

Market Inequalities and Ecological Distinction: The Moral Ruses of Sustainable Consumption across the North-South Divide

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Abstract

This paper critically explores how social inequalities shape the practice and politics of sustainable consumption. Drawing on a cultural and economic sociology approach and comparing contexts in the Global North (France) and Global South (India), we argue that sustainable consumption is an insufficient motor for eco-social transformation because it relies on and reproduces market inequalities via everyday practices. Dominant middle-class, performative environmentalisms exclude and stigmatize the poor and aspirational working classes, who often lack the surplus time and financial resources to participate in green consumption. As a result, they are unable to attain the moral recognition and social distinction associated with “enlightened” consumption. Rather than attributing this class polarization solely to the cultural dynamics of environmentalism, we argue that it is better understood as a consequence, and driver, of the broader social inequalities that underpin consumer economies — inequalities that are salient to how production is structured in globalized economies and to how markets are organized and communicate cultural values. We contend that this dynamic of inequality within consumerist societies has been largely overlooked in climate policy frameworks and public discourse, to its own detriment.

Keywords: Sustainable consumption; Inequality; Lifestyle environmentalism; Social distinction; Consumer economies; Economic sociology; Stratification.

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1 Introduction

In Bengaluru and Paris, one can observe two contrasting archetypes of cyclists riding side by side. The first appears to be engaged in the process of moving materials or performing services: *Uber* and *Deliveroo* riders, bike couriers, vendors, and men picking up recyclables. The second is largely concerned with moving themselves. To work, for exercise, to perform daily chores, or to visit friends. They too occasionally carry cargo, albeit for different purposes: a baby on a pillion or a Mac in a plasticized backpack. A sociologist might classify a gig worker's bicycling as an occupational activity. Bicycling to work or for fun is often analyzed as a practice of mobility consumption.



Figure 1. Two cyclists ride on the outskirts of Bengaluru, India. Image reproduced with permission

A closer look suggests that although these archetypes, both riding bicycles, bear a surface-level resemblance, they reflect different material experiences and communicate different symbolic meanings. In the Parisian context, platform delivery work is organized such that riders typically acquire and maintain their own bicycles (Anses, 2024). Some *Uber* and *Deliveroo* riders in Paris rely on the city's *Velib* bikes (Dablanc et al., 2022). *Velib* itself includes both mechanical and electric bicycles and is used by a range of riders, from occasional commuters to platform workers seeking to minimize upfront costs. These bikes are often heavy and, while robust, require stamina and physical effort to ride for extended periods of time, such as the 40 to 60 hours per week that a typical platform delivery worker rides (Médecins du Monde, IRD, & Ined 2026). In winter months, “utility cyclists” cover their handlebars with a thick plastic covering to keep their fingers warm. Vendors on bicycles in India, such as the one pictured above, use make-shift trappings to secure their goods. While many commuter cyclists in Paris also use *Velib*, others invest in bikes with enhanced safety and comfort features. Cargo e-bikes suitable for ferrying children cost 3000–4000 euros.

The cycle, as a rolling signifier (Aldred, 2010), communicates something quite pertinent about “sustainable consumption”. It shows us how the symbolic recognition of a practice as “green” is anchored in a complex of meanings, materials, and competencies, collectively produced and legitimated in ways that reflect the preferences and prerogatives of dominant social classes (Anantharaman, 2022). By the metric that the environmental benefit of cycling emerges from the ways in which it substitutes energy-intensive modes of mobility, the impacts offset by each type of rider might be similar. Both archetypes are “saving the planet” to an equal degree.

Yet, it is the “consumer cyclist” who is the more frequently invoked image of the urban ecological classes; the enlightened consumer *choosing* a more climate-friendly mobility option. This is despite the fact that the well-to-do consumer cyclist likely has a higher carbon footprint and engages in more carbon-intensive mobility practices such as flying, by virtue of their consuming power (Kroesen et al., 2026; Rice et al., 2020).

Scholars across several country contexts have discussed how so-called sustainable consumption, understood here as an everyday expression of ecological commitment, may redefine social status by creating symbolic distinctions, marking moral worth, and sustaining status dynamics (Alkon, 2008; Anantharaman, 2017; Baumann et al., 2022; Coulangeon et al., 2023; Guthman, 2003, 2008; Huddart & Givens, 2019). As outlined in the introduction to this Symposium (Sassatelli, 2026), the very definition of what is sustainable, in its many variations and instances, may become a cultural arena for the competitive co-construction of social inequality and sustainability. These accounts challenge the focus on inconspicuous consumption, materiality, and ordinary practices in social practice theory-driven accounts on sustainable consumption (Shove et al., 2012).

Yet, can we understand these dynamics of diversification and stratification of cycling practices solely through a cultural lens? In other words, can status dynamics and class performance fully explain why the commuter cyclist buys an expensive bike that offers better functionality and safety features? Is this a simple class performance to gain or defend social status, or does it reflect how green markets are constructed, how they develop tastes, and stratify? And what insight might we gain by considering the organizational, symbolic, and political dimensions of green consumption in relation to each other?

In this paper, we explore how the cultural co-construction of social inequality and sustainability emerges from and sustains market inequalities: cultural distinction and market structuring are co-constitutive processes. Rather than attributing the class variation and hierarchization solely to the cultural dynamics of environmentalism, we argue that it is better understood as a consequence and driver of the broader social inequalities that underpin consumer economies – inequalities that are salient to how production is structured in globalized economies and to how markets are organized and communicate cultural values. Based on this, we argue that lifestyle politics cannot function as a core engine of broader ecological transformation because of how green consumption emerges from and reproduces inequalities both materially and symbolically. These processes have political consequences that undercut ecological transition possibilities.

In the sections that follow, we first introduce and discuss economic sociology literature on how markets expand, diversify, and stratify as a mode of driving demand to deal with surplus in production and to generate growth. Green consumption is promoted via these market activities that create specialized green products and market these as green options for enlightened consumption. Here, green consumption refers not just to the environmentally friendly properties of the products purchased and consumed; rather, it encompasses a broader lifestyle adopted by consumers who explicitly claim to integrate environmental considerations into their consumption practices and mode of living. Public policies also construct and support market consumption and individualized behavior change, often in a moralizing vein, as the preferred mode of expressing ecological commitments and conforming to green mandates (Bergeron et al., 2018).

We discuss what cultural sociology, and particularly qualitative and ethnographic studies, tell us about how these market goods are appropriated by consumers in their everyday practices, and how “performative environmentalism” results in both symbolic recognition and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1980). These dynamics of distinction, in addition to fueling the engine

of continued market diversification, also have the impact of delegitimizing “accidental environmentalism” (Huddart & Horne, 2020), monopolizing ecological legitimacy for high-status groups.

2 Market Dynamics

Contemporary consumer societies are characterized by the centrality of affluent consumption, a phenomenon that is both a driver of economic growth and a major obstacle to the ecological transition. While economists often reduce consumers to rational actors guided by pre-existing preferences, economic sociological approaches reveal how markets, public policies, and corporate strategies actively shape consumer behaviors and social hierarchies. This section explores how markets have expanded, driving demand and stratifying consumption. The first part explores how market devices and intermediation activities manufacture consumers’ demand; the second part examines how market devices contribute to a stratification of consumption, which includes green consumption.

2.1 The Manufacture of Consumers through Market Devices

Markets are not neutral spaces where supply and demand meet spontaneously. Instead, they are constructed through a dense web of material devices, intermediation activities, and social relations that shape consumer preferences and behaviors. Economic sociology, inspired by the sociology of science and technology, demonstrates that markets are populated by “market devices” – such as brands, packaging, labels, digital platforms, and loyalty programs – which embed specific representations of consumers and prescribe their actions (Callon et al., 2007; Chessel & Dubuisson-Quellier, 2018; Karpik, 2010). Market devices are active engines of market expansion and play a vital role in the normalization of mass consumption (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2022), making it accessible, legitimized, and aspirational for individuals, and thus serving the interests of both economic actors and governments.

Market devices, such as advertising, branding, pricing, or merchandising, are designed by market professionals (such as marketers, advertisers, designers, influencers) to construct consumer representations and equip their choices (Chessel & Dubuisson-Quellier, 2018). For example, market research, focus groups, and digital tracking technologies (e.g., cookies, algorithms) do not merely reveal consumer preferences; they actively shape them by arbitrating between a limited set of pre-defined options (Beauvisage et al., 2024), defining the market qualities, categories, and values. These devices are “judgment devices” (Karpik, 2010) that provide consumers with criteria for evaluating products, such as brands, prices, rankings, or social media reviews. By doing so, they standardize consumer tastes and reduce the complexity of choice, making mass production and consumption possible.

Market devices are the material and symbolic tools that frame consumer-market interactions. They play a key role in developing consumer competencies (Chessel & Dubuisson-Quellier, 2018). For instance, the rise of self-service retail in the mid-20th century required consumers to develop new skills: navigating aisles, comparing products, and managing their own purchases (Cochoy, 2014). Today, merchandising techniques aim at guiding and channeling customers’ choices in supermarkets towards the most profitable products for the retailing company. Symmetrically, digital markets use algorithms and personalized recommendations to channel consumer choices toward products that maximize corporate profits (Alemany & Vayre, 2015). Loyalty programs, sales rankings, and limited-time offers

further discipline consumers to adopt behaviors that align with business models, such as versatility (seeking variety) or loyalty (repeating purchases).

Consumer innovation has been extensively documented as a driver of product development, particularly in niche markets where users possess deep, practical knowledge of their needs. For instance, mountain bikers — acting as user-innovators — developed critical advancements such as improved suspension systems and brake designs by leveraging “local” information derived from their own experiences (Lüthje et al., 2005), becoming sources of novel product concepts. These studies collectively illustrate how user-driven creativity can lead to the emergence of entirely new product categories. However, this innovative work is largely shaped and framed by economic actors themselves, who transform these user-generated ideas into fully fledged market categories, thereby commercializing and standardizing what initially emerged as grassroots experimentation. Market devices can significantly contribute to shaping the conditions under which consumers can express their creativity. For instance, brands may establish consumer communities where individuals can test, evaluate, or suggest product innovations (Schau et al., 2009). Additionally, companies can draw inspiration from consumer creativity to develop new products or drive innovation. Consumer creativity thus becomes a resource that companies strive to stimulate and shape, with the primary aim of creating value that ultimately benefits them (Arnould et al., 2025).

Markets function as arenas of socialization, where consumers acquire dispositions aligned with corporate interests (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2022). Consumer tastes are not innate or spontaneous; they are actively constructed and maintained by market technologies, i.e., by the material devices, commercial strategies, and institutional arrangements designed by corporations to align consumer preferences with their business models. They function as socialization devices shaping consumers’ disposition for mass consumption: building tastes for variety, novelty, and availability, which are central to the functioning of mass markets, as they enable companies to sell ever-increasing volumes of standardized products while creating the illusion of individual choice and customization.

Variety is a key strategy for companies operating in saturated markets. While supermarket shelves and online platforms appear to offer an overwhelming diversity of products, this variety is carefully controlled and standardized. Market technologies such as packaging, branding, recipes, and range strategies create the perception of customization, allowing consumers to believe they are expressing individual preferences. However, this variety is often introduced at the end of the production process (e.g., delayed differentiation in the car or fashion industries), where a limited number of core products are adapted superficially to give the impression of diversity. For example, household appliances (e.g., washing machines or vacuums) from the same manufacturer may differ only in color or minor features, while sharing identical technical components. Fashion brands produce multiple “collections” per year, varying cuts or colors to encourage repeated purchases, but relying on standardized production processes. Variety has become a market value that legitimizes mass production by framing consumption as an expression of individuality, even though the underlying products remain largely standardized.

The value of novelty has historically been a powerful driver of consumption, long before the advent of modern capitalism. As early as the 17th century, “novelty shops” in Europe regularly introduced new products to attract affluent consumers, framing novelty as a marker of social distinction (Trentmann, 2016). Today, novelty remains a cornerstone of mass markets, but its function has evolved: it is no longer just a tool for elite consumption but a strategy to accelerate product turnover and justify continuous purchasing. Market technologies play a crucial role in manufacturing this taste for novelty. With planned obsolescence, products

are designed to become outdated quickly, whether through technical obsolescence (e.g., software updates that render older devices slower) or cultural obsolescence (e.g., fashion trends that devalue last season's styles). Brands in fashion, electronics, and even food industries using seasonal and limited-edition products, seeking to introduce short-lived items to create urgency and encourage repeat purchases.

Finally, availability refers to the spatial and temporal accessibility of products, a value that has been central to the expansion of mass markets. Market technologies such as chain stores, globalized brands, and multichannel selling have trained consumers to expect instant access to goods, regardless of location or time. By standardizing their retail spaces, supermarkets, fast-food chains, and global brands offer identical products worldwide, creating a sense of familiarity and reliability for consumers. Devices like the shopping cart or one-click purchasing extended the time and volume of consumption, normalizing the idea that more is better. The taste for availability is thus a learned disposition, where consumers come to value accessibility over quality or necessity. This is particularly evident in the globalization of fast fashion and electronics, where the ability to purchase cheap, standardized goods is framed as a form of democratic participation in consumer society.

Market devices transform markets into spaces of socialization, where consumers learn to value certain qualities over others. But market devices also contribute to stratifying consumption.

2.2 The Social Stratification of Consumption

The sociology of culture, and particularly the Bourdieusian program, has effectively demonstrated the mechanisms of taste stratification, which manifest both in and through consumption. Individuals internalize the effects of past experiences in the form of a habitus, which guides both their perception and action, leading them to develop dispositions to appreciate certain things over others — tastes as well as distastes (Bourdieu, 1979, 1980). These tastes and distastes enable individuals to express their social affiliations while also distinguishing themselves from other groups. The sociology of culture has highlighted the role of socialization processes — whether familial or professional — in shaping these dispositions. Here, we aim to emphasize the role of markets in these socialization processes, proposing to demonstrate how they contribute to reinforcing processes of cultural distinction by transforming certain consumption practices into fundamental elements of social belonging (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2026).

Market devices, such as luxury or cheap packaging and pricing strategies, play a key role in stratifying markets (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2026). They create and activate different consumer dispositions depending on the economic model they want to perform. Variety can allow companies to segment consumers and target different social groups with slightly adapted products. The taste for novelty is not uniform across social classes. Historically, it was a distinctive practice of the elite, or in some cases the middle class, who used novel goods to signal their cultural capital. For example, sugar and coffee were initially consumed by elites but later promoted as “energizing” or “healthy” by factory managers and public health campaigns and adopted by working-class consumers (Bruegel, 2001). Indeed, as productivity increased, companies extended novelty to mass markets. In this way, novelty becomes a disposition that cuts across social strata, though its forms and meanings vary. For the affluent, it remains a tool of distinction; for the masses, it is a way to keep up with consumption norms and aspirations.

The stratification of consumption is not a residual effect of market dynamics but a struc-

tural feature of affluent economies, actively constructed and maintained by corporations, public policies, and cultural institutions. Far from leading to the homogenization of tastes, mass consumption relies on social hierarchies to sustain both volume production and the symbolic distinctions that drive demand. Markets simultaneously democratize access to certain goods while reinforcing exclusivity in others, ensuring that consumption remains a powerful tool for social differentiation and economic profitability.

Affluent economies operate through a dual mechanism that combines two consumer dispositions. The taste for exclusivity is a disposition to seek distinction through rare, high-status goods, historically associated with elites but now extended to broader social groups via aspirational marketing. The taste for exclusivity was first theorized by Thorstein Veblen (1899), who argued that the upper class used conspicuous consumption — lavish, visible spending on non-essential goods — to signal their superior social status. This consumption was ostentatious and oriented towards leisure activities, serving as a marker of distance from the working classes, who were constrained by necessity. Symmetrically, the taste for mass consumption is a disposition to participate in standardized, widely accessible consumption patterns, framed as a form of social integration or “keeping up with the Joneses”. While exclusivity drives demand at the top, the taste for mass consumption ensures outlets for standardized, high-volume goods. This taste is framed as a form of social participation, where consuming what “everyone else” has becomes a way to belong to the mainstream. Maurice Halbwachs showed how working-class households in early 20th-century France used the consumption of leisure goods or clothing to integrate into society (Baudelot & Establet, 1994). Later, owning washing machines or TVs was not just about utility but about symbolic inclusion, a way to reduce the stigma of poverty and signal “normalcy”. Both tastes are intertwined, as Veblen demonstrated, as conspicuous consumption by the super-rich leads to emulation and imitative consumption. Exclusivity trickles down from the top to other groups.

Indeed, these two tastes are not contradictory but complementary: they allow markets to segment consumers while ensuring outlets for both high-end and mass-produced goods. This duality is functionally necessary for capitalist economies, as it prevents market saturation and sustains corporate profitability. Public policies and market work may reinforce these socialization processes. For example, consumer credit (e.g., “buy now, pay later” schemes) allows lower-income groups to access goods that signify middle-class status, even at the cost of debt (Prasad, 2012), while slogans like “You deserve it” frame mass consumption as a democratic right, masking the structural inequalities that limit real access. “Buy one, get one free” deals or family-sized packages are marketed as smart choices, training consumers to equate volume with value.

Given this context, green consumption should not be understood as an isolated or alternative economic practice; rather, it is deeply embedded within the logic of an economy of abundance, where markets must continually create new niches to absorb surplus production and sustain growth. Far from challenging the dominant structures of consumer capitalism, green consumption reproduces and reinforces the same dynamics of market expansion, standardization, and stratification that characterize conventional consumption. As we will discuss in section 4, it operates as a specialized segment of the broader affluent economy.

3 Consumer Dynamics

Inspired by a Bourdieusian approach, a long tradition of work in cultural sociology has looked to understand how consumption practices, and more specifically green consumption practices,

reflect and reproduce social identities, enact moral boundaries, and construct hierarchies of worth (Baumann et al., 2022; Bourdieu, 1979; Ginsburger, 2020; Schor & Holt, 2000). This section explores how green consumption practices are socially differentiated and how this differentiation results in symbolic distinctions that reflect and reproduce market stratifications. Building on the analysis of market dynamics developed in the prior section and on their role as co-constitutive of cultural distinction, we focus here on the practice or consumer side, first exploring explanations for how and why green consumption concentrates amongst educated, affluent, and urban populations. The second part discusses the social and political consequences of the classed nature of green consumption practices, notably vis-à-vis the delegitimization of non-dominant environmental practices.

3.1 Framing Green Consumption as Both Ethical and Elite

Green consumption practices are diverse, reflecting both the market's tendency to produce diversity to stimulate demand and the complexity of practices through which people meet their needs while producing ecological impacts (Cohen & Murphy, 2001). Markets deliver a variety of products and services that promise environmental benefits, encouraging consumers to shop their way to sustainability (Barendregt & Jaffe, 2014). The willing and able consumer can today green every aspect of their consumption, across domains of food, mobility, housing, and leisure. Public policy programs, in turn, encourage consumers to do their part in solving the ecological crisis by sorting waste, saving energy, or using active modes of transport. Eco-citizenship, a normative framework constructed by public authorities, seeks to shape individuals' behaviors in line with sustainability goals (Ginsburger, 2020).

Yet, despite their diversity, a cultural representation exists of environmental practices as a middle-class phenomenon associated with educated, affluent, and urban populations (Anantharaman, 2018; Geerts, 2024; Huddart & Givens, 2019). While some green practices, such as saving energy, are more commonly observed amongst less-advantaged social groups and others, such as sorting waste, are not patterned by class (Geerts, 2024), the appropriation of green goods and services continues to be associated with more privileged segments of the populace (Coulangeon et al., 2023; Huddart, 2022). Even so-called "alternative" practices, such as participating in local food networks, zero-waste programs, or engaging in urban gardening, tend to concentrate amongst socially advantaged groups (Alkon, 2012; Anantharaman et al., 2019).

Explanations for this highlight both material and cultural factors as key to making green consumption more accessible to and more legitimate for higher status groups. Practice-based studies detail how the performance of green practices often requires access to resources, infrastructures, time, and skills that are more readily available to certain sub-sections of society (Brand, 2010; Sahakian & Wilhite, 2014; Shove et al., 2012). Relatedly, the "prosperity thesis", the individualized explanation of ecological modernization, posits that people develop environmental concern when their material needs are satisfied (Franzen & Meyer, 2010). In political science, some studies have emphasized the political dimension of this type of consumption, framing it as a new mode of political engagement. This phenomenon has been characterized as a particular element of the collective action repertoire known as political consumerism, which is founded on what Micheletti called "individualized collective action" — that is, collective action based on individual choices (Micheletti, 2003). While these studies may have overestimated the political or collective dimension of such consumption practices and underestimated their social and cultural aspects, they have nonetheless accurately identified the segment of the social space they concern: primarily women and the more educated (Micheletti et al., 2011). Furthermore,

so-called political or moral consumption practices may also coincide with more selfish forms of disaffection toward consumerist consumption, taking the shape that Kate Soper calls an “alternative hedonism”. This perspective holds that the negative effects associated with affluent consumption — such as pollution or stress — hinder access to true satisfaction (Soper, 2007). These accounts suggest that green practices concentrate amongst the well-off because they have the material resources and competencies to go green or have access to alternative hedonism.

Cultural theorists emphasize that the uneven distribution of money and time only explains a part of the story. Specific tastes and dispositions are also required to consume green. In an influential paper, Carfagna et al. (2014) observe an eco-habitus emerging amongst the upper-middle class in the United States, arguing that an internalized ecological orientation has become a core component of the habitus of high-cultural-capital groups. The eco-habitus thesis proposes that a durable ecological disposition has emerged, manifesting in how consumers evaluate different activities and providing strong motivation to consume sustainably, in a way that is aligned with their concerns and interests. Eco-habitus provides the knowledge and “feel for the game” required to navigate the variety of green offerings in the market. Studies across France and the United States suggest that environmental commitment is enacted through coherence across certain consumption domains (such as food, mobility, energy-use) by high-cultural capital groups, supported by knowledge, networks, and reflexive capacities (Coulangeon et al., 2023; Huddart, 2022; Huddart & Givens, 2019). Importantly, this coherence does not necessarily imply low overall ecological impact or internally consistent environmental practices. Rather, coherence operates as a culturally recognizable repertoire of dispositions and practices through which privileged groups perform environmental responsibility and moral worth. Thus, the same groups that intentionally consume “green” in some domains may also fly frequently, travel long distances, or occupy larger homes, without this undermining the moral legitimacy of their ecological identities.

In this vein, a related but analytically distinct line of work challenges the assumption that green practices primarily express a stable ecological disposition that is coherently integrated into upper-middle-class habitus. Rather than focusing on (inferred) ecological dispositions as the core motor driving green consumption practices, this perspective examines green consumption as a dynamic, relational strategy of symbolic distinction, whose meaning is produced through opposition to other classed lifestyles (Anantharaman, 2017; Comby, 2024; Flemmen, 2025). Green consumption has become an identity project among culturally privileged groups. Actors rich in cultural capital but less endowed in economic capital oppose materialism and greed through what Flemmen (2025) describes as the “symbolic asceticism” of green consumption, positioning restraint and self-limitation as moral virtues. Green consumption thus becomes a way for culturally secure but economically unstable actors to reap symbolic rewards, defend their positions, or move up in social space.

This relational understanding of green consumption helps explain why all environmentally impactful practices do not automatically get recognized as green. What is at stake is not simply the practice itself, but the social conditions (which include but are not limited to the market) through which practices are recognized and interpreted. In the next section, we detail how symbolic boundaries emerge to stratify groups in the domain of ethical consumption, by differentiating legitimate forms of environmentalism from practices that remain unrecognized or devalued, even when their environmental impacts are significant.

3.2 Performative Environmentalism

The green practices of cultural elites accrue their symbolic rewards through distinction. The enactment of green consumption practices produces symbolic boundaries that distinguish the cultural “ethical elite” from a materialistic elite (Dubuisson-Quellier & Gojard, 2016). But another, equally important, set of distinctions is also at play, directed towards what Huddart and Horne (2020) term “accidental environmentalism” and others describe as a vernacular or pragmatic sustainability (Greenberg, 2013). Across these accounts, ecological legitimacy — which Pulido (1996) describes as the moral authority to speak for the environmental good — accrues to practices framed as voluntary, reflexive choices (Anantharaman, 2022). Concomitantly, environmentally consequential practices rooted in pragmatic necessity are rendered morally suspect and symbolically inferior (Malier, 2019). Simply put, while distinction operates upwards, it also operates downwards, against the working classes, the poor, and groups without dominant cultural capital. Yet, sustainable consumption scholarship has paid limited attention to how green lifestyle activism frames and engages “poor others”.

Empirical studies illustrate how such dynamics of distinction are enacted in everyday practice. French scholars identify how working-class subsistence practices (such as growing urban gardens or participating in repair networks) or rural “*débrouilles*” are often invisibilized or folklorized, and rarely recognized as ecological practices (Comby & Malier, 2022; Malier, 2019; Paddeu, 2021; Saunier et al., 2025). Moreover, working-class practices (such as barbecuing) are criticized for their negative ecological impacts. Meanwhile, “ecological” practices of upper classes (veganism, cycling) become status markers (Dubuisson-Quellier & Gojard, 2016), while the same practices in working classes are devalued (e.g., “*biking is for the poor*”) (Classes Vertes, 2025). Even Soper (2007), in her critique of consumerism and her advocacy for alternative hedonism, proposes rethinking the pursuit of pleasure around the quality of experiences, time spent in nature, authentic social relationships, and creative activities. However, she acknowledges that this alternative hedonism is not equally accessible to all social groups, as the affluent classes have greater ease in adopting more sober lifestyles due to their better access to the necessary infrastructures.

Similarly, in qualitative research conducted in India, middle-class cyclists distinguish their cycling activities from both the car-driving “unethical” elite and from the cycling poor through the utilization of both economic and moral discourses (Anantharaman, 2017). They emphasize the voluntary and enlightened nature of their mobility choices to differentiate themselves from those who cycle out of necessity, while simultaneously adorning their expensive bicycles with “bells and whistles” that signal purchasing power and property ownership — communicating, in effect, that cycling is a choice rather than a default. The proliferation of high-end bicycle stores that sell imported cycles and accessories, along with the emergence of cycling groups and communities that are exclusively middle-class, allows these class distinctions to be instantiated in markets and communities.

Other studies in India echo these findings. A study looking at millet consumption and organic food shops found that the resignification of millet as a lifestyle superfood, enacted through new ways of talking about its health benefits, was used to create and maintain symbolic boundaries that excluded lower-middle-class people (Erler et al., 2022). This restyling of a long-standing provisioning and consumption practice indigenous to the drought-prone Deccan plateau disassociates the practice from its rural and non-dominant caste origins. Studies of urban gardening found that middle-class gardeners position themselves as carriers of knowl-

edge, sophistication, and technologies, and in turn describe their hired gardeners as backward (Frazier, 2018; van Holstein, 2019).

These dynamics result in concrete power differentials. Lifestyle environmentalism practiced by high cultural capital groups excludes and stigmatizes the poor and aspirational working classes, who lack the surplus time, financial resources, and cultural competencies required to participate in recognized forms of green consumption. As a result, they are unable to attain the moral recognition and social distinction associated with living green, even when their environmental impacts are circumscribed, or they perform green practices. Further, when poor and working-class people are seen as environmentally suspect, “greening the poor” operates as a disciplinary project that frames poverty itself as an environmental problem to be corrected (Baviskar, 2011; Classes Vertes, 2025; Malier, 2021).

One outcome of this dynamic, which is visible in Indian cities, is the further disenfranchisement of working-class and poor populations from environmental debates and politics. In India, when the new middle classes successfully claim cultural authority over sustainable consumption, it obscures the daily environmental practices of the poor in a manner that further disenfranchises their already tenuous right to the city and its environments. Performative environmentalism exacerbates the exclusion of the working poor from participation in environmental politics by reinforcing class inequalities, restigmatizing poverty, and monopolizing ecological legitimacy for higher status groups.

Moreover, individualizing environmental action through green lifestyles can hide the fact that doing environmentalism through green consumption is tied to gendered, raced, classed, and ability-based possibilities and preferences (Anantharaman, 2018; Comby, 2024; Dubuisson-Quellier, 2025). It can perpetuate the false impression that everyone has access to environmental practices and then stigmatize those who do not consume ethically as ill-informed or uncaring (Malier, 2019).

These dynamics, in turn, affect how working-class and poor groups engage with environmental discourses and politics. In contrast to the eco-habitus of the cultural elite, i.e., feeling that being “green” is both good and achievable, Huddart and Givens find that lower-status consumers in Washington, USA, express “eco-powerlessness”: a sense of fear and uncertainty in the face of environmental issues. Lower-status actors experience environmental concern as a form of powerlessness rooted in dominant, consumer-based models of ecological action, and resign themselves to the idea that their daily actions have little bearing on trajectories of environmental change (Huddart & Givens, 2019).

Taken together, these accounts suggest that the association of green consumption practices with socially advantaged groups cannot be explained by material resources or ecological conviction alone. Rather, it emerges from an interaction between unequal access to resources, cultural dispositions, and the relational processes through which certain practices come to be recognized as green and acquire ecological legitimacy. These processes of recognition and misrecognition, and the stratifications that result from them, implicate both market activities and the discourses produced by consumers. Green living is being promoted in a context where consuming power is a sign of social status and worth, and conversely, being perceived as poor is stigmatized (Lamont, 2018; Lawson & Elwood, 2014). When already privileged actors actively use social status as a strategy to popularize green lifestyles, they *other* the poor, while gaining more ecological legitimacy themselves.

Crucially, these processes of recognition are actively shaped by markets and public infrastructures, which define, label, and circulate certain goods and practices as environmentally virtuous. As we discuss in the next section, through certifications, product categories, pricing

structures, retail environments, and policy programs oriented toward individualized behavior change, markets and states communicate what counts as legitimate environmental action and equip some consumers to perform it. Eco-citizenship is thus not merely a set of individual practices (e.g., recycling, energy saving) but a political project that individualizes responsibility, moralizes behavior, and depoliticizes ecology (Ginsburger, 2020). By focusing on individual “virtue”, it obscures the conflicts of interest between social classes, races, and genders in environmental governance.

4 Implications: Green Consumption as Social Stratification

The promotion of green consumption and lifestyle politics is often framed as a pathway to broader social change (De Moor & Verhaegen, 2020), yet its emergence and organization are deeply embedded in the logics of market expansion and social stratification. Green consumption is not an exception to the broader dynamics of consumer markets but rather a product of them.

“Sustainable”, “organic”, or “local” are market categories for which well-off consumers have been trained to develop a taste. Green market devices script consumer practices and the meanings associated with them. Eco-labels such as the *EU Organic* logo or Fair-Trade certifications do not simply inform consumers about product attributes to facilitate exchange. They construct a narrative of the “enlightened consumer” who prioritizes sustainability, ethics, and quality, while simultaneously excluding those who lack the economic or cultural capital to engage with these markers. Similarly, digital platforms like *Yuka* use algorithms to guide consumers toward “better” choices, reinforcing a hierarchy of products and practices that align with corporate sustainability strategies (Soutjis, 2020).

Markets also enact green socialization. Commercial spaces — such as organic supermarkets, eco-boutiques, or online platforms — educate consumers about the “correct” ways to consume sustainably. For example, the layout of an organic supermarket, with its emphasis on transparency, traceability, and ethical sourcing, socializes shoppers into valuing these attributes over price or convenience. Public and third-sector actors reinforce this socialization. NGOs and government agencies promote green consumption through campaigns, labels, and subsidies, further embedding it in the cultural repertoires of specific social groups (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2009). However, these efforts target affluent, educated consumers who already possess the cultural and economic capital to engage with sustainability narratives.

Green consumption is not a homogeneous or democratically accessible practice. Rather, it is deeply stratified, reflecting and reinforcing broader social inequalities. Based on premium prices, green consumption satisfies the taste for distinction of elite consumers who build their status on a reflexive relation to consumption (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2009). But it keeps consumers who cannot afford it at a distance while fueling their aspiration for practices that could demonstrate their capacity to move up the social ladder. As a result, green consumption becomes a marker of distinction, accessible primarily to those who can afford to perform their environmental consciousness (Baumann et al., 2022).

The stratification of green markets is a dynamic and evolving process that does not lead to straightforward democratization as products become more affordable. Instead, as certain green products become more affordable and accessible, markets shift their stratification strategies, introducing new layers of segmentation that maintain and even deepen social inequalities. This fluidity ensures that green consumption remains an exclusive practice, reserved for those with the economic and cultural capital to engage with its most desirable forms, while simultaneously

fostering aspirations among emerging social groups who see green consumption as a marker of social mobility.

One of the most striking features of green consumption is its cyclical pattern of segmentation. As products once considered luxury or niche — such as organic food, hybrid vehicles, or solar panels — become more affordable due to economies of scale, technological advancements, or policy incentives, they gradually lose their exclusive appeal. Rather than leading to a democratization of green consumption, this shift prompts the market to redefine exclusivity by introducing new, more sophisticated products that cater to affluent consumers. For example, the early adoption of hybrid vehicles was confined to environmentally conscious, upper-middle-class consumers who could afford the premium price. As these vehicles became more mainstream and their prices dropped, the market responded by introducing high-end electric vehicles (EVs), which re-established exclusivity through advanced technology, superior performance, and brand prestige. Furthermore, markets for green consumption, like other markets, activate consumers' taste for variety and novelty. For example, tote bags, refillable bottles, or recycled sports shoes are available through a broad range of choices of colors and characteristics, regularly renewed, encouraging consumers to accumulate a large number of these different goods.

Similar dynamics can be observed in other sectors, including bicycles and fashion. As basic electric bikes (e-bikes) have become more accessible to middle-income consumers, manufacturers have begun offering premium e-bikes with innovative features — such as integrated smart technology, ultra-lightweight materials, or designer collaborations — that appeal to wealthier buyers. In fashion, the diffusion of affordable “sustainable” lines by fast-fashion brands is countered by luxury brands launching exclusive capsule collections made from innovative, eco-friendly materials, marketed as unique and high-status items. This constant repositioning of exclusivity ensures that the most desirable green products remain out of reach for lower-income consumers, while the now accessible products are often stripped of the symbolic capital that initially defined green consumption. The fluidity of market stratification is thus reinforced by the strategic use of product ranges and market devices, through which companies deliberately structure their offerings to create a hierarchy of green products, where each tier corresponds to different levels of economic and cultural capital. This segmentation is achieved through a combination of pricing, branding, and marketing narratives that position certain products as aspirational and others as merely functional.

The fluid and evolving nature of market stratification is not merely a top-down process driven by corporate strategies; it is also fueled by the aspirations of social groups who see green consumption as a means of signaling their social mobility. This dynamic creates a self-reinforcing cycle, where the desire for upward mobility sustains the demand for exclusive green products, even as the market introduces new layers of segmentation. For many middle-class and aspirational consumers, green consumption is not just about environmental responsibility; it is also a symbol of social progress. Owning an electric vehicle, purchasing organic food, or wearing sustainable fashion can serve as visible markers of status, signaling that one has the economic means and cultural awareness to engage in ethical consumption. This is particularly evident in emerging economies, where the adoption of green technologies is often associated with modernity and Western lifestyles (Ramakrishnan et al., 2020). For example, in countries like China or India, the purchase of an electric vehicle or solar panels is not only an environmental choice but also a statement of affluence and cosmopolitanism, distinguishing the buyer from less privileged social groups (Bhar et al., 2022; Lange & Meier, 2009).

This aspirational dimension of green consumption is carefully cultivated by marketers, who position green products as gateways to a more sophisticated and responsible lifestyle. Advertisements for electric vehicles, for instance, often feature affluent, urban professionals, reinforcing the idea that sustainability is a luxury reserved for the successful. Similarly, marketing campaigns for organic food or eco-friendly home products emphasize lifestyle benefits – such as health, well-being, and social recognition – rather than purely environmental advantages. By doing so, they tap into the desires of upwardly mobile consumers, who see green consumption as a way to align themselves with elite values and practices.

While aspirational consumers are drawn into the cycle of green consumption, lower-income households remain largely excluded from its most desirable forms. The assumption that all consumers can, or should, adopt green lifestyles ignores the material, economic, and spatial realities that limit participation for many. Green products are frequently more expensive than their conventional counterparts, not only due to the higher costs of sustainable production but also because of the premium pricing strategies employed by corporations to signal quality and exclusivity. Even when green products are financially accessible, they often compete with other essential expenses in the budgets of lower-income households. For example, a family living on a modest income may prioritize housing, healthcare, or education over purchasing organic food or investing in energy-efficient appliances. The opportunity cost of green consumption is far higher for these households, making it an unrealistic or unsustainable choice in the long term. Furthermore, the marketing of green products often assumes a level of disposable income that many lower-income consumers simply do not have. Campaigns that encourage consumers to “invest” in sustainability — whether through higher upfront costs for solar panels or premium prices for ethical fashion — ignore the financial precarity that characterizes the lives of many working-class and low-income individuals. For these groups, green consumption is not a lifestyle choice but a luxury, one that is frequently deferred in favor of more immediate and pressing needs.

This exclusion is not merely a result of financial constraints but also of cultural and infrastructural barriers. For example, the marketing of green products often assumes a level of cultural capital — such as knowledge of sustainability issues, familiarity with certification labels, or access to digital platforms — that many lower-income consumers lack. The distribution of green infrastructure is shaped by corporate strategies and public policies that prioritize profitability and cater to affluent consumers. The physical accessibility of green products can be limited, as organic supermarkets, EV charging stations, or bike-sharing programs are more likely to be located in affluent neighborhoods. The exclusion of lower-income consumers is further reinforced by policy design. Subsidies for green products, such as tax credits for solar panels or electric vehicles, are typically structured in ways that favor homeowners or higher-income earners, who can afford the upfront costs and have access to financing. Meanwhile, lower-income households — who may rely on rental housing, public transportation, or second-hand goods — are often left out of these incentives, deepening the divide between those who can participate in green consumption and those who cannot. The result is a geography of exclusion, where the physical environment itself reinforces the stratification of green consumption, making it inaccessible to those who lack economic or cultural capital (Rice et al., 2020; Sheller, 2023).

The fluidity of market stratification is also influenced by social movements and counter-narratives that challenge the exclusivity of green consumption. Activist groups, for instance, have pushed for more inclusive sustainability practices, such as community-supported agriculture, second-hand markets, or DIY repair cultures, which aim to make green consumption

accessible to a broader range of consumers (Madon, 2021). Yet their initiatives often remain distanced from working-class expressions of these very practices (Anantharaman, 2024). However, even these alternatives can become co-opted by market forces (Bryant & Goodman, 2004; Goodman, 2000). This recycling of exclusivity ensures that even alternative forms of consumption remain stratified, with the most desirable items still reserved for those with economic and cultural capital. Similarly, the mainstreaming of “political consumerism” — where consumers are encouraged to make ethical choices within their means — can serve to legitimize existing inequalities.

5 Conclusion

The predominance of lifestyle politics — where individual consumer choices are framed as the primary means of achieving sustainability — has become a defining feature of contemporary environmental movements (Akenji, 2014; Bengtsson et al., 2018). Primarily embraced by dominant classes, this project of a “reformist ecology” seeks to adjust consumption patterns without challenging the social structures that underpin them, favoring behavioral solutions instead (Comby, 2024). Advocates argue that by adopting green consumption practices, such as buying organic food, purchasing electric vehicles, or using reusable products, individuals can drive systemic change through the aggregation of their ethical choices. However, such approaches are fundamentally limited in their ability to foster meaningful ecological transition.

This limitation arises from two interconnected failures: first, lifestyle politics overlook the structural constraints that prevent lower-income households from participating in green consumption; second, it unintentionally reinforces the very market stratification it seeks to challenge. By focusing on individual behavior, lifestyle politics fails to address the root causes of unsustainable consumption and perpetuates the inequalities that green markets thrive upon.

As a result, while lifestyle politics aims to challenge unsustainable consumption patterns, it often unintentionally reinforces the stratification that defines green markets. It also contributes to the commodification of sustainability, where green consumption becomes a market niche rather than a collective practice. By focusing on individual choices — such as buying organic, driving electric, or reducing waste — lifestyle politics legitimizes the market-based solutions that corporations and policymakers promote. This approach not only ignores the structural inequalities that shape consumption but also perpetuates them by framing green consumption as a matter of personal responsibility rather than systemic change (Akenji, 2014).

Finally, lifestyle politics feeds into the aspirational dynamics of green markets, where sustainability is framed as a marker of social mobility. For middle-class and aspirational consumers, adopting green lifestyles — such as driving an electric car or buying organic — can serve as a symbol of upward mobility, distinguishing them from lower-income groups who cannot afford such choices. This aspirational dimension is actively cultivated by marketers, who position green products as gateways to a more sophisticated and responsible lifestyle. However, by doing so, they reinforce the very stratification they claim to challenge. The more green consumption is framed as a status symbol, the more exclusive and exclusionary it becomes, reserving its most desirable forms for those who can afford to participate. Meanwhile, lower-income consumers are left with the impression that sustainability is a privilege, further entrenching the social and economic inequalities that define green markets.

While transition policies in most developed countries do not entirely overlook the social inequalities they generate — and often seek to mitigate the regressive effects of these policies — they rarely take these inequalities as their starting point for policy design. Instead, they tend

to focus on compensating for the inequalities produced by transition policies through targeted measures, such as energy vouchers or fuel subsidies. However, these approaches fail to fundamentally reconsider how social actors' behaviors primarily reflect structural inequalities in access to low-carbon alternatives. In other words, rather than addressing the root causes of unequal access to sustainable solutions, policies often treat inequalities as an afterthought, correcting them reactively rather than proactively integrating equity into the core logic of transition strategies.

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