

Symbolic Drivers of Unsustainable Mass Consumption: Embracing and Resisting Consumerism

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Abstract

This theoretical article contributes with a theoretical model to explore and understand the role of cultural and symbolic drivers behind (un)sustainable patterns and volumes of consumption. More specifically, it addresses the symbolic drivers of consumption in relation to both embracing and resisting consumerism. Classic concepts and themes in the sociology of consumption such as identity, conspicuous consumption, consumerism, status, distinction, rituals, and social comparison are addressed. Through such concepts, the article addresses the contemporary problem of unsustainable mass consumption; that is, the late modern “consumerist” tendency to consume more/faster/larger/fancier, which results in constantly higher climate/ecological footprints. The article also addresses counterefforts to those tendencies; that is, efforts among people/movements/communities to resist consumerism and adopt lifestyles characterized by sufficiency. How are symbolic drivers involved in these opposite tendencies? What are the implications? To address such questions, the paper reviews recent scholarly discussions around how symbolic drivers connect with consumerism and consumerist critique.

Keywords: Anti-consumption; Culture; Eco-habitus; Identity; Social comparison.

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1 Introduction

Consumerism denotes a culture where possessions and consumption permeate daily life (Bauman, 2007). It encompasses the drive to acquire more, newer, better, fancier, and bigger goods, both mundane and extravagant, as a default tool for fulfilling desires and solving problems (Sahakian, 2022; Boström, 2023). The culture of consumerism is reinforced by capitalism, media, education, and growth politics, and is promoted through advertising, entertainment, influencers, fashion, and many other social dynamics. In this culture, people seek aspirations for joy, social belonging, and meaning in purchasing and possessing symbolically laden goods (Marcuse, 1964; Campbell, 1987; Belk et al., 2003; Jenkins et al., 2011; Jackson, 2017). Children are socialized into these habits, internalizing the socio-cultural meanings of commodities and personalizing them (Richins, 1994; Schor, 2004; Dittmar, 2008).

At the same time, the public is becoming increasingly aware of planetary environmental destruction and can link this unsustainable development to forces of mass production and consumption, although facing difficulties in altering practices and lifestyles. This raises a fundamental question: why do consumerism and, consequently, overconsumption persist? What are the drivers involved in reproducing and possibly altering these deep-rooted patterns?

Over recent decades, the sociology of consumption has primarily emphasized mundane and inconspicuous drivers of escalating consumption volumes, particularly through scholarship informed by social practice theory (Shove et al., 2012; Warde, 2005 & 2014; Rinkinen et al., 2021). This body of work has convincingly demonstrated how high levels of consumption are embedded and locked into the socio-material infrastructures and associated practices of everyday life. In many aspects of daily routines, individuals' capacity for reflection matters little: where people live, how they commute to work, and the infrastructures surrounding them often dictate consumption patterns. Critical consumption studies have further illuminated the asymmetric power relations between the forces of production and consumption (Maniates, 2001; Gould et al., 2004; Stuart et al., 2020; Stoner, 2021; Hansen, 2023; Wethal et al., 2024), and with this critiqued the dominant individualization of responsibility contained in (neoliberal) eco-discourses.

While these scholarly fields have provided important insights into the dynamics of overconsumption, they have unnecessarily neglected the cultural, symbolic, and deliberate dimensions of lifestyle change and consumerism (Boström & Callmer, 2025). Recently, scholars in the field of social practice theory have addressed this neglect, contributing conceptual discussions on ways to re-incorporate cultural aspects into theoretical schemes (Welch et al., 2020; Askholm et al., 2022; Sigaard, 2026). This paper seeks to continue addressing this gap by foregrounding the cultural and symbolic aspects of consumerism, both as forces that perpetuate overconsumption and as resources mobilized in bottom-up efforts to counteract it. However, rather than trying to further develop social practice theory to become more attentive to symbolic and cultural perspectives — a welcome development indeed — the ambition here is to turn directly into classic cultural perspectives in sociology and social psychology. Many of these are crucial for understanding the relationship between, for example, contemporary consumerism, identity, and social status in stratified societies. Thus, I argue that it is important to maintain and welcome a plurality of approaches to explore both implicit (mundane) and explicit (symbolic) drivers of unsustainable mass consumption in a context of capitalism, rising inequalities, and mass-consumption culture.

Accordingly, this theoretical article aims to contribute a model to explore and understand the role of cultural and symbolic drivers behind (un)sustainable patterns and volumes of con-

sumption, engaging with classic and contemporary theories and concepts. The article is structured as follows. The next section introduces the theoretical model. The third part examines symbolic drivers of overconsumption and consumerism, whereas the fourth part explores how symbolic drivers may (or may not) contribute to countertrends and alternative lifestyles. The concluding discussion reflects on the implications.

2 Symbolic Drivers of Consumption: A Theoretical Model

Consumption is socially embedded. We acquire goods not merely for the use value, but to forge, affirm, and sustain social relationships as well as to make distinctions. Consumption, therefore, carries symbolic meaning, expressing identity, status, belonging, creativity, and values. It is inherently social and communicative, shaped by cultural norms and interpersonal dynamics (Belk et al., 2003; Wilk, 2002). We can think of consumption as consumerism when consumption permeates social life (Bauman, 2007). Consumerism can be seen as an umbrella concept that encompasses the various processes involved in reproducing patterns of unsustainable mass consumption. It applies “when consumption of commoditized goods and services is the default tool for solving all sorts of problems and for the aspiration to satisfy needs, wants and desires” (Boström, 2023, p. xvii). It signifies a contemporary societal and cultural condition in which people and communities have developed a *propensity to buy* more, better, newer, and bigger (see Campbell, 1987). However, this broad concept of consumerism must be divided into parts and examined across different layers of society and social life, including drivers related to both agency and structural/cultural phenomena (Boström, 2023). In the context of unsustainable mass consumption (increasingly higher socio-ecological impact and climate footprints), dealing with consumerism in this sense inevitably brings in moral and normative considerations, while the sociological analysis of consumption always must be attuned to the ambivalence and multifaceted nature of the issue (Rief, 2008).

In this article, based on these general ideas around consumerism, I develop a theoretical model that accentuates the more explicit symbolic aspects of consumption. This model can be applied to explore and understand the embracing as well as the resistance/rejection of consumerism. The model does not cover all individual and social forces behind unsustainable mass consumption, such as the more implicit, inconspicuous aspects of consumption, including how unsustainable consumption is woven into socio-material infrastructures and technologies. The model proposed here is based on arguments from Boström (2023) and includes, firstly, a macrosocial context including primarily (not exclusively) three interacting factors behind symbolic drivers: the economic system, stratified society, as well as cultural norms and normalization (of mass consumption).

The economic system in modern societies is dominated by consumer capitalism, which, through its expansive logic, has an inherent tendency towards mass production/consumption in which symbolic drivers are channeled through, for example, the fashion industry, advertising, marketing, and social media influence. Relatedly, Dubuisson-Quellier (2022) shows how business strategies of availability, novelty, and variety (product differentiation) spur mass consumption. The economic system could be different: there are various alternative not-for-profit ways of organizing production, distribution, and consumption with a stronger preference for sufficiency, which, in contrast, provide symbolic drivers for alternative consumption, including sharing, frugality, and reduced consumption. A stratified society with distinctions based on social class, income, gender, ethnicity, etc., is another general background context that fuels symbolic drivers through mechanisms such as status competition and relative poverty (as

explained later). A third general background factor — closely linked with the two previous — includes cultural norms and normalization (Callmer & Boström, 2025). Cultural norms and ideas of normal conduct provide both explicit and more implicit ideas linked to consumerism. Normalization refers to phenomena that appear as common and taken-for-granted in many different social contexts. It can be felt as strongly emotionally distressing and shameful to fail to live up to common cultural norms and ideas about normality in many areas of consumption, thus fearing to be labeled as deviant, poor, etc. (Cherrier et al., 2012; Boström, 2021; Sahakian, 2022). For instance, certain consumer conduct and ideas around sovereign and affluent consumption are normalized to suit the objectives of mass production (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2022). These three contextual factors are not further theorized in this article, while shaping and being present in the coming analysis.

Secondly, I assume that there are two central human and social motivations/drivers among people in any social context that connect to symbolic meanings: Status (standing out) and Belonging (Fitting in). These are charged with many personal and emotional energies, and the two are often tightly connected; two sides of the same coin. For example, both components are integrated into the concept of identity. These concepts will be further introduced and scrutinized in the next section.

Thirdly, I highlight two central social mechanisms that appear in micro- and meso-social contexts: comparisons and interaction rituals. Social comparison presupposes some degree of social visibility, whereas interaction rituals generally assume co-presence. More theoretical arguments around these two mechanisms are developed in the next section (and are also found in Boström, 2023).

3 Symbolic Drivers and Consumerism

3.1 Fitting In and Standing Out

The heading signifies two key human drivers and social motivations. Any person wishes to be seen as someone special, a unique person and personality, while at the same time appearing normal, as everyone else, and particularly sharing attributes with certain “reference groups”. Two closely related subthemes will be explored in this section. The first is the paradox of fitting in and appearing unique. The second is the drive to stand out (status and distinction).

In each of these, social comparison is a key mechanism. Leon Festinger’s social comparison theory (1954) explains how individuals evaluate themselves by comparing opinions and abilities with those of others, gravitating toward groups that reflect their own traits. To belong, people often consume what their social group deems appropriate and desirable. Social visibility, that is, the potential for people to be noticed by others in an action with social meaning (O’Keefe et al. 2026), is a micro-contextual circumstance that accentuates this tendency to compare.

People use social comparison to evaluate their views, values, status, appearance, and achievement. Social comparison and visibility fuel consumerism. Fear of social exclusion drives lots of social activity. Comparisons are involved in the pursuit of both social belonging and distinction. In a stratified society marked by class, gender, age, ethnicity, occupation, and other divisions, consumption becomes a means of navigating social hierarchies and expressing identity. This dynamic not only reinforces group norms and status markers but also contributes to ecologically harmful mass consumption. The next sections will look more closely at the dynamics, first through the concept of identity.

3.1.1 Identity-Formation: Fitting In and Appearing Unique

Studies of identity-formation can be useful for understanding symbolic consumerist drivers (Dittmar, 2008; Sigaard, 2026). A useful concept is that of the “extended self”. Russell Belk (1988) argues that possessions form part of our “extended self”. What we own (house, car, clothes, etc.) becomes a mirror of who we are. In late modern consumer culture, identity is shaped early on through a person’s socialization, in which a broad range of material goods are involved. They help people express and affirm their sense of being. People are “born to buy” (Schor, 2004). Building on Belk’s theory, Helga Dittmar (2008) argues that people are identity seekers who use consumption to construct their self-image. While possessions can enhance identity, consumer culture and advertising often promote unattainable ideals, leading to identity deficits. These arise when personal self-image clashes with internalized ideals like the “body perfect” or the “material good life”. Ideals are shaped by early exposure to gendered toys and media.

Identity formation relies on self-reflexivity: the ability to see oneself through others’ eyes within shared meaning systems. Children learn the symbolic value of goods by observing and comparing with role models and by engaging in social interactions. They internalize materialist values that link possessions to status, social acceptance, and belonging (Schor, 2004; Fitzmaurice & Comegys, 2006).

However, in the context of mass consumption, material possessions are unreliable tools for well-being and for repairing fractured identities (Dittmar, 2008). Social comparisons often involve measuring oneself against idealized peers, which in turn leads to feelings of inadequacy. People may consume in hopes of bridging the gap between actual and ideal selves, but this rarely succeeds. The pursuit of identity through goods becomes a cycle of dissatisfaction, reinforced by consumerist culture while also reproducing it (Boström, 2023).

Social media further reinforces this negative cycle. Younger generations spend hours daily on social media, now central platforms for marketing through influencers, bloggers, and celebrities (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Loukianov et al., 2019; Hruska & Maresova, 2020). Social media expands “reference groups” (see Schor, 1998); that is, those we admire and imitate, and which are offering endless opportunities for comparison. As users compare themselves with distant others, they may feel inadequate, lacking an appealing appearance or social success (de Vries & Kühne, 2015). Such negative self-evaluation drives consumerism, as individuals attempt to repair or enhance their identity through consumption. In this way, social media becomes not just a space for interaction but a powerful engine that shapes identity and self-worth and fuels the desire to (over)consume. Studies show that those who feel socially excluded are more likely to buy products symbolizing group membership (Mead et al., 2011). This pressure is especially strong among children and teens, who may face the risk of bullying for lacking the “right” brands (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004; Banerjee & Dittmar, 2008).

Dittmar (2008) highlights the irony: the pursuit of uniqueness through mass-produced goods. Each individual must balance conformity with individuality and use material goods to navigate the complex terrain of belonging and self-expression. Fashion is the typical case. You need an extensive wardrobe to satisfy the constant pressure to fit in with the right social group while still appearing uniquely styled each day — fashion depends on appearance anxiety (Miller, 2010). Brands too fit this logic. Brands hold paradoxical power by merging mass consumption with individuality. They represent both similarity and distinction. Central to consumer culture and capitalism, brands give products identity, perceived quality, and emotional appeal. Through branding, corporations shape aspirations, pleasures, and social meaning, fos-

tering brand communities and loyalty (Holt, 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Laroche et al., 2013). Even from a very young age, children recognize and prefer branded goods, associating them with status and trendiness (Dittmar, 2008; Schor, 2004). Brands also serve as symbolic markers in a stratified society, appealing to different segments: luxury for elites, imitations for broader markets (Kim et al., 2018). Even anti-brand sentiments are commodified: manufacturers design both conspicuous and discreet branding to suit diverse consumer identities (Han et al., 2010).

3.1.2 Standing Out: Status and Distinction

Standing out is the other side of the coin of identity formation. Sociological scholarship discusses this in terms of status and distinction. Group belonging often involves distancing from dissociative reference groups; that is, those we don't wish to be associated with (White & Dahl, 2006). Sociology has long shown how status and differentiation drive consumerism, with consumption serving as a tool for positioning identity within the social hierarchy. Social status, whether ascribed or achieved, reflects one's rank and perceived respect. Dubois and Ordabayeva (2015) outline four criteria for status signaling: it must be costly or difficult to attain, lack practical value, be visible to the intended group, and be collectively recognized. When widely acknowledged, such signals become cultural capital (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Consumers use both explicit and subtle cues, communicating to others where and how they travel, their fashion style, food preferences, etc., to express identity, values, and class belonging. Choices like driving a sports car or wearing casual clothes can signal freedom or individualism (Firat et al., 2013). Ultimately, consumption is a social language through which people shape and communicate their status.

Classic sociology has long emphasized the role of consumption in shaping identity and social status. Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1994 [1899]) introduced the concepts of pecuniary emulation and conspicuous consumption, showing how individuals signal esteem and wealth through extravagant purchases. This competitive pursuit of status drives the continuous accumulation of possessions, fueled by the fear of falling behind in social hierarchies. These consumption norms among the higher classes trickle down to lower social strata, so the desire for more remains universal. Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984) deepens this type of analysis by introducing concepts like taste, habitus, and cultural and symbolic capital. He argues that consumption and the expression of status are not just about what we buy but also about how we use goods. Social classes cultivate aesthetic preferences and pass them on through socialization, making taste a learned medium for social positioning. Cultural capital is embodied in attitudes, styles, and behaviors and works as a subtle yet powerful marker of class and distinction.

Cultural capital signals vary across social classes: "prestigious signals" grant access to elite circles, while "respectable signals" help exclude lower-class individuals from middle-class groups (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). These signals are shaped by context. Lamont and Lareau (1988) found that Americans emphasize access to high-status goods, while the French value cultural literacy and refined consumption habits. In the American context, Peterson and Kern (1996, p. 900) noted "a historical shift from highbrow snob to omnivore". Similarly, Sullivan (2008) speaks of "cultural omnivorousness", where high-status Americans embrace diverse consumption, favoring inclusivity over exclusivity. This broad engagement nurtures "multi-cultural capital", requiring frequent consumption of varied goods and experiences, including travel destinations. Accordingly, high status increasingly depends on the ability to

talk and brag about a wide range of cultural forms, a trend certainly not limited to the U.S., and with very significant socio-ecological implications.

Based on the above insights and findings from the literature, Boström (2023) identified eight different aspects regarding how status fuels consumerism. First, status drives consumerism through the “extended self”, in which possessions such as clothing, housing, and cars serve as visible markers of identity and social rank. Second, wasteful consumption, buying items with little practical value, signals status by demonstrating excess and unrestricted spending power. Third, increasing social stratification and market differentiation intensify status consumption as individuals strive to stand out amid shifting fashion cycles and competitive trends. Fourth, endless social competition keeps consumers dissatisfied, fueling continuous consumption to avoid falling behind or being judged. Fifth, status consumption is often underestimated because it is unconsciously internalized through socialization into class norms and cultural capital. Sixth, fear of social exclusion motivates individuals to consume conspicuously to gain attention and secure a sense of belonging. Seven, status consumption extends into family life, where love and care are expressed through goods that help children match peer expectations. Eight, perceived inequality and relative deprivation create a structural drive for status consumption, reinforcing consumerism across social groups (discussed next).

3.2 Rising Inequalities Add Fuel to Symbolic Drivers of Consumerism through the Mechanisms of Social Comparison and Relative Poverty

There is a need to deepen the analysis of the critical role of social comparison in driving consumerism by considering (escalating) inequalities in a stratified society. Alongside the above-reviewed classical concepts, “relative poverty”, defined as the gap between cultural aspirations and available means (Merton, 1938), offers additional insight. When people perceive themselves as worse off than others, especially in societies with common goals and values, feelings of injustice and envy emerge.

In recent decades, income gaps have widened in welfare societies, with the rich growing richer while lower-income groups stagnate (Sayer, 2015). This rising inequality has profound social and psychological effects, shaping consumption patterns across all classes. The (super)rich not only contribute to ecological harm through excessive consumption but also influence societal norms (Kenner, 2019; Gössling & Humpe, 2020). Their lifestyles raise reference points, inflame desires, and spread consumerist ideals. Through social media and public visibility, they model extravagant consumption and spur a culture of hyper-consumerism and wastefulness (Urry, 2010; Wiedmann et al., 2020). Wilkinson and Pickett (2010 & 2019) show that rising inequalities in wealthy societies spur a sense of relative poverty, which in turn drives consumerism. They found substantial evidence across OECD countries confirming the idea of relative poverty: what matters for people in rich countries is not their actual income level or living standard, but, significantly more, how they compare with others in the same society. People observe what others (seem to) have and consider themselves worse off than the comparison groups. Rising inequality accordingly heightens status anxiety and reinforces materialistic goals (the pursuit of affluence and possessions; see Fitzmaurice & Comegys, 2006) as a strategy for compensation, self-promotion, and identity construction. Several studies across the world and in different social contexts confirm this connection between relative poverty and consumerism focused on symbolically laden possessions (Schor, 1998; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004; Christen & Morgan, 2005; Keller, 2005; Guillen-Royo, 2008; Isaksen &

Roper, 2008; Zhou & Wong, 2008; Chipp et al., 2011; Dubois et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2017, Jorgenson et al., 2019; see Boström, 2023, for an extended discussion).

3.3 Consumerism and Everyday Rituals

The above discussion about fitting in and standing out — within a stratified society — may not capture all the important dynamics of social belonging and symbolic drivers. Randall Collins' concept of Interaction Ritual Chains (2004), developed from the classic works of Emile Durkheim and Erving Goffman, among others, is useful to understand additional symbolic drivers contained in consumerism. This concept explains how shared rituals, marked by membership, mutual focus, and collective mood, generate emotional energy and social solidarity within a social group and community. These rituals, whether grand or mundane, formal or informal, are repeated because they energize participants and reinforce group identity, morality, and sense of belonging. This theory places greater emphasis on social interaction and co-presence than on social comparison and overt behavior.

In consumer societies, rituals often center around consumption (Miller, 1998; Boström, 2023). Activities like shopping, family dinners, vacations, or amusement park visits become emotionally charged events. Consumer goods — brands, cars, certain ways of dressing — emerge as “sacred objects”, symbolizing group affiliation, status, shared norms and values. A logo can signal membership in a brand community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001); a certain car may represent masculinity; and travel by aircraft may be linked to ideas of freedom and multicultural values. Even more mundane everyday acts like grocery shopping carry symbolic weight and are involved in establishing and reinforcing social bonds (Miller, 1998; Sigaard, 2026). While they help individuals express identity, they also help people connect with each other on a deeper level. Adolescent girls who trade clothes become “soulmates” (Belk, 1988), while mundane goods still play a role in sustaining rituals and shared meaning (Miller, 1998).

Through such everyday rituals, consumerism is deeply woven into family life, friendships, and workplace settings. It fosters emotional energy, social cohesion, and moral standards, creating feedback loops that reinforce consumption habits.

4 The Role of Symbolic Drivers in Resisting Consumerism

This section addresses counterefforts to consumerist tendencies and the role of symbolic drivers in these efforts. This topic is broad and covers many aspects of consumption, both conspicuous and inconspicuous. I have addressed this elsewhere with my co-authors, discussing the various challenges and opportunities it presents (Boström, 2021 & 2022; Callmer & Boström, 2024 & 2025; Karimzadeh & Boström, 2023). Here, I confine the discussion to the symbolic aspects around “green” consumption, anti-consumption, and reduced consumption.

4.1 Status and Identity in a Stratified Society. The Symbolic Meaning of Purchasing the Right Things

The first aspect to explore is the ways in which status consumption extends into the realm of green consumption. Again, the mechanisms of fitting in and standing out are key to understanding the social dynamics. Green consumption is understood here as intentional efforts by people to integrate ethical and environmental concerns in the act of consumption, across various stages such as buying, using, and discarding objects. Such “green consumption” may not

necessarily be very sustainable or have low socio-ecological or climate impact; what matters for the analysis is the intention. Also, green motives behind consumption can be fused with other personal, economic, and social motives, such as status and distinction, which will be discussed here.

A growing awareness of environmental issues contributes to the emergence of environmental identities, values, and practices as a form of cultural capital among middle-class groups (Isenhour, 2012; Carfagna et al., 2014; Geerts et al., 2023). During the recent decades, scholars have highlighted how “green” or “eco-friendly” choices, particularly conspicuous (visible) such as installing solar panels, driving electric cars, or wearing organic cotton can enhance (or protect) social status (Griskevicius et al., 2010; Elliot, 2013; Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015; Uren et al., 2021; Geerts et al., 2023). Such consumption may serve as a visible marker of environmental awareness and social distinction — that is, an expression of “eco-habitus” (Carfagna et al., 2014; Huddart & Givens, 2019; O’Keefe et al., 2026). It may also reflect the emergence of new social norms within certain groups (Whitmarsh et al., 2017; O’Keefe et al., 2026). Noppers et al. (2014) found that the adoption of highly conspicuous products, such as electric vehicles, is driven not only by environmental and instrumental motives but also by symbolic ones. Moreover, symbolic motives can influence the adoption of less conspicuous innovations, including local renewable energy systems. This may be because such innovations contribute to a positive self-image and reinforce a green “extended self”. In this study, they also observed that the significance of symbolic motives needs to be detected through indirect methods; that is, not asking directly if people would choose a product due to status-enhancing qualities. People would not fully acknowledge how symbolic attributes affect choices, “as it may not be socially desirable to admit to having purchased a product to gain status or to see oneself in a more positive way” (Noppers et al., 2014, p. 53).

From a sustainability perspective (reducing negative socio-ecological and climate impact), the problem is that green consumption may still be heavily tied to consumerism — and its linkage to social status — and thus implies a narrow vision for how environmentally mindful actions can be integrated in everyday life. In an interview study of political and class differences in Washington state, Huddart and Givens (2019) found that “green consumption is the pre-eminent ideal for household engagement in environmental protection” (p. 654). People with strong eco-habitus, who had high cultural capital and relatively high economic capital, could relatively easily adapt to this moral standard around green consumption, whereas people with less cultural and economic capital expressed a sense of “eco-powerlessness”. These latter groups didn’t necessarily lack environmental concern — and they often had low carbon footprints — but felt overwhelmed by ecological problems and the existing situation, and/or frustrated by their inability to measure up to the moral standards of ecological citizenship.

In another study, Uren et al. (2021) found, in an Australian sample, that costly, publicly visible, and effortful environmental actions were perceived as conferring greater status. Installing solar panels and buying electric cars ranked significantly higher than recycling, walking (instead of driving), and taking part in public campaigns. They also speculate that social media provides another platform in which green actions can be made publicly visible and thus grant social status. However, participants in their study stated that conspicuous actions need to be moderated so that their visible actions are not interpreted as bragging: “perceived social status was diminished if the participant was acting with the intention to gain social status, or if the individual communicated the behavior with a sense of moral superiority” (p. 476). In another study, Geerts et al. (2023) found a positive relation between cultural engagement and environmental practices among the Flemish population. High-brow cultural capital was associated

with pro-environmental shopping decisions, which was one type of environmental practice in their study (next to curtailment, sustainable transport, and sorting waste).

Studies like these show the importance of maintaining a critical eye toward symbolic drivers behind green consumption. Conspicuous green consumption may offer only a superficial remedy to high-impact climate behaviors and may even cement class distinctions and reproduce inequalities (Geerts et al., 2023), which can reproduce sentiments of relative poverty and contribute to continuous polarization in societies (Huddart, 2022). While such “green” choices may appear virtuous, they don’t necessarily reflect a deeper environmental commitment or a lower climate footprint. They are individualistic and don’t represent a critique of consumerism and materialist value-orientations. Green consumption may be appealing to people who have recently become environmentally aware and may not have (the social) willingness or capacity to deviate from mainstream consumerism (Isenhour, 2012). Instead of buying less, they are trying to buy better. In contrast, several studies have found that reduced consumption generally does not offer the same status appeal (Brooks & Wilson, 2015; De Nardo et al., 2017; Whitmarsh et al., 2017; Huddart & Givens, 2019; Huddart & Horne, 2019; Uren et al., 2021). The social rewards of frugality may be perceived as limited, making it harder to gain recognition for restraint.

On a more positive note, sufficiency and frugality norms could evolve within certain communities or cultural contexts and become part of the interaction rituals in the community, potentially reshaping how status is assigned. As identities and distinctions become more fragmented in late-modern stratified society, there are more role models available that could provide inspiration for identity formation, including more radical green distinctions, and serve as sources of social solidarity through novel interaction rituals (community gardening, sharing communities, etc.). In his ethnographic study of environmental activists, Dave Horton (2003) observed how environmentalism could challenge material affluence and conspicuous consumption. “Environmental activists distinguish themselves by the ‘austerity of elective restriction’, the ‘self-imposed constraint’ of ‘asceticism’”. (Horton, 2003, p. 67). They use their green cultural codes and scripts as a means of distinction. Their green identity was bolstered by the careful selection and use of material goods: bikes instead of cars, casual clothing, vegan diets, fair-trade and organic choices, etc. “The car is important as a conspicuous object of non-consumption among environmental activists” (Horton, 2003, p. 72).

4.2 Dealing with (Fewer) Possessions with Care and Attachment

Even if reduced consumption is not considered to convey high status among the public, as seen above, studies have, somewhat paradoxically, documented surprisingly high levels of public support for it (70–88 % in Oregon, US) as well as broad public critique of policies that stimulate economic growth (Bowerman, 2014). Indeed, cultural capital, as Bourdieu understood it, is certainly not merely about the quantity or volume of consumption. Mass consumption does not automatically equate to good taste; in fact, the two may be at odds. Good taste often arises from more refined and extraordinary forms of consumption, not from abundance. It requires long-term experiential learning: knowing how to use, appreciate, and engage with goods in culturally appropriate ways. This cultivated approach to consumption can act as a brake on the acceleration of cheap, fast, and mass-consumption habits. Rather than encouraging more, it promotes selectivity and restraint. In this light, we can see the potential for alternative consumption: slower, more intentional, quality-focused, and possibly anti-consumerist in nature. These possibilities suggest a shift away from volume-driven consumerism toward more mean-

ingful engagement with goods, in which concern for their physicality, quality, authenticity, and tactile and aesthetic experiences matters more. Values such as community/place attachment, manual labor, and craftsmanship are also elevated. Notions such as “true materialism” (Carfagna et al., 2014; Schor & Thompson, 2014), “true hedonism” (Pelikán et al., 2020), and “alternative hedonism” (Soper, 2015) capture these possibilities.

4.3 The Symbolic Meaning of Reduced Consumption

While many areas of consumption provide symbolic meaning for people and sources of identification and distinction, so do practices of reducing and refusing consumption (Horton, 2003; Hogg et al., 2009; Isenhour, 2012; Portwood-Stacer, 2012), particularly as they are tied to new ideas and norms around alternative consumption and consumerist critique, for example those related to “sufficiency” (Callmer, 2019; Sandberg, 2021; Jungell-Michelsson & Heikkurinen, 2022) or other ways of sustainable living and communities (Schor & Thompson, 2014). Such groups of people may consider “materialists” and high-consumerist segments as dissociative reference groups. Hogg et al. (2009) address how an individual’s undesired self also operates around anti-consumption, including the rejection of brands, products, and services; a fact often neglected in consumption studies: “Anti-choice involves emotions, which means that symbolic rather than functional attributes often prevail as reasons for rejecting products and services. Anti-choice, therefore, links to the protection of self-esteem, which connects, in turn, to negative aspects of the self, including the undesired self” (Hogg et al., 2009, p. 150).

A green identity and social belonging can be important for many reasons beyond showing off to others; they can help establish greater consistency between one’s values, knowledge, and actions, as well as across actions (Whitmarsh & O’Neill, 2010; Whitmarsh et al., 2017). Sentiments of pride can be seen among people who are able to live with less than a consumerist standard of living and are satisfied with what they already have (Callmer & Boström, 2024). For example, this has been noticed among “voluntary simplifiers” in the Czech context: using longitudinal data, Pelikán et al. (2020) could study children of voluntary simplifiers in this country. They focused thematically on the reproduction of environmentally mindful lifestyles through generations, using Bourdieusian concepts. The study demonstrates how values (cultural capital and eco-habitus) were transmitted through generations within the family context. A combination of low economic capital and high cultural capital contributed to the embrace of a non-consumerist lifestyle (see also Laidley, 2013). Participants in the study were motivated by virtue ethics, which involves caring for others and crafting a meaningful life in which aesthetic practices take central place (art, music, reading). An important observation connects to the theme of relative poverty: “Parents’ relative poverty did not lead to a consumerist orientation among their children” (Pelikán et al., 2020, p. 432). The Bourdieusian distinction was involved in another sense, more in terms of *not* being mainstream in consumer society. “The children are aware, and sometimes even proud, of their difference” (Pelikán et al., 2020, p. 433). At the same time, it can be important to be able to consume less in a way that doesn’t signal one is living in poverty.

In her ethnographic study, Isenhour (2012) found that middle-class people found subtle ways to conspicuously communicate anti-consumption ideals and high cultural capital: bookshelves, prominent books, art, high-quality goods, travel souvenirs, gardens, carefully compiled second-hand furnishings and décor, and even high-quality, expensive items. Isenhour concludes that even people with very low consumption (and high cultural capital) can communicate a great deal about themselves and their social class belonging through their fewer

possessions. They may also want to spread alternative ideas about what brings quality of life in ways other than through consumption.

We also need to keep a critical eye on conspicuous anti-consumption and reduced consumption. Such green distinctions can block communication and polarize populations, particularly if they appear as class- or gender-markers (see Huddart, 2022) or are involved in “othering the poor” (see Anantharaman, 2017). The concept of eco-habitus is the subject of debate around a paradoxical tension between openness (to other groups of people) and distinction (Schor et al., 2016; Geerts et al., 2023), or between openness and resistance to lifestyle change (Kirby, 2017). Even more, the spatial concentration of an eco-habitus population can drive (racialized) “eco-gentrification” as observed in the case of urban agriculture in Portland (McClintock, 2018).

Nonetheless, new norms and ideas about normality can also provide important reference points for people to identify with, opening paths to sufficient consumption for larger segments of the population. This needs to be combined with collective resistance to rising inequalities, polarizations, and gentrification. A core message to signal to broader audiences is that of how sufficiency can connect with well-being (Jackson, 2005 & 2017; Stackhouse et al., 2023).

5 Discussion and Conclusions

In contemporary consumerist culture, people are taught that (more) consumption brings (more) happiness. From childhood to death. People feel a deeply internalized desire to possess more (or at least not less), better (or at least not worse), more expensive (or at least not cheaper) goods or experiences than others (Boström, 2023). For the individual, consumption serves as a tool to bridge the gap between the actual self and the ideal self (Dittmar, 2008). The problem is that this gap rarely, if ever, closes, and it is exactly this that makes the consumerist aspirations persist. Society and culture provide people with endless opportunities for comparison. Hence, as social beings, people compare themselves with each other to find references for their identities and social belonging, or to know who they are not. Smartphones and social media ensure constant visibility and peer judgment: the gaze of others appears inescapable.

Macro-contextual factors forcefully spur consumerism. The economic organization, including capitalist commoditization, branding, advertising, the growth imperative, and cultural narratives amplified by mass media and social media influencers, capitalizes on the tendencies of social comparison and extension of selves (Boström, 2023). Social stratification and escalating inequalities intensify the dynamic, adding fuel to the fire. The game of social judgment spares no one: rich or poor. One may climb the social hierarchies, but the possibility of falling back down always looms. One ultra-wealthy individual can possess more or larger yachts than another. Even those mindful consumers who resist the competitive status race and embrace the values and benefits of sufficiency cannot easily shield their children from anxieties about social perception and consumerist desires. This is backed up by the cultural norms and compelling normality surrounding mass consumption.

However, the normalization of an alternative narrative may grow (Callmer & Boström, 2025). This may help more people to resist dominant consumerist norms. Ideas and norms around frugality, mindful consumption, and sufficiency are indeed nothing new but have always had their place in subcultures and can be reinvented on a grander scale.

However, much of contemporary green consumption does little to prevent the escalation of ecological and climate footprints and the continued exploitation of the planet’s resources. Worse, green consumption may be considered a kind of “symbolic violence”, accessible only to the privileged classes through their cultural tastes and eco-habitus (Huddart & Givens, 2019).

Reduced consumption is potentially appealing to broader segments of society. Still, while conspicuous anti-consumerism and radical green distinctions can appeal to committed followers, there is a risk that such niches block the potential for broader social change towards a sufficient lifestyle. There is a fine balance to strike between further segmentation, fragmentation and polarization of the population as a result of ecologically mindful action (cf. Huddart, 2022) on the one hand and the mobilization of bottom-up agency for transformative change on the other. What is needed is public critical reflexivity regarding what and how consumption reducers (movements and communities) signal to the rest of the public. Rather than demonstrating distinction, the potential lies in communicating the promise around quality of life through sufficiency: how consuming less benefits both individual and collective welfare. There is a need for dynamic interaction between bottom-up mobilization and top-down intervention (Boström & Callmer, 2025). “Sufficiency cannot arise without the development of a new consumption governance regime able to place sufficiency rather than affluence at the core of the process of social and economic value creation” (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2022, p. 45). At the end of the day, nothing less than more equal and integrated societies, new norms and ideas about normal consumption, and new economic models for production and distribution (less market, less capitalism, more not-for-profit businesses) are needed. There will always be symbolic drivers of consumption, but not necessarily those tied to an unsustainable culture of consumerism.

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