

Review

The Role of Formal and Informal Forces in Shaping Consumption and Implications for Sustainable Society: Part II

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Abstract: Looking at consumption from a societal perspective, we can see that purchasing and behavior decisions are influenced by many factors, not the least which are what the people around us and in the media are doing. Other factors include economic influences, the marketing of products and technological innovations, and regulations governing consumption. This article, Part II, argues that in order to understand consumption, we need to move beyond the dominant (economic) understanding of consumers and consumer behavior, and think about the origins of our preferences, needs, and desires. A thorough understanding of consumption is informed by the contributions of sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and behavioral scientists, who study the socio-cultural, social, and psychological contexts in which consumer behavior is embedded. These disciplines offer rich and complex explanations of human behavior, which in turn illuminate the discussion on how consumer behavior can be made more sustainable.

Keywords: socio-cultural factors; psychological contexts; consumption behavior

1. Introduction

Looking at consumption from a societal perspective, we can see that purchasing and behavior decisions are influenced by many factors, including economic influences, marketing of products and technological innovations, regulations governing consumption, and what the people around us and in

the media are doing. The complex interactions between these factors result in the consumption patterns and levels that Europeans think of as “normal”, but which are, in fact, unsustainable.

Consumer behavior is commonly perceived to be driven by rational decision-making based on individual preferences. In reality, the situation is far more complex, with social norms, cultural traditions, habits, and many other factors shaping our everyday consumption behavior. Understanding consumption necessitates knowledge of sociology, psychology, anthropology, and behavioral science, in order to appreciate the socio-cultural, social, and psychological contexts in which consumer behavior is embedded. These disciplines offer rich and complex explanations of human behavior, which in turn illuminate the discussion on how consumer behavior can be made more sustainable.

2. Personal Needs/Desires and Social Values/Norms

Thinking about familiar consumption behaviors helps us recognize that consumption is complex, not always rational (or even in our best interests), and that material possessions can be symbolic as well as functional. For example, why do people keep their wedding dress, collect stamps, or advertise brands through the clothing they wear? In order to understand consumption, we need to move beyond the dominant (economic) understanding of consumer behavior and think about where our preferences, ‘needs’, and desires come from.

2.1. Challenging Traditional Thinking: A Critique of The Rational Choice Model

Traditional thinking is dominated by the rational choice model, which suggests that individual behavior is a process of conscious decision-making, based on assessing costs and benefits and then choosing the option with the highest expected net benefit or lowest expected net cost. It is a utilitarian model based on the concept of people acting rationally, and acting individually.

The rational choice model has so deeply dominated the understanding of consumption and policy-making that it feels almost intuitive to us, even though we can see from the examples above that real-life consumption behavior is far more complicated.

The model has been widely criticized in three main areas [1]:

1. for assuming that a choice is rational, and excluding the roles of emotions and habits,
2. for assuming that the individual is the appropriate unit of analysis, and thereby excluding the crucial role that our social situation plays in guiding our behavior, and
3. for assuming that choices are only made in the pursuit of self-interest, and excluding the possibilities of moral and altruistic behavior.

The dominance of the rational choice model has led to the perception that it is our attitudes that shape our behavior [2-4]. However, it has been demonstrated that in some areas, there is a clear gap between the attitudes and behaviors of individuals, known as the “attitude-behavior gap” or the “intention-behavior gap”, e.g., [5]. This can lead to cognitive dissonance: the uncomfortable tension that we feel as a result of behaving in a way that does not fit with our beliefs and attitudes [6]. Because it is uncomfortable, the brain will try to find ways to resolve the contradictions—and making adjustments to one’s attitude is often easier than changing one’s behavior.

The realization that people's actions sometimes contradict their stated attitudes and values is important to keep in mind when thinking about policy interventions: many interventions have been based on the rationale of changing people's attitudes in the hope of changing their behavior. This simplistic approach is known to be false [7,8], and information campaigns are known to be among the least effective ways of changing behavior towards sustainable consumption [1]. In fact, it is often the people with the greenest attitudes who are doing the most environmental damage: research in the UK by Barr, Shaw *et al.* [9], found that the longest and most frequent flights were taken by those with the greatest awareness of environmental issues, including climate change.

In addition, it is difficult to separate out our behaviors from the context we find ourselves in, particularly with respect to the social norms around us and the infrastructure we live and work in; for example, people tend to recycle more when the provision of facilities makes recycling easy—regardless of their attitudes toward recycling [10-12]. Evidence from the social psychologist, Bem (1972), suggests that in some situations, we deduce our attitude to something from our behavior; for example, we know what our attitude to recycling is from observing whether we recycle or not [13].

2.2. Needs, Wants and Desires

Basic needs appear to be an obvious driver of consumption, but even the way in which physiological and social needs are met is determined by a variety of factors.

Needs theorists, such as Max-Neef [14] and Maslow [15], concluded that actual human needs are “finite, few and universal” [1], and have distinguished between material needs, such as subsistence and protection, and social or psychological needs, such as self-esteem and belongingness. Maslow's well-known “hierarchy of needs” implies that self-actualization needs will only be pursued once physiological needs have been met. However it is easy to find counterexamples, such as people who choose to starve to death rather than to lose self-esteem, or those who risk security for political reasons [16,17].

As pointed out by Douglas [18], satisfiers of needs differ across cultures, and may be material or immaterial. For example, our need for security could be met through social and community mechanisms, but is more often met through home security systems, alarms *etc.* [19].

The link between perceived needs and consumption levels is complex: the ways in which we choose to satisfy our needs and wants are influenced by cultural and institutional factors, and do not always contribute to our overall well-being—consumption of junk food or alcohol are examples. The obvious explanation is the role of advertising and marketing in creating “false needs” [1,20], although there are many other social and psychological drivers of consumption, which the following sections aim to explain.

The advertising industry plays a key role in continually creating new “needs” to ensure that we keep on buying new products ([21]: p. 107). “Marketer-induced problem recognition” refers to the techniques used by marketers to encourage dissatisfaction in consumers. For example, adverts for personal hygiene products, such as mouthwash and foot sprays, may be designed to create insecurities that consumers believe they can solve by buying the products; marketers ensure fashions change quickly and create perceptions among consumers that their wardrobes are out of date.” ([21]: p. 108).

The definition of what people “need” in order to be a “normal” member of society is continually creeping upwards in terms of material consumption. As Christensen, Godskesen *et al.* (2007) point out, in the past 20 years it has become normal for most European households to own at least one car, as well as individual telephones, computers, cameras, *etc.* [22]. Households now own more equipment, such as dishwashers, printers, coffee makers, *etc.* Most environmental campaigns focus on the areas of energy and water consumption, while the “normal” consumption of all of these material items, including clothes, phones, *etc.* that are standard parts of our lives, are not addressed in environmental policy [22].

Consumption policies mostly focus on areas that do not contradict growth-oriented policy, such as buying new electrical appliances, which have greater energy efficiency; however, a few policy interventions do have the potential to challenge consumerist values [22]: “In France, the introduction of the 35-hour week has stimulated self-reflection among consumers and encouraged a reassessment of values related to consumption so that less commoditized activities have been favored and more time is spent together with friends and family...Changing consumer values and priorities might also open up the possibilities for more radical sustainable consumption policies that address aggregate consumption and ever increasing standards” ([22]: p. 112) .

2.3. Values and Norms

Research from social psychology suggests that values are important for consumer behavior, since we buy products and services because they help us fulfil a certain value-laden goal. For example, two people may have similar behavior, e.g., vegetarianism, but their underlying values might be very different, e.g., healthy lifestyle or animal rights. Values are also understood to influence specific attitudes. For example, someone who cares greatly about security will be more likely to support governmental policies to reduce crime rates, even if this entails some erosion of civil liberties [23].

Dominant societal values shape the development of social norms: “Social norms are rules and standards that are understood by members of a group, and that guide and/or constrain social behavior without the force of laws” ([24]: p. 152).

Violation of social norms is followed by sanctions, either at the individual level—when personal norms [25] are violated—in the form of guilt, or at the level of the social group [26] by using such measures as reprimand, social judgment, or ostracism. Neuroscientists have found that such social rejection activates the same part of the brain as physical pain does: we are extremely sensitive to the threat of social ostracism and our brains send clear signals to avoid it [27], possibly because in prehistoric times, being excluded from the tribe would have meant a life of extreme risk and danger [28].

The importance of values in motivating sustainable consumption is an area of debate, with some suggesting that undertaking sustainable actions leads people to identify themselves as a person who cares about the environment. However, these ideas have been critiqued with counter-evidence, which shows that these “positive spillover” effects are exaggerated [29] and that undertaking small symbolic actions, such as recycling newspapers, is used to justify further unsustainable consumption [9].

The wider context of society seems to also have a marked influence on the extent to which our values translate into behaviors: “The single biggest factor which appears to interfere with personal

norms in the success of pro-environmental behaviors is the existence of external social or institutional constraints” ([1]: p. 56).

And values (and social norms) themselves are influenced by wider society, including government policy and communications: “governments intervene constantly in the social context . . . for example, by the way in which education is structured, by the importance accorded to economic indicators, by public sector performance indicators, by procurement policies, by the impact of planning guidelines on public and social space, by the influence of wage policy on the work-life balance, by the impact of employment policy on economic mobility (and hence on family structure and stability), by the effect of trading standards on consumer behavior, by the degree of regulation of advertising and the media, and by the support offered to community initiatives and faith groups” ([30]: pp. 94–95).

Consideration of values is important in “framing” sustainable actions: we are often encouraged to behave sustainably in order to save money, for example, by saving electricity at home. With no appeal to values other than self-interest, it is likely that the money saved will be redirected to other activities that the person values, such as flying on a holiday: this rebound effect means that environmental improvements in one area of lifestyle do not automatically result in overall environmental improvement, unless the underlying values of society are to act sustainably. The framing of sustainable actions is also important since many people view sustainable lifestyles as difficult, boring and unattractive—a view mirrored in societal discourse and mass media [31].

3. Different Meanings of Consumption for People

Four different types of meanings associated with products can be distinguished: *utilitarian*, *hedonic*, *sacred*, and *social* meanings [32]. Some authors indicate that for many consumers today, the symbolic value of products has become even more important than the physical aspects of goods [33].

3.1. Symbolism and Personal Identity

The research on the symbolic role of products reveals that it is not just the material function of goods that is important for consumers, but also what “things” signify about us and our lives—both to ourselves and others. Some products have hedonic meanings to us—obvious examples are wedding rings, and clothes showing allegiance to football clubs. Other products have sacred meanings to us, including personal memorabilia, such as family photos, or religious artifacts.

As we are not born with a fixed identity, individuals have a strong desire to create and confirm a personal style, and in this way, manifest one’s identity. The Western trend towards individualization implies that people’s identities are no longer defined by a community or traditional roles; instead, these may be partially replaced by increasing the number of owned goods, which serve as a message about their identity [34].

As mass media communications and marketing have pervaded ever more deeply into our lives, we are continuously shown consumption patterns from the most prestigious groups in society—we are no longer just “keeping up with the Jones’s”, but people from all parts of society are now aspiring to own designer goods and to live luxury lifestyles with high environmental impacts [35]. Schor suggests that the first step in breaking down these associations is to deconstruct the symbolic value of the luxury

goods marketed to us, and develop other reactions to them, such as thinking about them as “tacky attempts to buy their way into a personal image of exclusivity” ([35]: p. 148).

3.2. Consumption and Social Conversations: Conformity and Differentiation

Our behavior is greatly influenced by the lifestyles of those around us: friends, family, colleagues, and by the lifestyles (both real and fictional) portrayed on television and in the media. In addition to constructing individual identity, people are social beings and continuously construct and re-construct their collective identities. This a paradox: people feel a strong need to fit in with their social groups and avoid rejection; but we also strive to differentiate ourselves—to highlight our status within the social group. Thus, goods can be used both as means of interacting with society and the world at large, as well as for making a personal differentiation in society [18].

Maintaining membership and achieving a certain status in a social group stimulates consumption of so-called ‘status goods’. This leads to conspicuous consumption [36]. Such ‘positional’ goods are initially bought by richer people, but as time passes, the innovative product becomes a mainstream product with masses of consumers being able to afford it (for the mechanism see part I of this article), and thus, the product loses its positional value ([37]: p. 36). Instead, mainstream consumers buy products, at least in part, to not be excluded from the group. With time, people get used to a certain level of material welfare and this level no longer contributes to increased subjective well-being: rather, it is the loss of the obtained level that is feared [38].

The need to conform and belong to a social group can also drive reciprocal consumption; for example, participation in “social groups may require particular standards of dress, and reciprocity in treating others to restaurant meals. When it is clear that the alternative to belongingness is to be socially excluded, this kind of consumption appears less a luxury and more a necessity” ([16]: p. 65).

So, our participation in society drives people towards a certain level of consumption if they wish to take part in everyday activities and fit in with social and institutional expectations, such as needing to buy suits to wear to work. Most people do not wish to differentiate and draw attention to themselves from others through consuming less, perhaps partly as this could have associations with being ‘mean’ with money, or not being aware of or respectful to social and professional conventions. Such issues could be solved through more official changes in normal standards of behavior that relate to consumption. For example, in 2009, the prime minister of Bangladesh ordered male government employees (including ministers) to stop wearing suits, jackets, and ties to work, to enable air conditioning systems to be used less [39]. They hope to expand the suit ban to the business sector and eventually re-write Bangladesh’s official dress code; the government has also moved the clocks forward one hour as a daylight saving measure designed to reduce energy consumption [39]. Japan has a similar “Cool Biz” campaign, which discourages suits and ties and encourages keeping the thermostat at 28 °C. “Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe recently set a good example by instructing his cabinet to wear traditional Japanese short-sleeved shirts instead of businesswear” [40]. The idea has also been taken up in other countries, for example unions promoted the idea in the UK during hot weather, and UN chief Ban Ki-moon encouraged UN staff in New York to dress down in summer in order to turn down the air conditioning [41]. Similarly, Chinese workers have been encouraged by the state council to wear t-shirts instead of suits when working in public buildings, and to keep air

conditioning lower than 26 °C; the “26 °C campaign”, which has been in operation since 2005, applies to schools, offices, supermarkets, restaurants, shopping malls, and government agencies [40]. These examples show that it can be relatively quick and easy to change aspects of normal standards of behavior, especially if powerful and prestigious groups are included, and leaders also act accordingly.

This process of increasing societal expectations is reinforced by developments in infrastructure, which facilitate particular patterns of consumption and can help determine which behaviors are easy or difficult [42]. In this way, consumption of goods and services that may once have been luxurious or aspirational starts to become ordinary, necessary, and possibly habitual.

3.3. Ordinary Consumption and Habits

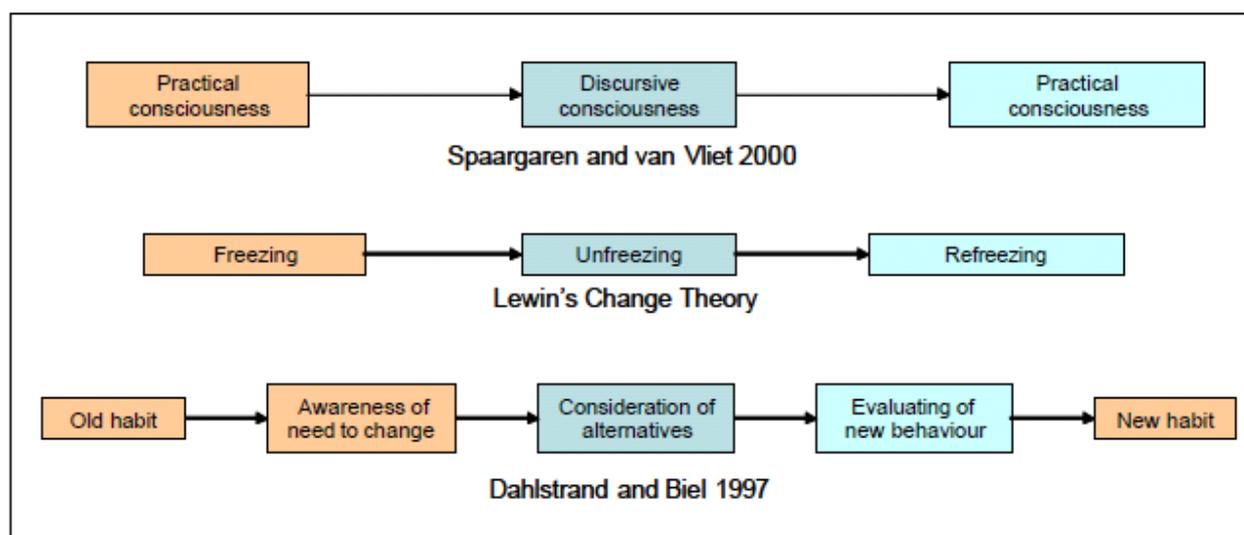
A significant part of our everyday consumption is inconspicuous or ordinary, and is not linked to status-seeking [43]. For example rent, utility bills, as well as mundane everyday purchases, such as lunch, newspapers, *etc.* These consumption “...actions require little reflection, ... communicate few social messages, ... play no role in distinction, do not excite much passion or emotion” ([43]: p. 3).

The category of ‘ordinary’ consumption is of great environmental significance, as it includes aspects of household energy use, food consumption, and to some extent, mobility patterns—the three consumption areas with the greatest environmental impact [44]. Although some of this consumption is difficult for consumers to influence (such as systems supplying heating to rented apartments), there are some opportunities for more sustainable consumption even in these mundane areas. Examples of such opportunities include choosing renewable energy suppliers for home and work, or switching to ethical banking, pensions, and investments. Of course, some of these changes are currently discouraged by pricing incentives that favor unsustainable consumption patterns.

In many cases, everyday consumption practices are deeply routinized and the decisions about familiar daily situations are made automatically, as a matter of habit. According to psychological learning theory, habits are formed in the process of continuous reinforcement of influencing factors. Once people are satisfied with their choice and situation, their behavior becomes routinized and they do not tend to search for new solutions until new signals and influences come that can trigger the search for a better alternative. Once we have identified a certain product and brand that suits us, we do not look for an alternative, because it is linked to transaction costs in terms of time, trials, and errors. For example, the average supermarket has some 40,000 individual products or brands on display [45]. Choosing products that satisfy our needs and wants may therefore become a strenuous task, as described by the paradox of choice by Schwartz [46], and therefore habits guide us through this maze of products.

Insights into how people can be encouraged to change old habits and establish new ones can help policy-makers to embed sustainable behaviors.

Figure 1. Breaking Bad Habits: Some conceptual perspectives. (Reproduced with permission from [1], published by Sustainable Development Research Network, 2005).



Some of the most important psychological models for understanding the process of breaking habits are shown in the figure above. Lewin's work is particularly influential: existing habits need to be 'unfrozen' by examining and challenging accepted ideas, before new behaviors can be tried out, repeated, and established in new routines [47]. Most importantly, Lewin states that this discussion about new alternative behaviors should take place in a group environment in order to facilitate "open and supportive communication amongst those involved in negotiating the change" ([1]: p. 116), which fits with knowledge about the importance of social norms in influencing our behavior. The notion that habits can best be challenged within a group setting is supported by psychological and sociological research, and through practical experience. For example, Global Action Plan's 'Action at Home', a scheme that promotes environmental behavior change through community group discussion and commitment, has been one of the more successful attempts at promoting sustainable household behavior in the long term [1,48].

3.4. Consumption as an Integral Aspect of Normal Practices

The normal, accepted practices of everyday life that people engage in—cooking, raising children, playing sports, watching TV—all have social and personal meaning, as well as patterns of consumption, associated with them. For example, raising children involves providing healthy food and a good education, offering enjoyable experiences, encouraging them to conform to social norms, *etc.*—being an accepted part of society requires us to take part in these standard practices, such as being a "good parent" [49]. These "practices" usually involve some material consumption e.g., equipment, materials, and infrastructures: people want to consume partly in order to participate in the normal practices of their society.

Practice theory attempts to move beyond the traditional ways of thinking about consumption—either that the social system and structures largely determine the actions of individuals, or that society is the sum of individuals acting independently. The concept of practices as bridging this theoretical divide is found, for example, in Giddens' theory of structuration: "The basic domain of

study of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across space and time” ([50]: p. 2).

Practice theory reminds us that consumption is not only about shopping; consumption might include leisure activities, receiving gifts, public provision, domestic production, *etc.* In this way, practice theory is useful in showing a different dimension of consumption: that it is often about “doing” as well as “having”, and about using products as well as displaying them ([51]: p. 11).

Schor [35] suggests that the material consumption associated with everyday practices could be successfully renegotiated at the collective level. For example, groups of parents setting a price limit on children’s birthday parties, or schools ruling that trainers above a certain price cannot be worn in school; such limits can help to remove the social pressure on children and parents, which would otherwise be extremely difficult for individuals to adopt.

Another advantage of the practice approach in analyzing consumption is that it avoids moralizing on specific behaviors, because it shows consumption as embedded in practices which are “carried out for all the best reasons, and people have a legitimate interest in being competent practitioners” ([51]: p. 13). For consumption patterns which are unsustainable, practice theory recognizes the real challenges that are faced when society needs to change the normal ways of doing things. This approach fits well with research on social learning, which shows that most people do not change their behavior in response to messages invoking fear or guilt; these strategies are not effective motivators and can even increase apathy and feelings of helplessness [1,31].

Shove’s work on comfort, cleanliness, and convenience [52] examines the variety of practices related to bathing, laundering clothes, air conditioning, *etc.*, and shows how social norms, technologies, and infrastructures combine to set new standards for normal behavior. Shove suggests that rather than only focusing on technical efficiency to avoid the continual escalation of material standards, it is these ‘normal standards’ themselves which should be challenged.

4. Different Groups of People and Their Consumption

Organizational psychology suggests that in social groups, individuals adopt social roles that are prescribed, assigned, or expected of them. Therefore, more and more studies focus on consumption as a collective and shared process, and consider the contexts and conditions within which consumption takes place, e.g., [53]. One of the possibilities of studying collective processes is by investigating different groups that people form as members of society.

4.1. Social Classes and Consumption

Social class refers to the hierarchical distinctions between individuals or groups in society. Typically, class is based on economic positions, including education and occupation, and similar political and cultural interests. People also tend to emphasize their position of power in a society and to signal it to other classes by adopting distinctive lifestyles, including the clothes they wear, the manners and language they use, and the political standing and cultural refinement they demonstrate. Thus, social classes exhibit different lifestyles and consumption patterns that reflect their social standing [54].

Class analysis has been criticized for no longer being a useful concept for understanding contemporary social phenomena in Western countries [55], and consequently for understanding consumption [56,57]. It has been suggested that in the era of mass consumption, lifestyles are becoming more diverse, and therefore the link between social class and consumption should be slowly disappearing as people choose lifestyles that are no longer associated with classical social standings [58,59].

Despite this criticism, empirical studies demonstrate that social class still matters due to income differences associated with class [60], or because people tend to raise their children within the same class and are inclined to recruit employees from within their social class [61,62]. Two fundamental theories of modern class segmentation—Bourdieu's "reproduction theory" and Giddens' "class structuration thesis"—are considered below, as well as the relatively recent "class convergence theory".

By synthesizing Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, Bourdieu offered a theory of social reproduction [63]—a transmission of cultural values and norms from generation to generation. According to Bourdieu, consumption is a tool for class reproduction. In his seminal work, "Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste," Bourdieu distinguishes three social classes: the bourgeoisie, petit bourgeoisie, and the working class. He describes how upper classes exclude lower classes in the labor and marriage markets by regarding their own tastes as superior [54]. Society incorporates "symbolic goods, [...as] the ideal weapon in strategies of distinction" ([54]: p. 66). The excluded classes strive to appropriate the resources and opportunities of the excluders [64]. Class fractions are determined by a combination of the varying degrees of social, economic, and cultural capital [65], where capital is understood as "the set of actually usable resources and powers". Each class has its own identity, values and lifestyle, or as Bourdieu puts it "values, tastes, and preferences" [54]. These preferences have an influence on consumption choices, social networks, and attitudes towards health, use of language, access to education, and choice of occupation. Differences in class are then explained by different degrees of "distance from necessity" ([54]: pp. 53–56).

Giddens' work "The Class Structure of Advanced Societies" [50], suggests that three social elements—property, education or professional skills, and manual labor—shape class structure. The upper class owns and controls productive property; the middle class creates a power position in the social ladder through education and professional skills, which they can sell on the market, while the working class can only offer manual labor on the market and receive subsistence salaries. Giddens, however, acknowledges the rigidity of such a structure; in modern societies class structures and boundaries are very fluid, and members of society can exhibit partial access to all the three elements that originally shaped the class structure—property, education or professional skills, and manual labor. In Giddens' theory there is always the social group dimension to domestic consumption, but also a dualism of the micro-level of private (domestic) consumption behavior and the macro-level of institutional developments in consumption.

The main proposition of class convergence theory is that social classes are becoming more like each other, especially as living standards are rising and increasing numbers of people have access to previously luxury goods and services [66]. Some also call this trend class reconfiguration—resulting in the emergence of new classes and new social movements [67]. One consequence of this change is the shift from class-based politics to identity politics or to a new politics of material abundance, and from

ideology to lifestyles. Proponents of this position argue that consumption patterns are becoming increasingly important for shaping identity [1].

Studies consistently demonstrate that members of the upper classes have higher income levels than those in lower classes. This inequality is also reflected in the occupation and working conditions, depending on class. Studies also show that despite the growing individualization trend in society, the occupational class effect remains a very powerful variable with respect to consumption patterns and chosen lifestyles [68]. Class structure is rather different in European countries and it can be used for explaining differences in consumption patterns. For example, Sweden has one of the most egalitarian distributions of disposable income in Europe ([69]: pp. 39–58), and workers are becoming part of the large middle class due to increasing wealth. This development has implications for consumption patterns in that due to a low degree of income difference, the upper classes create distinction by investing more into cultural consumption ([70]: p. 299).

The evidence presented suggests that consumption is a collective process that takes place in social groups and contexts; this means that behavioral change towards sustainable consumption must also occur at the collective level [1]. This has implications for both governmental policies, civil society initiatives, and for business strategies that could also consider the group dynamics and contextual factors that influence individuals.

The discussion about the importance of class is also relevant for the discourse on sustainable consumption. According to Beck [58], nowadays, social class is defined not only by a person's occupation, wealth, income or status, but increasingly by the lifestyle one chooses. Some authors even posit the birth of a “new-middle-class” with its new “leisure lifestyle” and consumption-based ideology [71,72]. These lifestyles become normalized and embedded not only in developed economies, but are also desirable for and copied by emerging consumer economies e.g., China, India, Brazil, and Russia [73].

The lifestyle segmentation tools often used for marketing purposes are now being used as a basis for segmenting people with regard to their attitude or behavior towards sustainable consumption and sustainable lifestyles [74]. For example, values-modes analysis is an approach to mapping the values behind behavior, and has been developed for audience segmentation within an environmental context, with a focus on behavioral change. The three main segments correspond to three values-modes: Settlers, who are predominantly security driven; Prospectors, who are outer-directed or esteem driven; and Pioneers, who are inner directed [75]. This approach is used in planning behavior change campaigns directed towards different audience types. For example, Pioneers might respond to a call to “think globally”, while Settlers would respond negatively to such a message [75]. However, this approach seems only to have relevance for changing one behavior at a time, rather than building social norms or values that promote environmental behaviors: “The values-modes approach places particular emphasis on engaging Prospectors (outer-directed or esteem-driven individuals). This group is resistant to the traditional exhortations for behavioral change based upon environmental concern and moral imperative—approaches that may work better for Pioneers. Moreover, it is this group that includes some of the most voracious consumers” ([75]: pp. 21–22).

This kind of research shows the potential for developing specific strategies and policy tools that do not necessarily target the entire population, but rather specific segments of it. The idea of customizing policy tools and packages for different segments of the population is gaining momentum in

environmental and sustainability policy. For example, it has been demonstrated that when consumers are grouped according to the sustainability of their food choices, these groupings (segmentations) are different from groupings of people with regard to their housing choices—and people that would respond to certain measures to change their diets (food domain) would require a totally different policy mix to change their mobility patterns [76,77]. In general, it has been argued that lifestyles can be conceived of as a useful conceptual unit, through which social change can be considered and sustainable patterns of consumption motivated [78].

4.2. Consumer Demographics and Consumption Patterns

Consumption patterns and levels vary with demographic differences, such as geographical areas, age, gender and income, as well as among people with different levels of education.

Geographical differences are seen both between and within continents. In Europe, as in the US and Asia, consumer spending is dominated by a middle class. The Eastern European middle classes wish, to varying extents, to emulate lifestyles in the US and Western Europe, including in such aspects as the home, technology, wellness, and leisure. Thus, much of middle class spending is aspirational and aimed at emulation, rather than spending on basic needs [79].

Income and level of education also affect consumption patterns. An interesting perspective on how income is spent by different classes and sub-classes in Sweden is provided in the study of Bihagen [80]. It demonstrates that the higher classes spend significantly more on household services (housekeeper *etc.*), association fees (e.g., membership fees), travels of all kinds, “high brow culture” (concerts, theatre *etc.*), cinema, sport activities, photo services, eating out, and “looks” (cosmetics and hairdressing). Skilled workers spend slightly more than non-skilled workers on “high brow culture”. These two classes have much higher expenditures on tobacco and lotteries than other classes. The higher classes not only travel more often, but also pay more when they travel. This study concluded that in addition to class differences, there are types of consumption that are also affected by the composition of the household, gender, region, age, and income.

Income is one of the most important factors influencing sustainable consumption, with wealthier households more likely to purchase sustainable products [81]. However, they are perhaps the least likely group to drastically change their lifestyles through reduced consumption. Therefore, strategies for greening the markets might be more efficient when targeted towards upper classes or wealthier households. Low-income households could be reached by life cycle cost information. It is also important to consider the distributional impacts of measures in order to prevent unfair distribution of costs among different classes and income levels, and so subsidies or tax rebates for lower-income households might be considered.

People of different ages have different lifestyle patterns as they pass through different stages of life [70]. For example, families with children consume specific items, such as diapers and baby food, while various holidays are developed for families, singles in the 18–30 age bracket, and for people in their 50s.

Children are playing an increasingly important role in consumption and decision-making regarding purchasing, despite their lack of direct income. Children are brand conscious and sometimes possess knowledge about purchasing and consumption that their parents lack [82]. A number of factors have been found that affect the level of materialism in children and adolescents: family environment,

parenting style, peer interaction, and media exposure. One study suggests that all these factors affect materialism through children's self-esteem [83].

Retired households spend a small proportion of income on necessities and more on gifts when compared with the non-retired family [84]. The aging population of Europe has consequences for consumption, such as increasing demand for services, retirement homes, health-care, and different types of entertainment targeted at older people. On average, Europeans who are over 60 are less wealthy than younger people and have lower household expenditures [16]. However, many who were young adults during the boom years of the 1950s and 1960s, and who also were able to establish generous final salary pensions, now have the opportunity to travel, and to afford different types of entertainment.

Different age groups also show differing sensitivity to sustainable consumption practices. For example, young people between the ages of 18 and 25 tend to be conscious about the need to reduce environmental impact, even though they may not always link it to their purchasing behavior [81].

Gender differences also greatly affect consumption patterns and levels. In OECD countries, women typically make over 80% of consumption related decisions, while men may spend more than 80% of household funds. This reflects the inequality between men and women in families in terms of access to power and resources. A study by the World Bank has demonstrated that gender differences are greatest among the poorest families [85]. Women typically buy cheaper everyday and recurring consumer essentials for the whole family, such as food, clothing, and household articles, while men tend to buy expensive capital goods and luxuries, such as homes, cars, IT and HiFi equipment.

Women are more likely to be sustainable consumers, as they tend to buy ecological or organic food, have a higher tendency to recycle, and place more value on efficient energy use, waste separation, and recycling than men do [81]. Women are more likely to take social issues, such as child labor, into consideration, and they tend to have higher awareness about fair trade labels [86]. A UK study found that women are more concerned about climate change than men and they advocate changes in lifestyles and consumption behavior, while men prefer technological solutions for mitigating climate changes [87]. This also has implications for the likely effectiveness of potential strategies for the instigation of sustainable consumption.

5. Alternative Lifestyles and Consumption Patterns

The consumption drivers and groups of consumers described in this study generally describe mainstream society—what 'most people' do; however there is a significant population within Europe today who are making attempts to live more sustainably. The voluntary simplicity movement as a whole has gained momentum in the United States and Western Europe, in addition to growth in associated lifestyles, such as voluntary downshifting [88]. Other examples of current movements linked with simplicity or environmental consciousness are Transition Towns, CRAGS, Giving What We Can, the LOHAS movement, Ashton Hayes (the UK's first self-organizing zero-carbon village), Samsø (CO₂ neutral Danish island), as well as individuals who choose to live sustainably.

The study of these individuals, groups, and initiatives is currently limited, but of great relevance for policy makers in understanding the process people go through in moving toward sustainable consumption [88]. People may adopt simpler and less materially-intensive lifestyles for many reasons,

including dissatisfaction with high-stress lifestyles, and wanting to spend time on activities outside of work, as well as environmental concern [89]; however, many simplifiers share the common desire to have greater control over their own time and money.

Huneke also discusses the possibility that voluntary simplifiers could ‘blaze a trail’ as early adaptors of more sustainable lifestyles that others would aspire to: “No single social movement is going to lower overall consumption to sustainable levels. However, the respondents to this survey appear to have found their simplified lives not only less resource intensive, but also more intrinsically satisfying, suggesting that this lifestyle may become increasingly widespread” ([89]: p. 549).

This picture fits with anecdotal evidence about workers who have been given short-time contracts during the economic crisis (typically working 75–80% of normal hours in return for reduced pay): some workers would now prefer to keep their short-time hours and reduced pay rather than return to their normal working conditions—up to 30% of staff in some companies [90].

This links to research on well-being, which shows that a focus on strengthening relationships, connecting with the wider community, pursuing sports and other interests, and having a positive attitude to life, has more potential to improve people’s life satisfaction and happiness than improvements in situation, such as higher income or a bigger house [91].

However, the (limited) research in this emerging field of alternative consumption (whether the motivation is environmental or otherwise) shows that many people find it extremely difficult to maintain a chosen more sustainable lifestyle, as it is in direct opposition to the structures and norms of mainstream society [30,92]. As a result, sustainable lifestyles are currently not a realistic or attractive option for most people, who do not want to be an ‘outsider’ or pioneer [30].

It is therefore important for policy makers to ensure that sustainable lifestyles are enabled and encouraged through improvements in sustainable infrastructure and technologies, regulation of marketing and product availability, and through promotion of alternative means for people to display their status and to signal their worth to society, (for example through voluntary work)—as part of guiding social norms and mainstreaming sustainable consumption.

6. Conclusions

In addition to describing some of the complexity of consumption behavior, this study also identified several myths that characterize the mainstream discourse on sustainable consumption, especially in policy circles.

Myth 1: “People are primarily rational consumers and maximizers of personal utility”.

Findings from social science studies on consumers and consumption behavior demonstrate that consumers are not always rational; they sometimes even act against their own best interests (for example, by knowingly eating unhealthy food) and sometimes make decisions prioritizing common or societal good over individual interests. Consumption behavior is influenced by a wide range of individual, social and institutional factors.

Myth 2: “Information-based instruments are the main policy tool to address unsustainable patterns and levels of consumption”.

Studies have demonstrated that when information-based instruments are used alone, they are rarely effective: knowledge does not directly lead to changes in attitudes, and attitudes in their turn are not

always translated into behavior. The reality is far more complex [1,31]. In addition, the fact that people's actions sometimes contradict their stated attitudes and values is important to keep in mind when thinking about policy interventions.

Myth 3: "Changing behavior in one domain of everyday life, e.g., waste sorting, will spill over to other domains of everyday life, e.g., driving or flying".

Psychological and sociological studies demonstrate that this is not always the case [93]. This suggests that policy instruments should address general values related to the environment and wider society, in addition to aiming for individual behavior changes in specific domains.

Myth 4: "Consumers are the main actors in the shift towards sustainable consumption".

A focus at the individual level is misguided. Consumption and the factors that shape it cannot be understood without considering the cultural context within which consumption processes take place. It is the social norms, traditions, and values underlying mainstream society that have the most significant impact on consumption behavior, and so these should be the level at which policy interventions are targeted in the first instance. As suggested by Meadows, fundamental changes in society are needed and the most effective leverage point is to transcend paradigms (e.g., economic growth) and to change both the mindset and value basis of a society [94].

Dispelling these myths could help many policy makers to begin developing more effective change strategies, rather than falling back on 'raising awareness' and other popular, but ineffective strategies.

In conclusion, perhaps we should look at the issue of sustainable consumption from a different starting point: when we consider that a sustainable lifestyle is currently likely to be more expensive and less convenient, and will entail living in opposition to mainstream norms and practices (which exposes us to social rejection)—it is salutary that people make as many sustainable choices as they do.

This raises a number of interesting issues for further research: current society is weighted against living sustainably—it can sometimes be difficult, expensive, and unpopular—so is it even fair or realistic to ask people to live a sustainable lifestyle within the current societal and institutional constraints? How do we currently treat people who try to live sustainably—do we support and encourage them as pioneers, or ridicule them (a sanction for flouting social norms)? How many people would be more willing to try sustainable behaviors if it were made easier and more socially acceptable?

We need a shift at the societal level from our current "normal way of life" to a sustainable "normal way of life"—and it is governments who can lead this best, rather than relying on the hope that if we give individuals enough information, they will choose to go against the mainstream and start living sustainably. We need to focus on changing the concept of a normal lifestyle for most people, rather than on changing the individual behaviors of individual people.

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