	Unemployed	3yr, 7 months	€6000 (2 adults)
33	Tzina	37	Technical Educational degree	Unemployed	2yr	€12000 (2 adults)
34	Irini	34	Technical Educational degree	Sales Assistant	1yr	€12000 (2 adults)
35	Toula	23	Elementary School	Cleaner	6yr	€11000 (2 adults)
36	Anna	46	Elementary School	Hairdresser	7yr	€2000 (2 adults)

Immersion in the literature on poverty guided the construction of the interview guide (Bernard 2011; McCracken 1988). In the interviews I focused on

different ways they acquire products, covering both mainstream marketplaces and alternative ones. I also discussed how they care for their belongings, items including repair techniques and everyday care practices such as laundry practices. Finally, I covered the disposal of items, including a wide variety of ways that emerged throughout the interviews.

I conducted a hermeneutic, iterative analysis (Spiggle 1994; Thompson 1997) of the interview data, with the purpose of identifying how consumers living in poverty employ resourcefulness. In the first phase of data analysis, after each individual transcript was read to identify the practices that consumers living in poverty engage in. In the second phase, the emphasis was placed on cross-case analysis among informants in which I got influenced from a grounded-theory approach to identify emerging codes and categories to the concept under development (Fischer and Otnes 2006). As I was concerned with deeply understanding the construct, consumer resourcefulness, an important step in the analysis was to identify both triggers and outcomes of it as they emerged in the data (Corbin and Strauss 2008).

In addition to the interview data, I conducted analyses on interactions between mothers on topic focused social media pages, photographs I took of objects the informants shared with me and observation notes. These additional data allowed to examine how consumer resourcefulness manifests and to triangulate the interview data (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994).

Findings

Consumer Resourcefulness

Consumer Resourcefulness is a learned, networked, and creative set of competencies that provides provisioning, maintenance and disposal of goods and

services, in the face of enduring constraints. It involves an ongoing contextual process that manifests as skills consumers have learned in social settings, and it contributes to resilience, solidarity, and sustainability, in the community level. In this context, mothers living in poverty have acquired and developed techniques to cope with the adversities and market constraints, such as exclusion from mainstream marketplaces and limited financial resources.

Figure 1. Consumer Resourcefulness

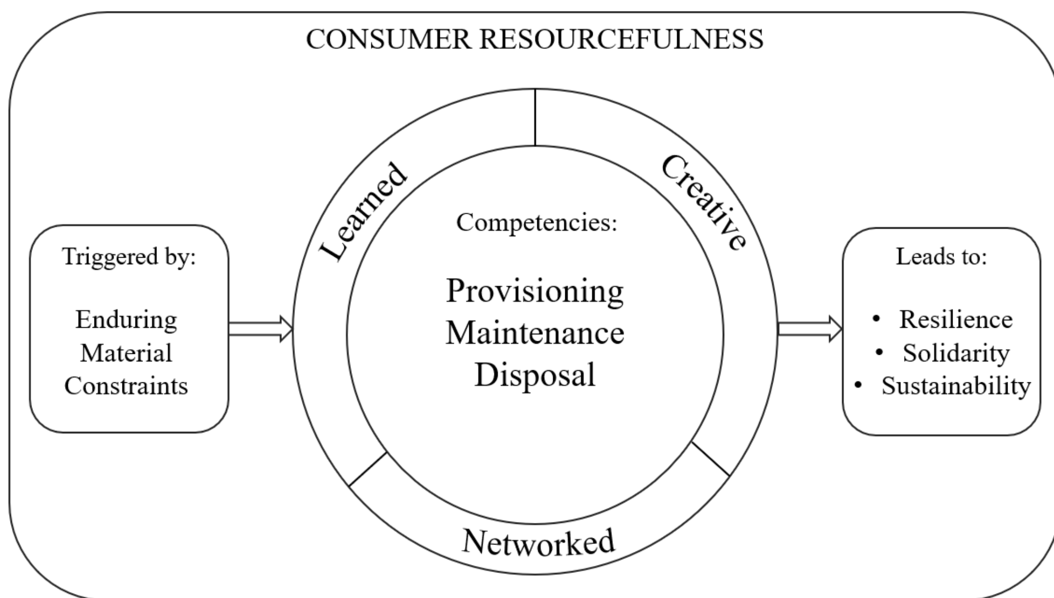


Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of consumer resourcefulness as a process shaped by enduring material constraints. These constraints act as triggers that compel consumers to develop and enact key competencies, in provisioning, maintenance, and disposal of products and services, that enable them to navigate scarcity and limited resources. These competencies are characterized by being learned, creative, and networked, highlighting the ways in which resourcefulness is both acquired and socially embedded. Through this process, consumer resourcefulness contributes to both broader societal and individual outcomes, fostering resilience, solidarity, and sustainability.

Consumer Resourcefulness is a phenomenon that consumers engage in when facing enduring material constraints, and it entails the ways in which individuals mobilize scarce resources to satisfy their needs. Anna (46) shares regarding meeting her family's needs:

"*You might ask for help, I in order to do so, at this time I can't afford getting new clothes and I found a group here on the island with mommies and a second one here on the island... I asked Maria, the girl who runs the group, that you know this and that I have a problem I need clothes for my boy. I inform you that within 48 hours I had 2 garbage bags of clothes*." (Anna 46)

In Anna's case poverty and material constraints push her to find alternative ways of meeting her basic needs, for clothing, food or other essentials. Anna had to be creative and mobilize her network in order to be resourceful and get the clothes she needed for her son. She is being resourceful to cover her family's needs, overcoming her material constraints and doing more with less. As Anna's quote illustrates, the data indicate that consumer resourcefulness is triggered by enduring material constraints that rise because of poverty.

Enduring Material Constraints

Consumer resourcefulness gets triggered by enduring material constraints, and the need of consumers to mobilize scarce resources to satisfy their needs. Holt (1998) also uses the term "material constraints" when discussing low cultural capital, and describes them as "material rigors of everyday life" such as covering monthly utility expenses, maintaining their car, and setting aside savings to visit family. In this dataset enduring material constraints, as the product of poverty, work as a trigger to consumer resourcefulness.

Mothers living in poverty experience constraints very vividly and it shapes their narratives and practices. Anna (46) shares that “I have experienced having nothing, especially when you have children to feed.” Anna gives an account of past experiences where she has had extremely limited resources and even “having nothing”. The sense of urgency from have nothing is heightened by being a parent, which forces her to think about the immediate future, when she has to feed her family. The experience of poverty is paradoxical since how can “nothing” be something you “have.” Yet this respondent captures an emotional and practical state that she is in, since she needs to cope with “having children to feed”. Enduring constraints also reduces choices. Niki (37) for instance explains the problem she faces in relationship to doing laundry for her children:

"*I also get the one (laundry detergent) that is for children and babies, that doesn’t cause allergies, has better ingredients. Sometimes. Or I will receive it as a gift.... I would like to always use it. I am not always using it for financial reasons to be honest*."

In this quote Niki has identified her preference for laundry detergent and shares that she sometimes purchases it. However, constraints mean that she cannot afford to purchase it regularly and must make do with products that may compromise her children’s health. The material constraint is reflected in the laundry detergent that she desires “to always use it” but can’t for “financial reasons.” It is considered a splurge, therefore she must rely on it as a gift that people will give her. Olga (31) shares similar thoughts about minimizing her energy consumption:

"*The prices of electricity are skyrocketing. Electricity is untouchable.... We are of course consuming a lot, as we are 5 of us in the house, and 2 of them are babies. But*

we are trying not to keep the A/C or the heat on full, because then it is going to be too expensive. We are trying as much as we can to save."

Olga feels she must justify her family's energy consumption by pointing out the shared value across a household of five people. At the same time, she acknowledges that the electricity prices are very high, or as she says "untouchable", suggesting they are beyond her reach. Untouchable also hints at how turning on the air conditioning in Greece's sweltering summers is a taboo, pointing at how switches and sockets in the household are surrounded by ritual prohibition. These mundane and ordinary consumption practices that are often taken for granted at higher income levels, but represent the initial stage of motivating the lived and reflective phenomenon of consumer resourcefulness (Heinonen and Lipkin 2023; Shove et al. 2012). They are trying to minimize their consumption while their energy needs are high.

While Niki and Olga had to limit their consumption, Katerina (35) had to eliminate it altogether:

"*I used to look at product labels, so they don't do experiments on animals, I was very absolute and very strict about that. And it wasn't bad, but it was too expensive of a "hobby" for me. Now I don't even consider it. Then, I used to work and make good money*"

Katerina reflects on her past consumption habits, when she had a higher income and no children. She remembers that she was very engaged in the moral profile of various brands in relation to animal testing. Katerina is still an animal lover, but is now cut off from animal friendly products as these are often more expensive. The severity of her situation has resulted in past lifestyle choices, previously essential, being framed as a "hobby", or that these product features would be an indulgence or a

luxury, rather than a necessity under her current household budget. Katerina (35) also plans to eliminate her car usage:

"*I also avoid taking the car.... One of the reasons my son will change schools next year, is that already the gasoline costs are exorbitant, and I find it really difficult to get by every month. So he will go to a school nearby so I can walk him*." (Katerina 35)

Katerina's commuting needs are crushing her budget due to the cost of petrol for her car. As energy prices rise she is having trouble meeting her family's needs. Constraints are therefore forcing her to rethink her family's spatial embedding and circulation around time. She is forced to live far more locally, and make a big change to her son's life by transferring him to a nearby neighborhood school. Katerina's use of the term "exorbitant" suggests that she finds the const of mobility unreasonable and laments the explicit experience boundaries on her consumption, since it is "difficult".

Mothers living in poverty often face intergenerational enduring material constraints that socialize them into consumer resourcefulness. As Christina (29) says "*this is how we learned from home... it is a way of living which we have learned from our family*". Christina connects her present behaviour with long-lasting family practices that were passed down to her. Another respondent, Andriana (35), when discussing how she learned how to mend clothes, said that sewing "*is something I learned from my grandmother. I consider it normal. In my eyes, since I was a little girl, I saw that. So, I think it's normal, if something is torn to sew it*". What is or what is not normal for Andriana was constructed when she was young, through seeing others in her house. The enduring material constraints, in Andriana's case the limited pieces of clothing, have been experienced for at least two generations, normalizing it and the ways to cope. Deploying the word "normal", this respondent highlights tacit

framework of values about sewing skills and repair, without which family members would be delegitimized. Andriana had someone in her close environment, her mother, that passed down the skills she needed to manage. Similarly, Irini (34) describes how, "*We're immigrants too, so it was a bit of a difficult start. We didn't buy clothes very often, so my mom always sewed everything and that's stayed with me.*" Both of them have a past of material constraints that they had to navigate since they were children.

This "way of living" is passed down by family members as a way that helps the family cope with poverty. While not all respondents are born into poverty, for those who are resourcefulness emerges from enduring, intergenerational constraint rather than from sudden external shocks. However, while a family may be able to endure poverty due to resourcefulness, unlike Fisher et al.'s (2021) entrepreneurial resourcefulness, leaves families trapped in the constrained context for generations. Nonetheless, respondents are not passive victims who let circumstances grind them down. They draw on certain structural components of resourcefulness, the first of which is a capacity to learn.

The Dimensions of Consumer Resourcefulness

The Learned Dimension of Consumer Resourcefulness

Consumer resourcefulness exists in societies (MacKinnon and Driscoll-Derickson 2013; Peters et al. 2021), where their members interact with each other, and pass down knowledge, thus it is learned. Many developed resourcefulness through their upbringing such as Aggeliki (25). In her case, she learned how to be resourceful growing up in her family. She shares about learning how to mend clothes from her mother, as many informants have:

"The truth is that I have been doing this since I was a little girl. When something, a sock for instance tears or a piece of clothing, I am very good at mending. I sew when

there are tears.... I learned it from my mother... If something is torn the first thing I do is try to see if I can fix it"

Similar to Aggeliki, many informants learned how to be resourceful and maintain the material objects they have from their parents. A feature of the resourcefulness curriculum that families pass down to their children is its gendered nature. These are types of knowledge that are handed down matrilineally, form participants' mothers and grandmothers. Thus, Aggeliki learned through her upbringing and almost automated the reflex to fix things when broken.

Christina (29) also shares how she had learned consumer resourcefulness in her family:

"*What we have learned from our home, of course I personally try to have 2 portions for exactly 2 days, but what we always did in my house was one day, it was the "recycling day" as my mother used to say. So, we ate a few greens left over from the day before a few potatoes, a piece of steak.*

.... So, we have learned from home and in fact the weekend we were at my house, my parents' house. As I was tidying up the table, there were two pieces of cheese left, and I said "I'm not throwing that away" I said that to myself, and my dad said "don't even think about it we don't throw away any food. It's a sin to throw food away, put it back in the cheese rack and I'll eat it tonight."(Christina 29)

In this quote it is apparent how families practice consumer resourcefulness and how it cascades to younger generations. Echoing Olga's relationship to the taboo of sockets and electricity consumption, Christina shows how she was taught that food waste is a "sin" or a heinous, immoral act that transgresses against divine law. This framing initiates a curriculum of family learning related to food storage and portion sizes that lasts. Consumer resourcefulness can be seen as a form of moral labour,

consisting of activities that need to be performed to do the right thing and avoid waste. While her father is the one to articulate the taboo, Christina talks about her mother and how she would teach food waste prevention. The almost official, “recycling day” once a week, becomes instituted within the family, creating an opportunity for repeated and regular opportunities for the children to learn resourcefulness skills.

Christina mirrors her father’s value system, and highlights how he and her think and act the same, highlighting the difference between the nature of consumer resourcefulness and Fisher et al.’s (2021) entrepreneurial resourcefulness, which aims at growth. Christina explicitly articulates to her family members that she is not throwing away the leftovers, to get validation that she is acting in accordance with divine law, and she learned in her family. Her father's warning for her to behave, illustrates how social environments function as sites of socialisation, where consumer resourcefulness is not only constantly learned but also continually reinforced as an ongoing process.

Others, like Chara (51), had to seek out different resources in order to gain the skills they needed and learn how to be resourceful. Regarding prolonging the life of objects by repairing, Chara had to actively search for instructional materials, like YouTube videos. When asked about how she learned to sew, she responded:

"From the Internet, classic. On YouTube, videos etc....It was needed, I needed to repair things for me and my kid” (Chara 51)

Chara’s need to maintain her material objects led her to be resourceful and in order to do so she had to acquire a skill she didn’t already have. This way of thinking and acting outside of the mainstream to satisfy a certain need is often also very creative.

The Creative Dimension of Consumer Resourcefulness

Consumers living in poverty develop problem solving skills that are often very innovative and require creative thinking (Hill and Stamey 1990). Consumer Resourcefulness is creative, as consumers are finding alternative and ingenious ways, sometimes also expressive, to fulfill their needs with limited access to resources in comparison to mainstream consumers. When Niki (37) thinks about throwing things at the garbage, she responds, "*No, why?! (*laughs*) No, I don't think about it, no. There are many things that you can do, throwing something at the garbage... why do it?*" Niki's laugh shows how the very notion of garbage is ludicrous and completely against her way of consuming. The default for everything, before it is thrown away and becomes garbage, is that it may have some use or functionality. She sees potential for transforming her unusable items, where others would not, similarly to the homeless population Hill and Stamey (1990) researched. Creativity can take many forms, such as prolonging the life of a product in Gogo's case:

"If it can be fixed, I'll fix it somehow. Or it will become... If it's in a state to become... Shorts. To be cut and made into shorts, or if there is a difficult seam and it shows, I keep it for the house. They wear them at home." (Gogo, 46)

Gogo shows creative thinking in two ways in her quote. The first is changing the function of the clothing and recontextualizing its usage, from something to wear outside in public to private lounge wear in the house. The second way she is creative is by altering her children's clothes to fit them longer (Picture 1). By cutting part of it she redesigns the piece of clothing and allows her child to continue wearing it even if they get taller or the season changes. This practice is popular among mothers, Aggeliki (25) for instance did the same with her baby's clothes (Picture 2).

(Picture 1) (Picture 2)

Others are both creative and expressive when being resourceful. Katerina (35) says “*I sew some teddy bear patches on some holes, so they don't get bigger*”. And Niki (37) also shares that “*If it is a small tear, I will sew it or use a patch that exist in the market, with different designs, ladybugs, flowers, etc.*” Both are not only find a resourceful way to maintain their children's clothes, but also to be creative and alter the design of the garment. By using a patch with a playful shape, they mend ripped garments but also style them.

There are other creative ways though which consumers are copying with material constraints. Katerina (35) has found a creative way to provide food for her family:

"*Now that I'm a university student, we have the university's cafeteria again. So, there are certain days that I know I'm going to go, I'm going to get my food containers, I'm going to fill them with salads.... so primarily we have the university's cafeteria.*"

Katerina has found this creative solution to fulfil her and her family’s needs. Since food for students at the university cafeteria is either free or very cheap, Katerina gets extra portions to bring back. It requires planning, such as picking the dates and

bringing the containers, and is a way to bypass the mainstream market in a creative way. There are more ways that due to severe material constraints consumers are thinking creatively. Silia (30) for instance, when faced with severe economic problems and could not afford buying the basic baby equipment she needed, she found a different way to acquire objects:

"Because I was about to give birth and we didn't have any baby gear, I reached out to some popular ladies at Instagram, asked them if they could make a post to see if someone has something they don't need, because my profile is private and I have about 150 friends there, who I knew them, so they already knew what I would post, let's say. And they helped me then. They posted and there were some women who gave me a crib, a cradle, all of the baby equipment, plus the clothes. Everything happened through Instagram posts." (Silia 30)

Silia after reaching out to her social circle and not finding the support she needed, she had to think more creatively. She approached Instagram celebrities, who had a broader following, and asked them to make a post about her needs in order to fulfil them. This had powerful results by receiving the support she needed from the broader community, a crucial element of consumer resourcefulness.

The Networked Dimension of Consumer Resourcefulness

Finally, Consumer Resourcefulness is networked, meaning that it heavily relies on consumer networks and social structures. Consumers actively participate in these networks both as recipients of support and as contributors, creating systems of reciprocity that sustain everyday consumption needs under material constraints. Niki (37) remarks:

"I was lucky, and I have friends and my sister that gave me things, second hand. If you are in a tight financial situation, I find it very logical and good to get help from

others. I also did the same with things that someone gave me and then I gave them to my friend that was pregnant."

Niki here admits that she got objects she needed from friends and family but also gave back when a friend was in need. She frames this practice as both "logical" and "good," while simultaneously highlighting its necessity in the context of "a tight financial situation". These kinds of networks enable consumer resourcefulness, embedding consumers in cycles of reciprocity. Kalli (35) similarly shares that:

"*I was very, very lucky. Because I had a little girl, because I have a girlfriend who I baptised her 2 girls. All their clothes went to me, I also have my best friend who has two girls.... So, regarding clothes, I am ready to donate. Take, take, take I don't want more... These clothes will be worn by at least 5 children*"

Kalli highlights the fact that the needed objects that were given to her, will circulate further after she is done using them, remarking that the clothes will be used by at least five children. Her narrative underlines how consumer resourcefulness is networked in nature, stretching the life of objects across multiple households. Both Niki and Kalli show that these exchanges are not merely pragmatic responses to scarcity but are framed positively as practices that make sense and carry moral value.

Consumers first approach their close ones, usually family members and then friends, and then after they have exhausted whether they could rely on them, they reach out to broader networks, such as the church or even form digital communities with specific aims. Olga (31) explains that:

"*Usually, we swap clothes with my sister. She gives me clothes, and I give them to others. Whatever doesn't fit my children I give it to friends. And once, I brought them to an organisation. Some carriers for babies, I brought them there.*

Because no one had a baby in the family or friends, so I thought, what should I do, I brought them there."

Olga illustrates how these exchanges are structured by relational proximity. Family and close friends are the first points of circulation, and only when these options are exhausted do items move to more distant networks such as NGOs. This "intimacy hierarchy" shows how consumer resourcefulness is not only a matter of material necessity but also a process of social navigation, where closeness dictates the path of exchange. Andriana (35) similarly says:

"*Some tracksuits from an older child were passed down to us. The philosophy is that there are clothes that are there, because children grow very fast, so in order to not waste it, one gave to the other, and we exchanged children's clothes.... I have taken many clothes from my best friend. And then, I searched for and donated to an NGO"*

So Andriana feels like since there are clothes in her community, people that need them should have access to them. She is being resourceful and finds an alternative way to get clothes for her child. Following the same intimacy hierarchy, first she asked her friends if they needed the clothes and then took them to an NGO. Olga's and Andriana's accounts together show how networks expand outward, balancing intimacy with broader social responsibility.

In addition, Olga (31) recalls receiving a baby crib from a neighbour, "When I had my first baby, there was a neighbour who told me, 'I have a crib, do you want it? Don't buy one, this is new', so I got it." A neighbour stepped in, demonstrating how networks are not confined to kinship or close friendship.

Yet when consumers don't have family and friends that can help, they often build their own communities, either locally or digitally. Chara (51) participates in an online community, in the form of a Facebook group:

"*I have been in donation groups for many years, at least a decade, where what I don't need I give away and I get what we might need for the house, for me, for the child and so on.... I give, I take. I give and when I need, I receive. So, mostly we cover ourselves.... And when of course we don't need more, accordingly, either we'll go to recycling if it's too worn out especially the kids, or again the donation groups or wherever it can be given away.*" (Chara 51)

Chara is clearly an active participant in Facebook donation groups, which have become central to meeting her family's needs. She describes material objects as belonging to a wider community. As Christina (29) echoes this view, she explains, "*that's where I've also gotten into the logic that what is trash to one person is very important to another*". Nothing is considered waste, if they can't use something, maybe another part of their network will find useful. This approach to resource sharing exemplifies a sustainable model (Eden 2017), minimizing waste and promoting the efficient use of materials across interconnected systems. However, this sense of community is not confined to digital spaces. Christina (29) connects these practices to rural traditions:

"*That's how we've already learned because we're both from the countryside. That's how the province works and there's a bit of "I'll support the neighbour", well when I taught foreign language lessons I only shopped at the butcher whom I taught his daughter*" (Christina 29)

Her account shows how resourcefulness can be rooted in local solidarities and reciprocal exchanges that extend beyond material goods to services and economic

relationships. The sustaining of solidarity relies on interdependent relationships (Chatzidakis, Maclaran, and Varman 2021), where mutuality (Arnould and Rose 2015) binds consumers within a shared social fabric, enabling them to navigate and cope with adversity collectively. Christina prefer "to shop from small businesses" even though is not the cheapest option "Financially, not for me, to financially support producers and small businesses. And because I think it is better." This is one of the rare instances when consumers with constrained material resources choose a pricier option rather than the most economical, underscoring how resourcefulness is sometimes motivated by social values rather than financial efficiency. Kalli (35) expands this sentiment:

"*The farmers market are cheaper even than the supermarkets, but why not support a local? And you have to go to big chains?.... You are giving someone a living. You understand? You give a continuity... why should I give them to the big sharks? Let's say and not help the man here who he might be a grandfather, has grandchildren and children behind him. You know that especially in the villages we all pretty much know each other. He is from morning till night on a tractor and with the machines and he is in the fields so that he can come to the market for you 04:00 in the morning to sell you potatoes and everything else. You understand? You are clearly supporting your place, in this sense I say that.... And relationships matter. It matters because they help me like I will help someone other.*" (Kalli 35)

Kalli compares big chain businesses to "sharks", in order to show how brutal they are. In contrast, small businesses such as the farmers at the farmers' market are portrayed as noble and hard working, deserving to be selected. Kalli highlights how supporting small scale producers is not just about price but about sustaining community "continuity". These relational commitments form the connective tissue of

consumer networks, demonstrating that resourcefulness is not just about coping with material scarcity but also about maintaining social bonds.

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that consumer resourcefulness is not merely an individual strategy under financial strain, but a collective system rooted in reciprocity, trust, and solidarity. By relying on interpersonal ties, hierarchical networks of exchange, digital donation platforms, and local solidarities, consumers co-create shared safety nets that allow them to navigate material scarcity while also reinforcing social bonds. In this way, resourcefulness is inseparable from the social structures that enable and sustain. Yet, while these networks provide the scaffolding for consumer practices, their effectiveness ultimately depends on the competencies that consumers develop to mobilize and navigate them.

Competencies

Consumer resourcefulness involves a range of competencies that enable individuals to effectively navigate the provisioning, maintenance, and disposal of goods and services, especially in resource-constrained contexts. These competencies encompass practical, context-specific skills such as repairing, repurposing, participating in online communities, and storing products, which allow consumers to stretch limited resources and meet both individual and household needs. These competencies often involve social and cognitive skills, including problem-solving and the ability to mobilize networks or community support. By focusing on these competencies, consumer resourcefulness can be understood not merely as a set of outcomes or behaviours, but as a dynamic and adaptive capacity that reflects consumers' agency in managing everyday life under varying conditions of scarcity.

Provisioning

When it comes to provisioning, consumers employ resourceful ways to find products to fulfil their needs. Many rely on donations and gifts to cover their essential needs, such as food or clothes, leaving purchasing products as their last resort. Olga (31) describes this approach:

"*I am very pro- recycling clothes. It is beneficial financially. When they are young they grow veeeery fast, you might get them a pair of shoes now and in a month they might not fit anymore. So financially, instead of giving money all the time, you are saving something. That's how I see it, you will save something…. This is the most important aspect of doing it. You make sure that your children have clothes, if not all of the clothes they need at least half.* "

Olga ensures clothing for her children through donations. Thus, it is important to participate in the networks discussed earlier to get access to the goods. Consumers are aware of their embeddedness in the community, where mutual support and shared resources are essential for household survival. Kalli (35) said "these clothes will be worn by at least 5 children", highlighting the communal logic that underpins provisioning.

As mentioned earlier, communities that enable provisioning can take many forms. Mothers that don't have family or friends who can help them, often participate and organise online communities. Aggeliki (25) has turned to Facebook "mommies" groups even for essentials, such as baby powder milk:

"*I have been helped a lot at Facebook "donation" (groups). I have gotten milk, powder milk, and clothes and a small bicycle, I got a small bicycle from my little girl here in Patra. I have also joined the Athens "donation" group, and they send them to me.*"

Aggeliki has great material constraints, leading to her unable to provide even the necessities for her household. She is being resourceful by finding alternative ways of provisioning, outside the marketplace to fulfil her needs. She relies on them for a variety of things, from essentials such as baby milk formula to a bicycle for her children.

Even when mothers living in poverty are forced to purchase items from the mainstream marketplace, resourcefulness shapes their choices. Resourcefulness in their purchases manifests as alternative consumer pathways, focus on specific product attributes or alternative shops. Ioanna (33) emphasizes durability “so it doesn’t get ripped easily. Ok. We are not buying clothes everyday,” reflecting attention to longevity in consumption. Affordability also remains crucial as she is “looking for cheaper things now. Deals”. Alternatively, some also shop second-hand, which often offer cheaper options. Katerina (35) shares that:

"*For me, I have been going to shop for many, many years at second-hand stores, they are amazing.... in second-hand clothing stores I find miracles, I found a dress, you can't imagine this dresses.*"

Katerina calls the items she finds at the second-hand shop “miracles”, as there is something unexpected in finding the items that she likes but also can afford. These practices illustrate a distinctive approach to market engagement. Mothers in poverty focus on durability, affordability, and opportunities for finding value outside mainstream consumption channels, while often deriving unexpected benefits from second-hand purchases.

Maintenance

After they have gathered the necessary goods, mothers living in poverty engage in maintenance practices, embedding storage and preparation for future use.

For instance, Kalli (35) says that her best friend “gave me clothes until high school” while her child is now only 3 years old, demonstrating forward planning and long-term storage. Olga (31) similarly reports:

"*I kept it (*a crib*) also for my daughter, now my daughter still uses it. When my daughter won’t use it anymore, I will give it elsewhere, as I have given all the rest of their things. Only one carrier has been stored, I gave all the other*."

It is clear through their quotes, that mothers living in poverty are storing things so they can use, or re-use, them on the future. Storage enables reuse for future family members or siblings, while surplus items are redirected into community circulation. Christina (29) explains a similar approach with food:

"*A lot of times, for example, I might consciously make rice for more days, to have 2 days of chicken and rice and then after 4 days we might have something else with rice as a side dish.... Well, what can I tell you, it was about both my pocket and my time.*"

Christina highlights the motivation behind storing for future use, which is no other than saving money and time. There is a lot of thinking and planning going on this practice of storing, foreseeing future needs and even future family members.

Additionally, part of the maintenance competencies is repair. Mothers living in poverty, when faced with an item that has a fault or is damaged, before disposing it, they first try to repair it, and if this cannot be done, they then try to repurpose it.

As Gogo (46) says “If it can be fixed, I'll fix it somehow”. Repair seems to be a resourceful practice embedded in their everyday lives. Niki (37) says about mending “I have been doing this forever”, indicating the intergenerational transmission of repair skills. Likewise, Andriana (35) responds to what happens if a piece of clothing gets torn:

"*I sew it. I will sew it, and if I can't I'll take it to a seamstress to fix it, if I cannot. If it's something that needs a sewing machine.... (*Last time it was*) socks. The most common. They were torn and I sewed them, that's the most common, after walking with trainers.*"

Andriana explains how she will find a way to repair the item, either using her own skills and means or taking it to a professional that has the right equipment. She shares that the most common item she repairs is socks, a quite inexpensive object, signalling that everything counts. Repair practices may involve personal skills, professional assistance, or leveraging social networks. Ioanna (33) describes relying on friends to do the repair:

"*If there is something to sew, I will sew it. But, if I need to add a patch, because boys often fall and need patches on their trousers, I will bring it to a friend I have that sews.*"

Ioanna doesn't have sewing skills, but she is resourceful enough to connect with others that have this skill and ask them to make the repair for her. When repair is not possible, repurposing ensures items continue to provide utility. Niki (37) explains:

"*If it's something fixable, I'll fix it.... If the damage is too big.... I'll use it at the house for a different kind of work. (*Like for*) dusting at the balcony, that we need cloths. To dust, clean or dry things.*"

Niki as well, first estimates whether the item can be repaired. If she regards it as "fixable" she will proceed and repair it. If the "damage is too big" she will try to find an alternative use. She says that a piece of clothing that is damaged will be then used as a piece of cloth, usually for cleaning and chores in the house. When she was asked about considering throwing away something she answers while laughing "No,

why? I don't think about it, no. There are many things that you can do, throwing something at the garbage... Why do it?" Niki highlights the need for alternative consumption practices, hinting to consumer resourcefulness out of need.

Resourceful repurposeness, in addition, manifests in two forms in the data. The first is changing the usage of the item, like Niki who uses old clothes as cleaning rugs in the house. Likewise, Katerina (35) says "I had a dress for many years, but it is stunning, so I thought it can be turned into a skirt". Consumers adapt products to their current needs and get more uses out of them.

The alternative repurpose practice is changing the context of consumption. Silia (29) shares that if a piece of clothing "isn't too damaged, I'll wear it home, if it's a small tear." In this way Silia, changes the consumption context of the item to make it acceptable to still consume it.

Niki (37) says echoes Silia and says that "If it has a subtle stain, it can be worn at the house.... We wear them inside the house. Or wear them at the grandparents house when they play." By making the consumption private, versus public, and wearing the stained or damaged clothes inside their houses or their extended families' houses, mothers living in poverty repurpose those clothes from outwear to loungewear or playwear. This allows them to maintain for more uses the products, continuing the logic of if something is damaged first try to fix it, then find an alternative use of it, and after that consider disposing it.

Disposing

Finally, disposing objects is especially hard for consumers living in poverty, as they feel emotionally charged when doing so. For instance, Christina (29) shares: "*We do our part (*for social welfare*), ... by not throwing away food, it's a way of living which we have learned from our family and from a moral point of view, that is*

long before the environmental we had this logic in our minds that it's a sin to throw away food.... And one more thing about food waste, not throwing away food is also that the logic, which has always existed in Greece, because of poverty, but not because of ecology. And the logic of not throwing away anything, so that nothing is wasted, i.e. using the bone to make broth, using the marrow, eat everything"

This quote illustrates how resourcefulness emerges as a deeply ingrained cultural practice that shapes everyday consumption behaviors. Rather than being framed primarily in terms of contemporary ecological concerns, the refusal to waste food is described as a learned moral logic. Resourcefulness here is enacted through practices of extending the use of materials, such as making broth from bones, consuming marrow, and ensuring "nothing is wasted". Resourcefulness is not presented as a novel or externally imposed sustainability value, but as a long-standing way of living, cultivated through necessity and moral teaching.

When it is time for consumers living in poverty to separate from an object, they are being resourceful towards the community as well. Olga (31) shares:
"*I don't find it nice to throw clothes in the trash. I think it's a pity. Someone probably will get it from there too, you know a garbage picker, but I can't do it, as I can't also throw away food. I put the leftovers in a bag and I leave them outside of the trash bin for someone. Maybe an animal eats it or a person.. I never throw away food, because I understand that some people don't even have this. And I think it is a sin to throw away food. It is a difficult period, the prices are very high, very high.* "

Olga employs resourceful practices towards the community even at the disposal stage. She considers that there might be a person that might pick at the garbage, and she tries to leave her leftover food packed for them next to the trash bin.

She feels uncomfortable throwing something in the garbage and she acknowledges that some people don't even have food, so she cares for her community.

Similarly Andriana (35) discuss disposing clothes:

"*If the clothing is in good condition, and if my best friend doesn't need it because she then gives them to other families in villages, that pass down clothing from family to family, I usually get them either to an NGO or to the church, and they give them to children in need. If the clothes are too worn out and can't be worn, I will take them to the clothing recycling bins, the purple bins*."

Andriana is being resourceful in her community as well. When she wants to throw away clothes, she first estimates their condition. If the clothes are in good condition, she helps distribute them to people in need of them. It can be either informal networks such as her best friend who then will take them to others, or formal organisations like NGOs or the church. Alternatively, if the clothes are not in good condition, she will try recycling them, ensuring that the object will still exist in one way or the other.

Outcomes

Consumer Resourcefulness has three main outcomes for consumers living in poverty and their communities, namely resilience, solidarity and sustainability. These are not only products of consumer resourcefulness but also are reinforced as consumers are resourceful.

Resilience is evident in the ways consumers navigate material constraints to secure essential needs. For example, Olga (31) describes sourcing clothes for her children through donations:

"*You will save something…. This is the most important aspect of doing it (exchange clothes in communities). You make sure that your children have clothes, if not all of them at least half.*"

By participating in donation networks, Olga ensures her family has clothes despite extremely limited resources, exemplifying resilience in action. Similarly, Aggeliki (25) through being resourceful and joining Facebook groups, she has received "*milk, powder milk, and clothes"*, all essential for surviving. She highlights how resourcefulness enables households to withstand and adapt to scarcity.

The second outcome of consumer resourcefulness is building strong bonds of solidarity between consumers living in poverty (Chatzidakis et al. 2021). Olga (31) for instance said that "*I put the leftovers in a bag and I leave them outside of the trash bin for someone.*" She is very mindful of others and their needs. She also emphasizes reciprocity within her close networks:

"*We give one another, that's how we were raised. My sister gives me anything that doesn't fit her child anymore. And I do the same, I give my daughter things from my son, and to others too.*"

Consumers living in poverty, like Olga, cultivate solidarity by both giving and receiving support, strengthening social bonds that are vital in contexts of material scarcity. Katerina (35) further exemplifies this sense of solidarity:

"*I helped her with a couple of things, she helped me with a couple of things, and then she tells me I have an abandoned house, do you want to live there? I went and saw it and told her I will fix it. I entered the house and stayed there for four years.... I've learned that we make our families. I know this since 2012, that family is not just your mother or your sister. My friends were there for me.*"

Through her resourceful and reciprocal engagement with friends, Katerina was able to secure housing for four years, illustrating how solidarity can transform social networks into tangible support systems.

Finally, sustainability often emerges as an outcome of consumer resourcefulness. Kalli (35) for instance, explains her approach to energy use: "*Also, I won't do 5 days a week, 3 laundries per day, because I will get an energy bill at 500E, and I will get crazy. For sure, if you think about ecology, everything is down* (their energy consumption). *Mostly because of economy, next to economy it's ecology*"

Her energy-conscious practices are motivated primarily by financial considerations, but they also reduce environmental impact. Or as Christina (29) shares about food waste "is part of everyday life, not only for environmental purposes, but also for moral and economic purposes of course." Christina mentions environmental reasons why someone wouldn't waste food, but she sees them next to other reasons such as morality and financial saving. Similarly, Katerina (35) avoids "taking the car" and takes "the bus" when she can. She is doing this in order to save money on gas for the car, but by doing so she is also eliminating her emissions due to driving. These examples illustrate how sustainability is often embedded within everyday resourceful practices, even when it is not the primary intention.

In summary, these outcomes, resilience, solidarity and sustainability, are deeply intertwined with the competencies and networks that underpin consumer resourcefulness. As these outcomes are realised, they reinforce the very practices and relationships that enable consumer resourcefulness, creating a dynamic cycle of agency and adaptation. Recognising this interconnectedness highlights that consumer resourcefulness is not only a strategy for surviving material scarcity but also a socially

embedded process that produces tangible benefits for individuals, households and communities.

Discussion

While consumer research has stressed the role of resourcefulness, particularly among people with extremely limited economic resources (Iyer et al. 2012), the field has no etic definition of the term, nor a structured framework to promote future research. On the one hand, extant research beyond marketing has provided a range of formal definitions of resourcefulness (Zauszniewski 2016). On the other hand, however, these definitions fall short due to the explicitly psychological focus (Meichenbaum 1979) or application in domains that that lack real deprivation (Fisher et al. 2021). Entrepreneurial resourcefulness for instance, while rigorous and process oriented, is designed for supply side issues rather than consumption and is often implemented in formal institutions (Williams et al. 2021).

This study defines consumer resourcefulness in circumstances of material constraints as being a learned, creative and networked response to provisioning, maintaining and disposing of products and services in a way that leads to solidarity, sustainability and resilience. In contrast to previous research in marketing that mentions resourcefulness in passing when discussing consumers coping with adversities (Bradshaw and Tadajewski 2011; Iyer et al. 2012), this paper not only defines consumer resourcefulness but also provides a conceptual framework for it.

This definition sheds new light on the role of resourcefulness in Diamond et al.'s (2009) holistic approach to sociocultural branding. While their model highlights person–object interactions to understand a brand's sociocultural value, consumer resourcefulness provides an account of why resourcefulness connotates sociocultural

value and how it can be strengthened. More specifically the “solidarity with community that consumption affords” (Diamond et al. 2009, 132) as signalled by the brand is the outcome of specific resourcefulness processes relating to learning, creativity and type of networking in that community.

In addition to defining consumer resourcefulness, this research contributes to building a better understanding of it. Similar to Well et al. (2023), this study finds that social connections and networks play a vital role in consumer resourcefulness. However, it extends this understanding by focusing on poverty, as a more enduring condition than a temporary crisis such as a pandemic, provides a more comprehensive picture of resourcefulness. In particular, it foregrounds the triggers, enduring material constraints, and outcomes, solidarity, sustainability and resilience, that emerge when consumer resourcefulness is not a short-term adaptation but a long-term necessity.

In addition, this paper highlights how consumer resourcefulness competencies are creative. Cheded and Liu (2022) for example, mention resourcefulness when discussing sewing skills in gender affirming processes, framing resourcefulness as a way of materially reshaping the body and its presentation. This resonates with the present findings, which demonstrate that resourcefulness involves not only creative problem-solving, in this case Thea’s biological sex, but also creative in expression, as she is making her “custom-fitted” and “ultimate” outfit (Cheded and Liu 2022, 73,74).

The present study also advances the conversation about consumer resourcefulness being social. While Wells et al. (2023) focus on a temporary crisis and Patsiaouras et al. (2017) examine acts of protest, this research demonstrates how collective forms of resourcefulness are embedded in the everyday practices of households and communities living in poverty. Networks are not exceptional responses to disruption but an ongoing strategy of provisioning, maintaining and

disposing of goods in ways that produce solidarity and resilience. This adds depth to the understanding of collective resourcefulness by situating it within the mundane (Heinonen and Lipkin 2023) yet creative routines that sustain life under constraint.

Consumer resourcefulness is introduced as a collective competency that strengthens social bonds and reinforces mutual support within impoverished communities, fostering solidarity (Chatzidakis et al. 2021). This highlights its role not only in coping with scarcity but also in sustaining social cohesion under adversity. Unlike perspectives that treat resourcefulness as an individual capacity, this research findings show that it is networked, relying on relational ties, mutual support, and collective problem-solving. This resonates with sociological perspectives framing resourcefulness as relational and embedded in community contexts (MacKinnon and Driscoll Derickson 2012).

The findings of this research further demonstrate how consumer resourcefulness is different from consumer resilience, but promotes it by enabling households to endure and adapt under long-term adversity. Thus, this study contributes to consumer resilience literature (Szmigin et al. 2020), showing how consumer resourcefulness acts as a foundational capability that enables resilience. Whereas resilience is often conceptualised as a short-term response to external shocks (Price et al. 2018; Szmigin et al. 2020), resourcefulness represents a long-term adaptive orientation that underpins resilience.

Moreover, consumer resourcefulness contributes to sustainability research, as data show that these consumer competencies have sustainable impact. This paper extends Lloveras et al. (2020) connection of sustainable practices and resourcefulness, highlighting specific competencies and connections between the two concepts. In addition, while Zavala and Arias (2025) make an account for practices that extend life

of materials, this research also examines how consumers employ resourcefulness for provisioning and disposal of goods and services.

This study makes also a contribution to the discussion of poverty in consumer research. The findings illustrate that consumers living in poverty, rely on networks of kin, friends, and neighbours to provide essential resources and knowledge. This underscores prior consumer research on the centrality of social ties in mitigating poverty (Ruth and Hsiung 2007; Viswanathan et al. 2014), while also pointing to the solidarity-enhancing function of resourcefulness. The findings challenge dominant narratives in poverty-related marketing literature, such as the Bottom of the Pyramid (Prahalad 2010), which often frame impoverished consumers primarily as passive individuals in need of external intervention. Instead, the results align with subsistence marketplace approaches (Viswanathan et al., 2025) by emphasizing the agency of consumers in fulfilling their needs outside the mainstream marketplace through resourcefulness. Recognizing resourcefulness as a central construct also responds to calls for richer descriptions of the lived experiences of poverty (Vieites & Mittal, 2024), by illustrating how mothers creatively navigate constraints rather than passively enduring them.

While the findings emphasise the positive outcomes of consumer resourcefulness, such as solidarity, sustainability, and resilience, it is also important to acknowledge that living in poverty, even when resulting in resourcefulness, is not a desired consumer state and it involves a number of related hardships. The competencies that enable households to cope with material constraints can also entail significant emotional, temporal, and cognitive demands. Sustaining networks of exchange, repairing and repurposing goods, and constantly managing scarcity may generate fatigue, stress, or pressure on social relationships. In some cases, strong

reliance on networks could also create forms of dependency or open the possibility for exploitation within unequal relationships. Furthermore, highlighting the creative and adaptive capacities of consumers living in poverty risks unintentionally romanticising deprivation or normalising the expectation that individuals should cope through resourcefulness alone. Such interpretations could be particularly problematic if policymakers interpret these findings as evidence that impoverished consumers are managing scarcity effectively without structural support. Rather than celebrating resourcefulness as a substitute for systemic change, the present findings should be understood as illustrating how consumers navigate constrained conditions, while broader institutional and policy interventions remain crucial for addressing the structural causes of poverty.

Finally, this paper contributes to the broader resourcefulness literature by demonstrating how competencies are developed and transmitted in everyday contexts. Whereas psychological accounts highlight self-regulation strategies such as self-monitoring, positive self-statements, or problem-solving (Rosenbaum 1983), this study shows that resourcefulness also involves embodied and socially embedded skills, such as techniques learned from peers, relatives, and communities. In this sense, resourcefulness is not solely an internal capacity but is cultivated within social settings and cultural practices. This expands Zauszniewski's (2016) framework of personal and social resourcefulness by highlighting how the two are interdependent.

Despite its contributions, this study also has several limitations that open avenues for future research. While it advances theorization of consumer resourcefulness, the analysis is situated within the poverty context of Greece. This may lead to not fully capturing variations across cultural settings. Future research could explore how consumer resourcefulness manifests in different groups or under

varying types of constraints, such as migration, health crises, or environmental disasters. While many of the participants were born into poverty, the social origins of constraint may also matter, for instance, unemployment may carry different social meaning than illness, potentially shaping how consumer resourcefulness is interpreted and enacted.

Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine how resourcefulness evolves across the life course and how it interacts with structural changes in markets and welfare systems. Since learning is an important part of consumer resourcefulness, I would expect that younger consumers might be less knowledgeable about the consumer resourcefulness competencies. On the other hand, younger consumers might employ creativity more freely and compensate for lack of knowledge.

Future research could also further examine the gendered and relational dimensions of consumer resourcefulness. In this study, most of the participants were married or living with a partner, yet they shared that organising household consumption is their responsibility. This raises questions about how resourcefulness is distributed, negotiated and supported within family structures. Future research could focus on the role of partners in shaping or enabling such practices. Exploring these dynamics would extend understanding of consumer resourcefulness to the household as a gendered site of resource coordination, shedding light on how caregiving roles, labor division and power relations influence the development and enactment of consumer resourcefulness in poverty.

Finally, the findings call for future inquiry into understanding the relationship between poverty and sustainability. While sustainability rises as an outcome of consumer resourcefulness, the examination of this was out of the scope of this study.

Future research should try to uncover the meanings and practices of sustainable consumption for consumers with material constraints.

Paper III: Sustainable Consumption in Poverty

Abstract

Sustainability in consumer research has been mainly considered a topic for the middle class/affluent consumers, leaving unexplored how people living in poverty understand and engage with it. This qualitative study examines the meanings of sustainability and how it is practiced in the context of poverty. I collected 36 in-depth interviews of mothers living in poverty in Greece, one of the poorest countries in Europe, along with observations of their consumption. Through this phenomenological study, I find that the meanings of sustainable consumption for poor consumers are organised around frugality, and are structured through solidarity, morality and locality. While poverty is broadly a marginalised state in modern capitalist society, this study proposes that poverty provides social support models that remedy anomic and fragmented lifestyles and inform the effectiveness of sustainability practices.

Introduction

Overconsumption is inimical to modern societies due to the dominant social paradigm of materialism (Connolly and Prothero 2008) with a huge impact on both ecological and social sustainability (Lim 2017). Not everyone though can afford to participate in relentless overconsumption, as there is a dramatic rise in poverty (Unicef 2022). Consuming in poverty, characterized by uncertainty and restrictions on money, time and materials, is focused on retaining and sustaining (Viswanathan et al. 2025). This leaves us wondering how consumers with limited resources engage with sustainability and how their practices reflect that, as there is only limited research on the matter.

Sustainability literature in marketing has shed light on the ethical implications of unsustainable practices, such as bad working conditions and impoverished communities (Lim 2017), but has yet to explore how these communities relate to sustainability. Moreover, scholars highlight that wealthier consumers possess greater decision-making power, enabling them to access and afford more sustainable options (Connolly and Prothero 2008). Conversely, individuals with lower incomes often adopt sustainable practices out of necessity, such as repair, to cope with economic constraints (Alexander and Ussher 2012; Godfrey et al. 2022).

As further exploration into the phenomenological understanding of how financial status relates to sustainable consumption is needed, I ask: What is the meaning of sustainable consumption for consumers living in poverty? To further unpack that I add, How do consumers living in poverty employ frugal practices to be sustainable?

This paper focuses on mothers living in poverty in Greece. Greece was selected as it has one of the highest rates of people living in poverty, consisting of almost 30% of the population ("Living Conditions in Europe - Poverty and Social Exclusion" 2023). At the same time, the focus is on mothers, due to their investment in the future lives of their offsprings. Thus, this context holds many controversial powers and rich data on how consumers living in poverty manage.

To investigate this phenomenon, I follow a qualitative research design. I use semi-structured interviews with low-income mothers with young children. I chose this sample because the focus of the study is on the controversies of having constrained resources and at the same time having a future outlook, as parenthood often suggests. Finally, to triangulate the findings, I supplement the analysis with field observations and netnographic data in online communities about parenthood.

The findings outline the meaning of sustainable consumption for consumers living in poverty as being centered around frugality. A thick description of the ways these consumers structure their sustainable consumption on solidarity, morality and locality is provided. In addition, the paper provides insights into the lived experience of consumers living in poverty, along with the sustainable practices they engage.

This paper contributes to the sustainable consumption literature, as it provides novel insights into consumers' lived experiences of sustainable consumption. More specifically, it contributes to the expansion of our understanding of the phenomenon by bringing insights from marginalised low-income consumers, extending the middle-class oriented conceptualisation. In addition, through an analysis of the ways in which consumers in poverty navigate sustainability through relationships, we get a deeper understanding of alternative ways of consumption.

Literature Review

Sustainable Consumption and Poverty

Consumer research has traditionally neglected individuals living in poverty and the unique ways they experience consumption (Vieites and Mittal 2024). However, poverty imposes significant constraints on access, marginalises financial resources, and often limits literacy (Viswanathan et al. 2025), leading to consumption patterns that differ markedly from those of more affluent groups.

Studies indicate that individuals living in poverty frequently exhibit stronger prosocial tendencies compared to their more affluent counterparts. Guinote et al. (2015) attribute this to a stronger adherence to egalitarian principles, while Piff et al. (2010) also, ascribe it to a heightened sense of compassion. Similarly, Chen et al. (2013) conducted a study on altruistic behaviours of children, noticing significant differences in how much children would be comfortable giving, based on their families' backgrounds, with the children coming from poorer families being more altruistic.

The sustainability literature in marketing has mainly focused on environmentalism (Davies 2020; White et al. 2019), often overlooking societal aspects of the conceptualisation (Lim 2017). The prevalent approach to sustainable consumption focuses on profiling consumers who engage in sustainable consumption (Kidwell et al. 2013; Shrum et al. 1995), and a variety of ways to influence them to act more sustainably (Schuhwerk and Lefkoff-Hagius 1995; White et al. 2019). This approach, with the consumer motivation in focus, has been criticised for removing the contextual meanings from the conceptualisation of sustainable consumption (Connolly and Prothero 2008).

Consumer culture theory perspectives broadly adopt a contextualised approach to sustainable consumption and sustainability (Godfrey et al. 2022). This concerns balancing, adapting, and contextualising the phenomenon (Lim 2017) and focuses on three key themes: consumer responsibilization (Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria 2021; Cherrier and Türe 2022; Eckhardt and Dobscha 2019; Giesler and Veresiu 2014), ideology of consumption (Belk et al. 2003; Kozinets et al. 2017; Schmitt et al. 2022) and re-imagining consumption (Godfrey et al. 2022; Lim 2017).

The first theme in the consumer culture theory sustainable consumption literature is concerned with consumer responsibilization (Cherrier and Türe 2022; Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Thompson and Kumar 2021). Consumer responsibilization has been identified as "a governance regime process that constructs responsible subject positions" (Cherrier and Türe 2022, 2) and stimulates "certain dispositions to social action" (Shamir 2008, 4). Responsibilisation is therefore the moralising process of framing consumer subjectivities such that they feel individually responsible for structural sustainability issues through neoliberal consumer governance (Foucault 2008). Coskuner-Balli (2020) shows how political discourse has reframed consumers as citizen-consumers with responsibility for broad societal challenges. Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria (2021) illustrate the role of affect and emotion in this process, while Cherrier and Türe (2022) unpack the way this gives rise to tensions in households that results in the suspension of waste flows.

Giesler and Veresiu (2014) suggested that there are four parts in the consumer responsibilization process. The first step is called "personalization" and it aims to contrast the ideal responsible consumer practice with the irresponsible other. Then there is "authorization", where the responsible consumer is armoured with expert knowledge thus gaining respect among others. Next is "capabilization", the

development of a market that enables and provides the tools for responsible self-management. Finally, "transformation" is changing consumers into moral agents who are responsible for finding solutions to social issues. Nevertheless, literature has yet to shed light on how consumers enact and practice their responsibility (Cherrier and Türe 2022).

The literature has revealed that consumers react in different ways when assigned to be responsible agents of sustainable social change, such as accepting, negotiating, rejecting or being indifferent to this role (Eckhardt and Dobscha 2019; Henry 2010). It is also noted that consumers justify their environmentally and socially unsustainable choices by using alternative moralities (Giesler 2006; Luedicke et al. 2010). In addition, research has highlighted some common difficulties for consumers when trying to act responsibly and adopt more sustainable consumption practices, such as time scarcity (Holt 2002; Thompson 2004) and lack of market literacy and capabilities (Adkins and Ozanne 2005; Bone et al. 2014). While the position of trying to enact the role of a responsible, sustainability-minded consumer has been seen as causing confusion and struggle to prioritise (Cherrier and Türe 2022; Phipps and Ozanne 2017).

The second theme, ideology of consumption, highlights that sustainability is clearly linked to consumerist desires and consumption patterns, wherefore reducing desire is a key component of limiting resource extraction (Wang et al. 2017). Consumer research suggests that consumption in contemporary societies is motivated by desire, which is defined as a passionate and fanciful longing for and fantasising about particular goods and services (Belk et al. 2003). The constant desire to consume perpetuates consumerism (Schmitt et al. 2022), which then leads to unsustainable consumption. This paper sees consumption as a form of ideology, which originates

from conflicts between consumer desires and the system of consumerism or the market. This is then reflected in consumers' lived experiences and expressed in social representations and communicative actions related to signalling status through brand affinity, performed practices, and political consumption (Schmitt et al. 2022). This process leads to an insatiable exploitation of natural resources which is often overlooked (Soper 2022). Even for intangible and epistemic consumption the ecological costs can be extreme (Zewe 2025).

Belk et al. (2003, 75) insist that knowingly or unknowingly, think and "act as ideologues" because they living in a consumerist society that they "cannot escape." In other words consumers embody this role through what they consume. Defining desire as "desire as energetic, connective, systemic, and innovative" (Kozinets et al. 2017, 659) reach a similar conclusion. This process of creating resource depleting consumption is supported by vast digital infrastructures such that technology increases the "passion to consume" (Kozinets et al. 2017, 659). In sum, these analyses suggest that incremental approaches to sustainability will not work. One the one hand they are extremely permissive towards further destruction. White et al. (2019, 24) for instance define sustainable consumer behavior as "actions that result in decreases in adverse environmental impacts." Yet this definition would allow Brazilian lumber firms to call themselves "sustainable" by merely cutting down 1 square meter less per year, since they have decreased the adverse impact, however, incrementally. Second, it fails to get to the systemic root of unsustainable consumption as illustrated in the institutional creation of consumer desire above. Broader recognition of these issues has led to a concerted effort to re-imagine consumption, which follows.

Finally, the third theme in the CCT literature, re-imagining consumption suggests that sustainable consumption can be viewed as an "oxymoron" or a figure of

speech that combines two words with opposite or contradictory meanings, creating a surprising or thought-provoking effect (Gordon et al. 2011; Peattie and Collins 2009). This is because to "consume" traditionally means to use up or destroy an object, which stands in contrast to "sustain", thus of sustainable consumption. Therefore, there is a need to conceptualise a different way of consuming that comes in as a rupture to the hegemonic ideology (Lloveras 2025). Schor (Schor 2014) for example provides the concept of the plenitude economy to characterise a sustainable and human-scale market beyond the dominant social paradigm. This highlights high-tech eco-entrepreneurialism and green lifestyle creation, emphasizing familial self-provisioning. Similarly, Vicdan et al. (2024) suggest that through technology humanity can reach degrowth in alignment with nature. This re-imagining can include the process of consumption as a whole, including purchasing, usage and disposal (Lim 2017), but also keeping in mind the broad consumption field and market synergies.

Scholars have tried to push the boundaries of traditional consumption to conceptualise new practices that may support sustainable efforts (Godfrey et al. 2022). Focus on extending the life cycle of a product instead of replacing it, either through repairing (Godfrey et al. 2022) or recycling (Eden 2017) provide key lifestyle templates in this regard. Godfrey et al. (2022) argue that repairing processes reduce waste, thus aligning consumer aspirations to be sustainable and consumer practice. At the same time, it is suggested that recycling and repurposing can be a way to bust out of traditional consumption (Eden 2017).

Extending the idea of repurposing and reusing, conceptualisations of liquid consumption, which is "ephemeral access based and dematerialized" (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017, 582) has spurred some innovations since access-based consumption happens when "transactions that may be market mediated in which no transfer of

ownership takes place” (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012, 881). Liquid lifestyles give rise to a sharing economy which leads to far more efficient usage of capital equipment and hence lower demand on material resources (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Perren and Kozinets 2018). On the other hand this may not be a game changer since consumers eventually grow attachments and become scared of losing access leading to renewed processes of solid acquisition (Rosenberg et al. 2023).

Finally, some researchers have focused on ways consumers could escape the market and consumer logic either through slowing down (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019), adversarial opposition and activism (Kozinets and Handelman 2004), micro-social organisation against brands (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007) or mobilization of heritage for more organic outcomes (Press, Eric J Arnould, et al. 2014). Much of this research has focused on anti-consumption, which addresses how “reasons against” consumption are not always the logical opposite of the “reasons for” consumption and there are important differences between “phenomena of negation and affirmation” in relation to sustainability (Chatzidakis and Lee 2013, 190) or voluntary simplicity (McDonald et al. 2006; Oates et al. 2008) defined as “a lifestyle of freely reduced consumption involving a conscious effort to live a simple life” (Rebouças and Soares 2021, 304).

There are several reasons why consumers might choose anti-consumption and simplicity, including ethical and environmental concerns, consumer resistance and symbolic concerns (Chatzidakis and Lee 2013). However, research suggests that this way of consuming, or anti-consuming is not sustainable in the long run as it cannot be maintained (Chatzidakis and Lee 2013). Anti-consumption is mainly practised by mostly affluent consumers, as they are free to choose their life standards (Alexander and Ussher 2012; Kuanr et al. 2020). Alexander and Ussher, (2012, 68) therefore

specify that human communities must "find a way to raise the material standards of living of the world's poorest people" while at the same time "reducing humanity's overall ecological foot-print" in order to achieve a more just and sustainable future. Concerning consumer wealth, scholars have pointed out that "the richer the consumer the more powerful she or he becomes" (Connolly and Prothero 2008, 130), thus giving access to more sustainable options to the upper social classes. In the case of sustainability, consumers in a better financial position can convert money into decision-making power, and thus afford to make more sustainable choices. At the same time, a variety of sustainable consumption practices are imposed on the lower-class practices out of necessity. For instance, Godfrey et al. (2022, 248) highlight that repair is typically used to cope with economic constraints or dense practice ecosystems outside of "relatively wealthy Western consumer societies." Sustainable practices have traditionally been used as a way of maintaining economic resources in households, so consumers with lower incomes have historically practised sustainability (Alexander and Ussher 2012).

Beyond the marketing literature, an emerging body of research across disciplines has examined sustainable consumption in contexts marked by economic constraint. For example, scholars in geography have explored ethical consumption in the Global South, highlighting how sustainability practices emerge within different socio-economic and cultural conditions (Crang and Hughes 2015). Historically, ethical and political consumption has also been closely associated with marginalised or less powerful groups, suggesting that sustainable practices are not exclusively the domain of affluent consumers (Littler 2010; Micheletti 2003). Relatedly, research on frugality demonstrates that resource-conserving practices often arise from necessity and everyday household management rather than explicit environmental motivations

(Evans 2011; Hasan, Wooliscroft, and Ganglmair-Wooliscroft 2023). Taken together, this literature suggests that sustainable practices can emerge under conditions of limited resources, yet these perspectives have rarely been integrated into mainstream marketing discussions of sustainable consumption.

Scholars have yet to fully explore the phenomenological understanding of sustainable consumption in relation to poverty. While Kotler (2011) connects poverty and companies' quest for sustainability, doesn't delve into the consumers' practices. In addition, Iyer and Kashyap (2007, 43) when discussing recycling, a common sustainable behaviour, they mention that "social class is significant, although its influence is intriguing and warrants close scrutiny", hinting for the connection between poverty and sustainability but not examining it.

When discussing the relationship between sustainability and consumers living in poverty, it is important to remain attentive to broader neoliberal discourses that individualise responsibility. People living in poverty are often held responsible for their poverty, shifting attention away from the systemic forces that shape poverty (Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria 2021). This framing is validated and legitimised through expert knowledge, while market-based solutions are introduced to equip the poor with the capacity to act as responsible economic subjects (Giesler and Veresiu 2014). Thus, it is important not to impose additional expectations that position this demographic as responsible for advancing sustainability. Instead, attention should be directed towards everyday practices that they implement to conserve, prolong and sustain their limited resources.

In the absence of data on consumers living in poverty and sustainability lived experiences, I ask: What is the meaning of sustainable consumption for consumers

living in poverty? And to further unpack it, How do consumers living in poverty employ frugal practices to be sustainable?

Methodology

As part of the broader research conducted for my doctoral dissertation, I gathered a dataset that also informs this particular study. Specifically, I carried out 36 semi-structured, phenomenological, in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of mothers experiencing poverty in Greece. Greece was chosen as the research site because it consistently records some of the highest poverty rates in Europe, with nearly 30% of its population living under the poverty threshold ("Living Conditions in Europe - Poverty and Social Exclusion" 2023). To identify potential participants, I applied two upper income thresholds, €6,000 annually for single-mother households and €12,000 annually for households with two adults, based on the most recent national report on poverty (Greece Poverty Watch 2024).

The focus was on mothers of children aged 0–12 years. This choice was guided by two considerations. First, women in both single- and two-parent households are typically the primary decision-makers when it comes to household consumption (Caesar 2024). Secondly, because of raising children, most mothers inherently think about the future, which aligns closely with the forward-looking nature of sustainability (Lim 2017). Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved.

Table 1 presents a profile of the participants. The women ranged in age from 25 to 51 years and had between one and four children, aged from 3 months to 11 years. Among them, 18 were unemployed, five were employed as cleaners, and the rest worked in other occupations. Most participants are married and living with their

spouses. The interview guide was developed through engagement with the literature on poverty and sustainability (Bernard 2011; McCracken 1988) and covered practices related to acquiring goods (both through conventional and alternative channels), maintaining possessions (including repair strategies and daily care practices such as laundry), and disposing of items (with diverse practices emerging across cases).

Table 1: Participants' Information

No.	Participant	Age	Education	Profession	Children's age	Household Income
1	Aggeliki	25	Elementary School	Unemployed	5yr, 3yr, 2yr, 3months	€4000 (2 adults)
2	Andriana	35	Technical Educational degree	Beautician	6yr	€4500
3	Niki	37	Technical Educational degree	Unemployed	9yr	€10000 (2 adults)
4	Ioanna	33	Technical Educational degree	Cleaner	9yr	€2500
5	Evi	29	Technical Highschool	Unemployed	6months	€4800 (2 adults)
6	Kaiti	33	BSc	Unemployed	2yr	€5000 (2 adults)
7	Gogo	46	Highschool	Unemployed	8yr, 5yr	€10000 (2 adults)
8	Katerina	35	Highschool	Unemployed	3yr	€4500
9	Olga	31	Technical Highschool	Waitress	3yr, 2yr	€9000 (2 adults)
10	Lena	36	Technical Highschool	Unemployed	2yr	€3000 (2 adults)
11	Christina	29	MSc	Translator	2yr	€11500 (2 adults)
12	Stella	28	Technical Educational degree	Supermarket cashier	3yr	€11000 (2 adults)
13	Giota	33	MSc	School teacher	11months	€8500 (2 adults)
14	Maria	36	BSc	Store employee	5yr, 2yr	€9000 (2 adults)

15	Zoi	37	High School	Cleaner	1yr, 5yr, 10yr, 11yr	€11900 (2 adults)
16	Marina	29	High School	Store Employee	2yr	€5000 (adults)
17	Koula	25	Elementary School	Cleaner	11months, 2yr, 9yr	€11900 (2 adults)
18	Fofi	41	Technical Educational degree	Cleaner	7yr, 7yr	€5700
19	Lina	30	Technical Educational degree	Acupuncturist	4months	€10000 (2 adults)
20	Dimitra	39	Technical Educational degree	Assistant Accountant	4yr, 6yr	€11500 (2 adults)
21	Natasa	24	Elementary School	Unemployed	2yr, 4yr	€3000 (2 adults)
22	Efi	35	MSc	Philologist	17months, 5yr	€11900 (2 adults)
23	Silia	29	High School	Waitress	11yr, 10yr, 4months	€4500 (2 adults)
24	Mara	35	Technical Educational degree	Unemployed	3yr	€10000 (2 adults)
25	Chara	51	BSc	Unemployed	10yr	€2000
26	Kalli	35	Highschool	Unemployed	3yr	€11000 (2 adults)
27	Eleni	35	MSc	Unemployed	4yr, 2yr	€12000 (2 adults)
28	Charis	30	Technical Highschool	Unemployed	11yr	€2000
29	Urania	26	Elementary School	Unemployed	4yr, 3yr, 2yr, 2 months	€11000 (2 adults)
30	Theodora	43	BSc	Unemployed	5yr	€10000 (2 adults)
31	Stefania	39	BSc	Unemployed	3yr	€12000 (2 adults)
32	Athina	33	Technical Educational degree	Unemployed	3yr, 7 months	€6000 (2 adults)
33	Tzina	37	Technical Educational degree	Unemployed	2yr	€12000 (2 adults)
34	Irini	34	Technical Educational degree	Sales Assistant	1yr	€12000 (2 adults)

35	Toula	23	Elementary School	Cleaner	6yr	€11000 (2 adults)
36	Anna	46	Elementary School	Hairdresser	7yr	€2000 (2 adults)

Data analysis followed a hermeneutic, iterative process (Spiggle 1994; Thompson 1997), aimed at uncovering what is the meaning of sustainability for consumers living in poverty. In the first stage, individual transcripts were examined to identify consumption-related practices. In the second stage, cross-case comparisons were conducted, drawing on principles of grounded theory to develop emergent codes and categories relevant to the construct under investigation (Fischer and Otnes 2006). To deepen the conceptual understanding of sustainable consumption in poverty, I further traced the structures which the meanings are organised and the related practices as they appeared in the data (Corbin and Strauss 2008).

Alongside the interviews, I incorporated complementary materials, including my observations of mothers' interactions on motherhood-related social media forums, photographs of objects participants chose to share with me, and fieldnotes. These additional data sources enabled me to triangulate the findings and enrich the analysis of consumer resourcefulness (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994).

Findings

For consumers living in poverty, sustainable consumption is primarily understood and enacted through frugality. While environmental concerns are not always the direct motivation, practices associated with sustainability emerge when they are aligned with economic savings. In this context, sustainability is often

understood as managing scarce resources efficiently. Consumers living in poverty employ a number of practices to do so.

Frugality often takes shape through resource conservation, where saving on electricity and water is prioritised. Participants described adopting cost-saving practices that align with sustainability, but their motivation was mostly economic. For instance, Eleni (35) noted:

"*When we started out (*our home*) we changed bulbs and got new special appliances. I have done that, I made sure that I had low energy consumption. But, to be honest, I didn't do it more for the environment, I did it for my pocket*."

Eleni, like many participants, engages in sustainable practices, such as conserving energy in her household. However, she emphasises that her decision to choose appliances with lower energy consumption was driven primarily by financial considerations. Her use of the phrase "to be honest" carries a confessional tone, suggesting that she recognises environmental concern as a more noble motivation and feels a sense of guilt that this is not her main priority.

Similarly, Christina (29) highlighted how routines such as batch cooking serve both to reduce household costs and, indirectly, to contribute to sustainability:
"*Initially, what we try to do, which is also for reasons of economy and I think also the economy of the environment, is to cook for two days, which is and we pay less electricity for example, but I think it already contributes*"

Reflecting the majority of the participants, Christina frames her energy conserving practice as primarily motivated by economic necessity, noting that preparing meals for two days reduces electricity costs. However, she also invokes what she calls the "economy of the environment," signalling an awareness that her

actions carry ecological benefits beyond household savings. She acknowledges that she is part of the solution, and she nevertheless sees her small, routine adjustments “already contribute.” This quote illustrates how participants perceive sustainability as an incidental outcome of frugal living. In Christina’s account, the act of cooking in bulk becomes a dual strategy: it is first a way to manage scarce financial resources, but it simultaneously produces contributions to environmental sustainability.

Likewise, Koula (25) describes a creative way for reducing water use for washing dishes when hosting people:

“*Well, the only such (*sustainable*) consumption we do is when hosting, when I set the table, instead of putting plates, we put parchment paper, because I don't want to wash. We put parchment paper, so I don't have to wash the plates*"

Koula’s has an unconventional approach to resource conservation, as she uses parchment paper instead of plates when hosting in order to avoid dishwashing. She regards it as sustainable behaviour, as this practice leads to saving water by eliminating the need to wash dishes. From an ecological perspective, her strategy highlights the tension between different dimensions of sustainability: although it minimizes water consumption, it simultaneously increases reliance on disposable materials, which may generate more waste. Koula’s narrative therefore underscores how sustainable consumption is understood pragmatically within conditions of constraint, yet can still intersect with broader ecological concerns in complex and sometimes contradictory ways.

Another form of frugality was expressed in practices of repair and repurposing. Instead of discarding items, participants emphasised fixing or reusing them until they could no longer serve a purpose. As Gogo (46) shared, “If I can fix it,

I won't throw it away. If not, I throw it away. It'll become a rug for some purpose and then it will be thrown away." Gogo, echoes many others with her statement "If I can fix it, I won't throw it away", highlighting that repair is the first strategy, ensuring that resources are used as much as possible. When repair is no longer viable, the object is repurposed, in Gogo's case turned into a rug, before its eventual disposal. Such practices demonstrate a layered process of value extraction, where every possible stage of utility is exhausted before waste is accepted. While these actions may align with sustainable ideals of repair and reuse, for the participant they are primarily strategies of necessity, driven by economic constraints. Sustainability here is not an intentional pursuit of environmental responsibility but an outcome of pragmatic frugality shaped by limited resources.

Frugality also guides food waste management, with participants seeking to avoid discarding food through reuse, transformation, or storage. Christina (29) described:

"*What we do in essence is that when we keep everything, it is not considered leftovers. Of course, what is left over from the food of each day we try to use it the next day, for example, even if it is not the main food, we can have it as a side dish or we can have it for dinner*"

Christina's narrative demonstrates how frugality and sustainability converge in everyday food practices in poverty. By stressing that "we keep everything," she rejects the idea of leftovers as waste and instead reframes them as resources with continued value. From a sustainability perspective, this practice reduces both food waste and the additional energy that would otherwise be required to cook new meals. For Christina, however, the primary motivation lies in frugality, while environmental benefits emerge as a by-product. Similarly, Charis (30) emphasised the importance of

not discarding food, "If we don't eat it, I will put it in the freezer and we will eat it another day." Both Christina and Charis illustrate how food management practices among consumers living in poverty reflect an intimate connection between frugality and sustainability. These practices reveal a shared commitment to minimizing waste and maximizing the utility of household resources, which are structured using three themes, namely solidarity, locality and morality.

Solidarity

One way in which consumers living in poverty practice sustainable consumption through frugality is by embedding it within relations of solidarity (Chatzidakis et al. 2021). In this case, sustainability is expressed through the rejection of overconsumption and the avoidance of single-use patterns, as individuals extend the life of goods by passing them on when they are no longer needed. Such exchanges of necessities, both among strangers and closed ones, demonstrate how resource sharing becomes both an economic strategy and a socially grounded form of sustainability. This can be exemplified through sharing goods within personal networks, particularly among family members, to maximise their use and reduce waste. Aggeliki (25) illustrates this approach, emphasizing family-oriented exchanges:

"*The rest of the clothes, which were winter clothes, I selected some and gave them away. I gave them because I thought that they wouldn't fit next winter, so I should give them to younger children, so that in the winter they can wear them. So, I donated them. Yesterday, I gave the baby basket of my youngest because I don't use it anymore, to my cousin who gave birth. I also donated some of his clothes from when he was a newborn, and we had some uniforms and smaller socks from when he was born. The newborn clothes I gifted them to my cousin. The items that I don't need because they grow, I donate them*."

What Aggeliki shares here is a common practice among consumers in poverty. By donating outgrown clothing and unused baby items to family members, she maximizes the utility of her household goods and reduces the need for others to purchase new items, conserving both financial and material resources. This practice demonstrates that solidarity operates not only as a moral or social principle but also as a practical strategy for extending the life of goods and minimizing waste. Within close networks, sustainability emerges as an integrated feature of everyday life, where frugality and community support intersect.

The solidarity support extends to strangers as well, allowing goods to continue being used rather than discarded. Gogo (46) describes a practice of giving children's clothing to people she does not personally know, responding to requests made through her child's school. She says that she "was giving to people" she "didn't know, they were asking and" she gave. When she was asked how she found them, she responded that "they asked me, at the school. The one and the other, clothes, clothes, clothes for X. You give, it's ok, you don't need them, I didn't plan to have a third (child) so."

This is another example that highlights how solidarity can structure sustainable consumption practices through frugality. By passing on items that are no longer needed, Gogo ensures that resources are reused rather than discarded, extending the lifecycle of goods. Her primary motivation might be practical, offering clothes to families that need them, this act simultaneously generates ecological benefits by preventing waste. Sharing with strangers also demonstrates the socially embedded nature of sustainability under conditions of poverty, showing that the redistribution of goods can occur beyond personal networks and still contribute to

resource efficiency. Finally, to highlight the significance of these exchanges for social sustainability and the central role of solidarity, image 1 is presented.

Image 1: Screenshot of a Facebook post

The image is a screenshot of a post at a Facebook group named "Giving away baby/children clothes, toys etc!!", and on the top a user has written "Request: If there is a mother giving away this milk and doesn't need it, with my own expenses though box now (a local delivery service). Thank you in advance whether it can be found or not". This is an alternative outlet, where these social bonds can be found and consumers can support each other, practicing social sustainability.

Together, these examples illustrate that consumers living in poverty enact sustainable consumption through frugality across both familiar and unfamiliar social networks, with solidarity shaping the redistribution of goods in ways that maximize utility, reduce waste, and support both economic and ecological efficiency.

Morality

Another way in which sustainable consumption through frugality is expressed among consumers living in poverty is by linking everyday practices to moral obligation. In this section, the data indicate that frugality is not simply a practical response to poverty but a learned ethical stance that guides consumption choices (Eckhardt and Dobscha 2019). Behaviors such as overconsumption or unnecessary waste are cast in negative, almost transgressive terms, while repairing, reusing, and sharing, among others, are upheld as correct and respectable ways of living. In this sense, sustainability acquires a moral dimension, where acting in this way is less about explicit environmental concern and more about fulfilling one's responsibility to avoid "wrong" consumption practices.

Gogo (46) connects her household routines and the behaviors she teaches her children to a broader moral understanding of what constitutes the "right thing". She shares when discussing laundry and washing clothes:

"*If I use washing powder, they are not washed, it takes a proper washing, while with the capsule, you can take them off in 40 minutes. And it cleans.... It's a lot of water and about the whole system a little bit… ok. Because there's a shortage of water, and in general, a (climate) disaster, I'm like "No trash, no plastic." We're trying.... And my kids don't throw garbage out on the street, everything they have in their hands, they gather it in my pocket, in my bag, in my jacket and pants pockets, everything I wear, and throw it at home or in a bin. That's the right thing*"

Her experience is similar to many of the informants, highlighting how sustainable practices, such as reducing water use, avoiding plastic, and teaching children not to litter, are framed through a moral lens. For Gogo, these behaviors are

not simply practical acts of frugality but are understood as obligations in light of wider environmental crises. By emphasizing that these are “the right thing,” she casts sustainability as a moral duty, reinforcing the idea that wasteful practices are ethically wrong. Like Gogo, Olga (31) grounds her everyday choices in moral reasoning, but with a sharper emphasis on waste as a form of ethical violation:

"*I don’t find it nice to throw clothes in the trash. I think it’s a pity. Someone probably will get it from there too, you know, a garbage picker, but I can’t do it, as I can't also throw away food. I put the leftovers in a bag and I leave them outside of the trash bin for someone. Maybe an animal eats it or a person.. I never throw away food, because I understand that some people don’t even have this. And I think it is a sin to throw away food. It is a difficult period, the prices are very high, very high*. "

Here, discarding usable items is explicitly described as “a sin,” revealing how moral judgments are attached to waste. Olga’s refusal to throw away food or clothing is framed less as a calculated sustainability action and more as a deeply held conviction about what is right, informed by empathy for those in greater need and by her own experience of scarcity. In this way, frugality becomes intertwined with morality: conserving and redistributing resources is an ethical imperative, while unsustainable behaviors are perceived as morally unacceptable. Her framing resonates with Gogo’s, as both highlight that what might otherwise be considered mundane acts of sustaining, such as saving water, keeping food, reusing clothes, carry moral weight and are treated as responsibilities rather than choices. This sense of moral responsibility extends beyond the household, as Kalli (35) recalls collective initiatives to clean local beaches:

"*Every year, groups get mobilized, these groups can be just women, village groups, and clean the beaches…. Groups get together, I tell you, it can be the kindergarten parents' club, the primary school parents' club. Anybody, and they go and clean up the beaches and take the kids with them, which is good for me. Because the little children also learn*."

In this example, morality is expressed through collective responsibility for shared spaces, where community members act together to address the environmental impact of tourism. Kalli emphasizes the involvement of children as particularly important, suggesting that these activities serve not only to preserve the environment but also to introduce moral values of care and responsibility in the next generation. While Gogo and Olga highlight how morality guides frugal household practices, Kalli shows that the same moral framework also operates in the public sphere, where communal acts of cleanliness and preservation are treated as ethical obligations for both present and future well-being.

Taken together, these narratives reveal that for consumers living in poverty, sustainability is not only a by-product of frugality but also a moral stance: waste and overconsumption are treated as violations of what is right, while practices of care, preservation, and community action affirm an ethical commitment to responsible consumption.

Locality

The third and final structural concept through which consumers living in poverty practice sustainability via frugality is locality. In this context, locality refers to the ways individuals ground their consumption within regional, familial, and

community networks, thereby reducing reliance on distant or impersonal supply chains. By privileging local sources, whether through supporting nearby markets, cultivating household food production, or engaging directly with producers, consumers ensure affordability and trust while also minimizing waste and environmental impact of transportation. Locality thus represents a mode of sustainable frugality that ties economic survival to the preservation and strengthening of place-based relationships. Ioanna (33) explicitly links her shopping choices to supporting her region by saying that "I am trying to support my place. Support my region so we can also, we can also survive. That's why I shop from my place."

For Ioanna, sustainability is embedded in a sense of local responsibility. Choosing local products is not only a matter of economic necessity but also a way to strengthen the survival of her community. This highlights how frugality is practiced through a conscious preference for local markets, where consumption is intertwined with sustaining both household and regional well-being. Locality here becomes a survival strategy, ensuring that resources circulate within the community rather than being lost to distant, less personal supply chains.

While Ioanna emphasizes the economic and communal benefits of local shopping, Kalli (35) highlights another dimension of locality through her family's reliance on homegrown food:

"*In the summer, I'm emphasizing this because one thing is a village, and another Athens, another is a city, my parents set up a garden. In the summer, most of the food comes from our garden, let's say, my dad has chickens, and he brings me eggs now and every day he brings me eggs*."

Her account shows how sustainability and frugality are achieved through self-sufficiency and family networks of production. By cultivating food locally, her family avoids the costs of store-bought products while also reducing the environmental impact of mass-produced goods. The reference to the difference between "a village" and "a city" highlights that locality is also spatially contextual: rural life provides opportunities for sustainable frugality through gardens and livestock, in ways that urban living may restrict.

In contrast to Kalli's reliance on rural family production, Giota (33) demonstrates how locality can also operate through local producers and the benefits of choosing them:

"*If I can't go to the farmer's market with the baby, I call them and they bring the groceries home (...) It started when I gave birth, my husband can't move much (because of a disability) and I was out of the surgery, so I called them before and told them I might need them*"

Her experience illustrates how local producers play a role not only in providing fresh and affordable food but also in supporting consumers' personal circumstances. In Giota's case, her reliance on local markets is shaped by convenience and accessibility during a period of vulnerability, reflecting how local networks respond to needs in ways that transcend purely economic exchange. This shows that sustainability in poverty is relational and social: it is enabled by trust and reciprocity between consumers and local producers. Unlike distant and impersonal retailers, local actors sustain not only households but also the social fabric of the community.

Taken together, the data show that locality functions as a cornerstone of frugal sustainability for consumers living in poverty. Whether through supporting the regional economy, relying on self-sufficiency in rural spaces, building adaptive relationships with local vendors, or trusting direct exchanges with producers, locality provides a framework where economic necessity aligns with ecological and social responsibility.

Discussion

This paper examined how consumers living in poverty engage in sustainable consumption and demonstrated that frugality is the primary mechanism through which sustainability is understood and enacted. While environmental concerns are not always at the forefront, practices that align with sustainability often arise from the efficient management of scarce resources. Participants described conserving electricity and water, reusing and repairing goods, and avoiding food waste, all of which demonstrate how necessity drives consumption practices that contribute to broader sustainability goals. These findings align with Alexander and Ussher's (2012) observation that low-income households have historically practiced forms of sustainability to preserve resources, while extending this insight by providing phenomenological accounts of how such practices are experienced and rationalized today.

Importantly, three structuring concepts, namely solidarity, morality, and locality, shaped how frugality intersects with sustainability. Solidarity (Chatzidakis et al. 2021) highlights how consumers in poverty embed resource management within social networks, redistributing clothing, food, and household goods among family members, neighbours, and even strangers. These findings build on Guinote et al.

(2015) and Chen et al. (2013), who note stronger prosocial tendencies among consumers in poverty, by showing how such orientations translate into consumption practices that extend product lifecycles and reduce waste.

Morality underscores how participants frame frugal practices as the "right thing to do," casting wastefulness as an ethical violation. This echoes Connolly and Prothero's (2008) call for more attention to the cultural and moral dimensions of sustainability, moving beyond consumer motivation as narrowly defined.

Finally, locality reveals how participants rely on nearby markets, family gardens, and direct relationships with producers to sustain both households and communities. This extends consumer culture theory perspectives (Godfrey et al. 2022; Lim 2017) that conceptualize sustainability as contextual and embedded in social relations, showing that place-based consumption is central to frugal sustainability under poverty.

Taken together, these findings illustrate that sustainable consumption in poverty is socially structured and relational rather than merely individualized. Frugality intersects with social support, moral obligation, and localized practices to create sustainability outcomes that emerge from necessity but also from embedded values and networks. This challenges mainstream sustainability research, which has focused heavily on environmentally motivated, middle-class consumers (White et al. 2019; Kidwell et al. 2013), and responds to calls for more contextualized and nuanced accounts of sustainable consumption (Connolly and Prothero 2008; Godfrey et al. 2022).

The findings of this study show that sustainable consumption among consumers living in poverty is enacted primarily through frugality, but that it is socially structured by solidarity, morality, and locality. These three dimensions demonstrate that sustainability is not only about individual choices but also about the networks, values, and contexts within which consumption takes place. Building on the discussion, the following contributions outline how this study advances sustainable consumption literature in consumer research by addressing empirical gaps, extending theoretical debates, and reframing the relationship between poverty and sustainability.

First, it contributes to the sustainable consumption literature by providing empirical evidence of consumers' lived experiences. Prior work has emphasised environmentally motivated consumers and market-based strategies to "responsibilize" individuals into more sustainable behaviour (Giesler and Veresiu 2014a; Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria 2021). By contrast, this research shows that sustainability also emerges from practices of frugality among consumers with limited means. This does not imply that living in poverty is a socially desirable condition, but rather that broader society can learn from the ways in which those facing economic constraints enact sustainability through frugality, solidarity, and community-based practices.

Second, the paper extends existing understandings by focusing on an under-researched population: consumers living in poverty. As Vieites and Mittal (2024) and Viswanathan et al. (2025) note, poverty profoundly shapes consumption experiences, yet sustainable consumption research has largely ignored these groups. By documenting how sustainability is enacted in conditions of scarcity, this study fills an empirical gap and broadens the scope of sustainable consumption research beyond affluent and Western contexts.

Third, the findings connect theoretical discussions of sustainability and poverty by showing that poverty generates unique models of social sustainability. Practices of solidarity, moral responsibility, and locality demonstrate that sustainable consumption under poverty is relational, grounded in community support, ethical orientations, and place-based networks. This not only resonates with evidence that lower-income groups display stronger egalitarian and prosocial tendencies (Piff et al. 2010; Guinote et al. 2015), but also provides new insights into how such tendencies manifest through consumption. By doing so, the paper responds to Connolly and Prothero's (2008) critique of decontextualized sustainability research and advances consumer culture theory perspectives (Lim 2017; Godfrey et al. 2022) by empirically illustrating how sustainability is enacted under economic constraint.

Overall, this paper reframes poverty not solely as a barrier to sustainability but as a context in which alternative, socially embedded forms of sustainability emerge. It highlights the importance of recognizing frugality, solidarity, morality, and locality as key dimensions of sustainable consumption, thereby expanding theoretical and empirical discussions in both sustainability and poverty research.

While this study offers novel insights and contributions, it also offers some promising directions for future research on sustainable consumption. Firstly, further studies could investigate how frugality as a mechanism of sustainability varies across socio-economic, cultural and geographic contexts. Such work would not only capture variation in practices but also reveal how different structural conditions, such as welfare regimes, housing infrastructures, or market access, shape the enactment of sustainable consumption under constraint. Longitudinal research could additionally explore how practices of frugal sustainability evolve over time, particularly in

response to shifting economic pressures, technological change, or environmental crises.

Second, future research could deepen understanding of the structuring concepts identified here, solidarity, morality, and locality, and their broader implications for sustainability. For instance, solidarity-based consumption networks might be examined as alternative economies that redistribute resources and extend product lifecycles, potentially informing community-level sustainability initiatives. Morality as a driver of frugality raises questions about how ethical orientations toward waste and resource use are cultivated, transmitted, or contested across social groups, which could contribute to more culturally attuned sustainability interventions. Likewise, locality underscores the importance of place-based consumption, pointing to the need for research on how proximity, embeddedness, and local networks foster resilient and sustainable practices. Together, these avenues extend the conversation beyond individualized consumer choice to consider how sustainability is structured through relationships, values, and contexts.

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