

The Political Life of Everyday Sustainability. Conspicuous Sustainable Consumption and Normative Resistance

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Abstract

Moral ambivalence has long characterized consumer practices and discourses, becoming more pronounced as sustainability gains relevance. This paper argues that sustainable consumption is not normatively neutral: it participates in the production of social distinction through competing claims to moral legitimacy. It develops the concept of conspicuous sustainability to capture how sustainability operates as a visible marker of moral worth and social positioning in contemporary consumer culture. Rather than treating visibility as a superficial dimension of display, the paper conceptualizes it as a mechanism through which ecological legitimacy is produced, distributed, and contested. Considering the tensions animating conspicuous sustainable consumption, it shows how moralized visibility structures the recognition of environmental subjects, generating asymmetries in ecological valuation whereby some practices are publicly legitimized while others remain invisible or devalued despite comparable environmental impact. The paper further argues that such dynamics may generate normative resistance when dominant sustainability narratives are experienced as exclusionary and ultimately extractive. Developed as part of the Symposium “Conspicuous Sustainability: Consumption, Climate Change and Morality”, which it introduces, the paper highlights sustainability as an arena of moral and political valuation in which legitimacy, inequality, and recognition are continuously negotiated.

Keywords: Conspicuous Sustainability; Conspicuous Sustainable Consumption; Distinction; Moral Worth; Normativity; Normative Resistance.

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1 Introduction

Following the practice turn, both theory and empirical research on sustainable consumption have emphasized inconspicuous consumption, infrastructural arrangements, and ordinary practices. Structural factors, such as central heating systems or the diffusion of tertiary goods, have been highlighted to explain rising levels of consumption, often at the expense of more classical dimensions of practices, including conspicuous and positional consumption, the logics of symbolic recognition and their ambivalence, and the moral discourses surrounding belonging and distinction. Yet the normative dimensions of practice, and in particular the role of moral evaluation in social positioning, are becoming increasingly evident both in research and in public debate, within and across national contexts. Sustainable consumption may thus provide social recognition by marking moral worth and animating status dynamics: the very definition of what counts as sustainable, and the role thereby attributed to consumption, become a cultural arena for the competitive co-construction of social (in)equality and sustainability.

Classical dynamics of ceremonial, conspicuous, and positional consumption can thus be reappraised in ways that articulate the nature-culture divide, the limits of both market and society, and the (re)production of social inequalities across multiple scales. As we know, wealthier households are more likely to champion those styles that may be presented as ecological and responsible, and yet, as a social group, they do have higher carbon footprints. Tensions such as this can be situated within a broader critical framework (Sassatelli, 2006). A framework that considers not simply the moralization of consumption, but also the mechanisms that sustain and the effects that are produced through normative evaluation. Arguably, there may be momentous effects as privileged forms of sustainability may get stronger moral legitimation. To be sure, eco-sustainable consumption may not be a rapid, straightforward path to eco-sustainability, and yet it is not merely a tokenistic *façade*. It is ambivalent. It is against this backdrop that this paper develops foundational arguments to provide a point of entry for the Symposium “Conspicuous Sustainability. Consumption, Climate Change and Morality”. The Symposium investigates the promises and the limits of the greening of demand, interrogating the normative dimension of practice. Ultimately, while taking distance from a mere moralistic posture about eco-consumption (see Schor et al., 2010), the Symposium aims to shed new light on how sustainable consumption may be studied by explicitly incorporating normative framing, inequality, and power into the analysis.

2 Distinction and Legitimacy: The Visibility of Ecological Worth

The gap between capitalist markets and nature has become adamant, and it is often debated through opposite moral sensitivities and affects, ranging from anxiety to negation, from guilt to indignation (Weik von Mossner, 2017). As critiques of environmental commodification increasingly become entangled with diverse promotional initiatives (Meier, 2023) and operate as elaborate aestheticized repertoires within art and culture (Demos, 2016), sustainable consumption is framed not only as an ecological choice but also as a marker of status. Consumption is normalized, and normative framings are crucial to this (Sassatelli, 2007).

Affects and moralities have been made particularly visible in hierarchical and competitive ways through the performance of consumer lifestyles in advertising and digital cultures. This reverberates more acutely on matters of sustainability, which inevitably foreshadow quite concrete boundaries — of bodies and communities. In examining the promotion of sustainable

lifestyles on social media, a paradoxical configuration of values emerges (Frig & Jaakkola, 2024). Here, the choice of sustainable or ethically branded goods not only serves ecological goals but also visibly signals social status, as sustainability narratives are promoted alongside conspicuous consumption, in which an acquisitive mentality may contradict sustainable goals. By and large, “Going green to be seen” is not new in the market: the concept of “conspicuous conservation” has been suggested by marketing scholar Vladas Griskevicius and colleagues (2010) to describe consumers who buy environmentally friendly products explicitly to signal higher social status to the point that status competition can be commercially leveraged to promote pro-environmental behavior. Building on the idea of “competitive altruism”, which posits that conspicuous displays of altruism can help build and maintain costly reputations, they show that this effect emerges when consumption is public and green products are more expensive, but not in private contexts or when they cost less.

Visibility is thereby a fundamental aspect of such a modality of consumption. Yet it need not take the form of ostentatious flashiness. Displayed “inconspicuousness” is not the absence of positional signaling but a historically specific form of visibility. David Kuchta’s (2002) analysis of the “great renunciation” of male elite dress in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England shows how aristocratic masculinity shifted from ornate display toward restrained clothing as a coded sign of virtue, rationality, and authority. “Inconspicuous consumption”, therefore, may appear as a structured form of legibility rather than its negation. Comparative sociology of elite distinction suggests that the symbolic repertoires deployed by elites to mark superiority are historically contingent and vary across cultures (Dalož 2022). Recent analyses of consumer capitalism in the US suggest that distinction operates as much through a combination of the semiotics of restraint and the visibility of display. In *The Sum of Small Things*, Elizabeth Currid-Halkett (2017) argues that contemporary elites increasingly define themselves through forms of “inconspicuous consumption” tied to education, health and sustainable lifestyle choices, including supporting environmental causes or shopping at farmers markets. This “aspirational” elite is “upheld by specific values and acquired knowledge and the rarified social and cultural processes necessary to acquire them” (Currid-Halkett, 2017, p. 19). Distinction is thus displaced from visible extravagance towards performances of competence and cultivated self-regulation. Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann (2014) similarly show that contemporary “foodie culture” appears democratized while continuing to operate as a system of social distinction, in which cultural capital is expressed through apparently inclusive consumption practices. Yet conspicuous sustainable consumption involves more than merely reproducing elite distinction through cultural capital. Sustainable consumption increasingly functions as a moral and epistemic regime through which ecological legitimacy and social worth are publicly negotiated. The issue is not simply that privileged groups consume differently. Rather, their lifestyles increasingly acquire normative authority, while other potentially sustainable practices become socially invisible, morally devalued, and ultimately aesthetically and viscerally othered.

Arguably, visibility, anchored in games of competitive and hierarchical positioning, is contributing to the shaping of how sustainable consumption is culturally framed today. On the very productive idea that the sociology of consumption was not “well equipped to deal with environmentally critical forms of ‘inconspicuous’ consumption nor with equally crucial developments in domestic infrastructures supporting the creeping evolution of normal standards of daily material life” (Warde & Shove, 2002, p. 232), questions of visibility and moralization in sustainable consumption have often been shifted to adjacent fields such as cultural anthropology, cultural history and media studies. To grasp the multilayered, globally relevant mor-

alization and public visibility of sustainable consumption, we need to broaden our perspective across highly differentiated social worlds. Fertile observations on the aesthetic and moral regulation of urban cleanliness in Bengaluru, India, are offered by Manisha Anantharaman's *Recycling Class* (2023), a study of urban sustainability policies and waste management practices. She demonstrates the ambiguity of the waste-pickers' system, which promotes the individualization of responsibility, shifting the burden of environmental care onto consumers rather than the state or corporation, while building moral boundaries that marginalize eco-compatible, necessity-driven practices of the poor. Grounded in what she terms "performative environmentalism", the system privileges urban aesthetics, visual cleanliness and green gentrification at the expense of substantive ecological and egalitarian reform: "working-class groups who do not embody the same 'feel for the game' or 'eco-habitus' are denied ecological legitimacy even if they do the very same practices in their everyday lives" (Anantharaman, 2022, p. 166). On the other side of the world and the social spectrum, *Billionaire Wilderness* by Justin Farrell (2020) shows how ultra-wealthy elites in Teton County, Wyoming, fold wilderness stewardship into lifestyle performance, using conservation philanthropy and land ownership to secure moral authority, civic virtue, and symbolic dominance. Elite conservation expenditures function as a positional move that may simultaneously restrict access to natural resources for lower social classes. Indeed, according to Farrell:

whatever their good intentions, those at the very top of the socioeconomic pyramid leverage nature to climb even higher. [...] Burned by social stigmas, status anxieties and feelings of inauthenticity and guilt, the ultra-wealthy use nature and rural people as vehicle for personal transformation, creating visions of themselves they view as more authentic, virtuous and community-minded (2020, p. 7).

The normative framing of an environmental posture is revealed as deeply implicated in power relations and social stratification.

Through very different cases and perspectives, these studies illuminate complementary dimensions of the social production of ecological legitimacy. While Anantharaman shows how environmentally compatible practices performed by poorer groups may remain socially unrecognized and morally devalued, Farrell demonstrates how environmental commitments and the conspicuous appropriation of nature can become sources of moral authority for already privileged actors. In both cases, ecological worth is not attached to practices alone but is mediated by social position and public recognition, regardless of whether environmental commitments are perceived as sincere, strategic, or a combination of both. Sustainability thus emerges as a field of symbolic and moral valuation in which some actors are more readily recognized as legitimate environmental subjects than others, highlighting how ecological legitimacy is unevenly produced across social positions.

These dynamics resonate with a growing body of empirical research on middle-class consumption across diverse contexts, which highlights the centrality of distinction in the making of sustainability (Aritzia et al., 2014; Baumann et al., 2022; Carfagna et al., 2014; Johnston et al., 2011; Johnston & Baumann, 2014; Lu & Ran, 2025; Rieger & Schor, 2021; Sassatelli & Davolio, 2019). Studies of "eco-chic" consumption further underline the global aestheticization of sustainability and its embedding within middle-class distinction practices (Barendregt & Jaffé, 2014), a theme also prominent in research on consumption, status, and gentrification (Zukin, 2010; Sassatelli et al., 2015). Within this broader field, the moral and political framing of consumption has been central. Earlier work on the "political morality" of food (Sassatelli, 2004) shows how food consumption is shaped by moral discourses of quality, authenticity, and

responsibility, which are themselves embedded in wider struggles over value, legitimacy, and justice. Related research on ethical consumption and political consumerism has further theorized consumption as a form of political engagement oriented toward justice, while remaining structured by relations of power and distinction, where moral claims may also operate as markers of social status (Sassatelli, 2014).

Despite its richness, this emerging literature remains dispersed across studies of elite distinction, ethical consumption, green gentrification and environmental governance. While it consistently shows that sustainability is implicated in processes of social valuation and inequality, it tends to isolate different dimensions — distinction, moral worth, spatial transformation, governance, and lifestyle performance — without fully theorizing how they are connected. As a result, although ecological legitimacy is widely shown to be unevenly distributed, the mechanisms through which it is produced and stabilized remain underexplored. Less attention has been paid to how visibility becomes morally coded and operates as a crucial mechanism of valuation. Addressing this gap requires a renewed focus on public visibility in the production of ecological worth. Visibility, understood through Foucauldian relational and immanent conceptions of power (Foucault, 1976; 1980), features as a foundational dimension of the production of knowledge and subjectivity, rendering actors available for moral evaluation, comparison, and accountability. Rather than directly producing ecological legitimacy, it provides an embodied and spatialized mechanism through which worth is negotiated and stabilized. In this sense, moralized visibility is both contested and re-signified, differentially attributed and consolidated, and generating effects of exclusion and resistance.

3 Conspicuous Sustainability: Consumption, Normativity and Resistance

The preceding discussion has suggested that ecological legitimacy is unevenly produced through processes of moral valuation in which visibility operates as a key mechanism of recognition, comparison, and accountability. When sustainable consumption becomes publicly legible as a marker of worth, these dynamics take on a distinctly positional character. It is this configuration that I conceptualize as *conspicuous sustainability*. Such dynamics evoke the Veblenian tradition of conspicuous consumption, albeit in a distinctly moral and ecological register. I have introduced this term to theorize a broader normative and affective configuration through which sustainable consumption practices become visible markers of moral worth and legitimacy and related to hierarchical positioning. *Conspicuous sustainable consumption*, in turn, is understood as an empirical manifestation of conspicuous sustainability, namely the enactment of these dynamics through consumer practices and lifestyles. At face value, conspicuous sustainability illustrates how the eco-moralization of consumption operates as a display of moral worth and social position, intertwining environmental concerns with positional recognition. More fundamentally, the mainstream greening of demand does not merely reflect inequalities in access to ethical goods; it participates in their rearticulation, reinforcing the centrality of hierarchical forms of distinction within contemporary consumer culture.

To further clarify the economic and moral logic underpinning this visibility-based production of ecological legitimacy, it is useful to revisit Thorstein Veblen's analysis of conspicuous consumption. This perspective also engages longstanding debates on Veblen's (1899) *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, which emphasized both its analytical durability and its limits (Campbell, 1995). Although not explicitly mobilized in his work, Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of distinction and taste can be read as a reworking of Veblen's insights on status and consumption,

relocating them within a theory of cultural classification and embodied inequality. Veblen directs attention more explicitly to the public display through which value and worth become visible, socially consequential, and subject to moral evaluation. Veblen fundamentally defines human relations with goods as simultaneously instrumental (use) and ceremonial (distinction):

[I]t would be hazardous to assert that a useful purpose is ever absent from the utility of any article or of any service, however obviously its prime purpose and chief element is conspicuous waste; and it would be only less hazardous to assert of any primarily useful product that the element of waste is in no way concerned in its value, immediately or remotely (Veblen, 1899, p. 47).

For Veblen, goods are never purely utilitarian: they combine use with socially structured forms of “waste” through which status is signaled. Read in this way, Veblen’s distinction between utility and waste is less a fixed classification of goods than a relational moral economy of valuation.

If we translate such an interpretation of Veblen’s work into contemporary societies characterized by the alleged widespread and democratizing access to oversupply, conspicuous sustainable consumption may be perceived as signaling distinction through the visible rejection or reconfiguration of the generalized escalation of waste. In very concrete terms, as suggested by Annika Rieger and Juliet Schor:

a paradoxical dimension of the coding of green products and practices as ‘elite’ is that many of the most sustainable ways of living describe the lifestyles of poor and low-income households, in both the global North and South. These include examples such as using bicycles rather than cars, growing and preparing one’s own food, air drying of clothing, using public transportation, and diets low in meat consumption and high in grains and legumes (2021, p. 12).

Also, research on “conspicuous anti-consumption” further suggests that practices of refusal, restraint, and reduced consumption may become vehicles of status and symbolic distinction (Sekhon & Soule, 2019). Whereas conspicuous anti-consumption foregrounds abstention, conspicuous sustainable consumption mobilizes restraint and pleasure simultaneously as forms of ecological distinction and moral valuation.

This is an important point. The articulation between gratification and moral worth is already present in Veblen’s analysis. Indeed, as Veblen (1899, p. 35) notes, conspicuous consumption “is a consumption directed to the comfort of the consumer himself, and is, therefore, a mark of the master”. More broadly, “utility” in capitalist economic and moral discourse is typically associated with individual pleasure and intrinsic rewards (Berry, 1994; Hilton, 2004; Sassatelli, 1997). Conspicuous sustainable consumption thus visibly sells intrinsic and extrinsic utility in a characteristic moral form: through the normative framing of eco-sustainable consumption, pleasure and moral worth become aligned, converting consumption itself into a source of legitimacy. The capacity to define and conveniently display one’s own consumption as simultaneously pleasurable and worthy secures such legitimacy — particularly when these forms of consumption become publicly scrutinized. Arguably, in consumer capitalism, the normalization of consumption is grounded in the hegemonic ideal of autonomous choice, framing consumption as legitimate when it can be accounted for as a pleasurable utility or a form of “tamed hedonism” which is controlled, rational, and individualized (Sassatelli, 2001). In this context, eco-commodities generate a productive tension: they derive much of their value

from symbolically distancing consumers from the generalized escalation of waste associated with mass-standardized, convenience-driven consumption; yet, as market goods, they play into recognized forms of pleasure. Thus, sustainability may include a reformed appreciation of goods perceived as lower quality, such as reconstituted orange juice, which has a much lower footprint than refrigerated, freshly pressed juice, yet is nevertheless perceived as less healthy and less green (Evans & Mylan, 2019). Or it may entail renewed attention to seasonal produce, which is less varied, less exotic, and often cheaper, yet supports sustainability from the local to the global (Régnier, 2025). Still, even such goods arguably acquire eco-legitimacy conditional on a consumption game structured by (and structuring) positional hierarchies. Such game is predicated on pleasure and responsibility as the fundamental duality of normative framings.

That consumer capitalism has bound together higher and lower groups in presenting consumption as a legitimate goal, while preserving a hierarchical positional logic at the core of commercial visibility, is a major factor in these dynamics. Attending to the finely graded inequalities through which sustainability is framed, it may still be true that middle classes with greater access to cultural capital embody the “particular-universal” that shapes cultural hierarchies (Savage, 2003) and, being positioned closer to working classes, elicit competitive comparison (Bourdieu, 1979). Working-class groups, in turn, sustain their moral worth by drawing boundaries, particularly against the upper-middle class, whom they view as false and exploitative (Lamont, 2000). Visibility does not simply reflect existing hierarchies of worth; it participates in their reproduction and transformation by making particular forms of ecological legitimacy publicly recognizable, thereby reshaping the distribution of recognition itself.

Continuing to explore the theoretical implications of this configuration, sustainable consumption — especially its mainstream commercial forms, where shifts to eco-commodities do not necessarily entail substantial reductions in resource use — contributes to class dynamics by intensifying processes of moral evaluation and *normative resistance*. Operating within power relations, normative resistance should be understood not as an external reaction but as an internal effect of asymmetries in the attribution of ecological worth. It arises when subaltern or othered groups take distance — through distrust, disengagement, refusal, or endorsed necessity — from the epistemic and moral framing of ecological legitimacy produced by privileged social groups. Anchored to visible claims to environmental worth, forms of resistance are directed less at ecological goals than at the moral dominance of the actors and lifestyles through which they are represented. Resistance is often visceral, responding to the perceived devaluation of one’s own subjectivity and worth, pleasures and responsibility. It ultimately arises from the dual normative framing of sustainable consumption, which simultaneously invokes duty and pleasure.

One such framing is the “double dividend” (Jackson, 2005) of sustainable consumption, which lies in its capacity to (dutifully) reduce environmental pressures while simultaneously (pleasurably) enhancing social well-being and quality of life. When sustainable consumption becomes publicly associated with the eco-strategies of particular social groups, the promise of such a double dividend may become unevenly distributed and recognized. The capacity of privileged social groups to disenfranchise subaltern groups’ eco-compatible lifestyles may thereby undermine the social legitimacy necessary for their realization. If sustainable consumption signals status more than cooperation for the commons, the ecological transition may be jeopardized. By framing consumption as morally desirable for all while allowing only some to engage in “virtuous” sustainability, neoliberal tendencies may intensify sustainability’s normative grip while simultaneously risking a normative backlash.

Here, the notion of a “rebound effect” springs to mind. Deriving from Jevons’ paradox in the nineteenth-century coal market, it describes how efficiency gains can stimulate additional consumption, offsetting expected environmental benefits (Herring & Sorrell, 2009; Jackson, 2017). Unlike the conventional rebound effect, this normative rebound operates not through increased resource use but through the destabilization of moral legitimacy. The public valorization of particular sustainable lifestyles may erode support for the very ecological norms it seeks to advance. Rather than reinforcing ecological commitment, visible claims to ecological virtue can provoke estrangement, distrust, or resistance among those excluded from the forms of worth they embody.

4 Beyond Distinction: Worth without Frontiers

It may be true that, as Clive Hamilton’s best seller *Requiem for the Species* (2010) suggests, the most immediate reason for the failure to act on ecological sustainability and global warming lies outside consumption and is to be located in the continuous exercise of political power by mighty corporations, especially the fossil fuel industry. Yet other factors may be usefully considered. Sustainability itself is a contested and normatively charged category rather than a stable analytical object (Greenberg, 2013). The point is not that the value attributed to waste-reducing nature-conservation commodities predicated on environmental sustainability is being commercialized. Nothing prevents commercialization, *per se*, from being on the side of ecological transition. The concern is that some forms of ecological worth may be socially divisive (and even counterproductive) when they are not accompanied by the recognition that environmental issues require a structural shift (economic, moral, and epistemic) beyond distinction.

As we know, tensions emerge between what are conventionally defined as the three pillars of sustainability adopted by the United Nations: the social, economic, and environmental dimensions. Such tensions lie at the heart of the “wicked problem” of sustainability: “(i)f sustainability proponents do not succeed in reconciling the three pillars of sustainability and the different approaches to it, then non-ecological economic modernization will have free rein” (Murphy, 2012, p. 19). While sustainability harbors contradictions that may be understood under different guises, prioritizing consumption in today’s analysis is arguably strategic as we get to the core of how market relations are sustained or criticized in everyday life. To be sure, the boundaries and worth of sustainable consumption are continuously negotiated among assorted actors — such as consumers, corporations, advertisers, policymakers, activists, and experts of a variety of sorts (Evans et al., 2012; Lekakis, 2022; Littler, 2008; Micheletti et al., 2015; Sassatelli, 2006; Shove, 2003; Spaargaren et al., 2006; Soper et al., 2009). Still, such negotiation is not merely a matter of individual valuation but is intensely morally and politically framed across global and national contexts. These dynamics suggest that ecological inequalities operate through culturally and politically mediated processes of valuation and visibility shaped by historical relations of power.

Ideas of nature conservation have long been shaped by imperial and post-imperial power relations and by forms of “green colonialism” (Blanc, 2020), foregrounding issues of green politics, power, and inequality in what is termed the global South. Contemporary environmental actions remain shaped by long-standing imperial and carbon-intensive systems that have enabled high-consumption lifestyles for some populations while systematically externalizing environmental costs to less privileged populations within and across societies (Sultana, 2024). Similar dynamics are reflected in the stratification of consumers within the global North,

where practices understood as critical and sustainable consumption are found among significant, though typically privileged, segments of the population (Elliott, 2013). Environmental narratives, often mobilized through green imagery in the commercial promotion of sustainable goods, are therefore increasingly scrutinized in relation to social justice. While moments of moralization and demoralization of consumption have varied historically (Hilton, 2004; Trentmann, 2016), contemporary moralities of consumption are increasingly articulated through varieties of political ecology (Moore, 2015). In this context, post-colonial, decolonial, and feminist critiques of global ecological threats and inequalities within and between nations have become increasingly prominent (Chakrabarty, 2021; Fraser, 2022). Contemporary evaluations of what counts as responsible and sustainable emerge within historically unequal relations of power.

Such a perspective resonates with analyses of morality, value, and class that show how relations between dominant and subordinate groups are structured through struggles over legitimacy and moral worth (Skeggs, 2004; Lamont, 2000; Zelizer, 2009). Environmental governmentality can be understood as one modality through which ecological norms become socially disciplinary (Malier, 2019). Yet conspicuous sustainability exceeds discipline: it is a visible arena in which restraint, pleasure, ecological legitimacy, and competing visions of the common good are negotiated. In this context, the conspicuous greening of consumption among privileged groups may interrupt the virtuous chain of emulation that, as Veblen (1899) noted, underpinned trickle-down dynamics during the rise of consumer capitalism. At the same time, empirical research suggests that sustainable consumption may also be framed through distributed responsibility rather than individualized consumer blame (Welch et al., 2021), while ethnographic accounts show that eco-practices can combine ethical commitment with forms of emulation not reducible to status dynamics alone (Miller, 2024) and are embedded in diverse political orientations that may both reinforce polarization and enable collective action (Huddart, 2022).

Both dynamics are morally sustained by a normative ordering of consumption that operates through affects and evaluations. While moral ambivalence is a fundamental characteristic of consumer culture since the onset of the capitalist economy (Sassatelli, 2007), as we consider the ethical and political investment of the consumer through sustainability, its contradictory features appear to grow. Ethical consumption has been analyzed as reconfiguring consumption as a site of responsibility and producing self-governing moral subjects (Barnett et al., 2010), often through the historically deep figure of the “sympathetic consumer” (Skotnicki, 2021). This has been theorized in terms of “responsible sovereignty” as a normative framing that opens space for rethinking care, equality, and freedom within consumer culture (Sassatelli, 2015). A political morality perspective is nevertheless required, attentive both to how sustainability may be absorbed into divisive neoliberal logics and to what may resist or exceed such absorption.

Here are some points to summarize the argument. Firstly, the intense normative coding of consumption can be read as a process through which political order is both constituted and contested. Well before the mainstreaming of green commodities, Beverly Skeggs (2004) argued that dynamics between dominant and dominated groups are largely representational and revolve around moral reproach and resistance. Today, the greening of demand may generate forms of normative resistance grounded in unequal access to ecological legitimacy and recognition. The concept of conspicuous sustainability helps illuminate these dynamics. Secondly, the crucial question is how eco-sustainability is implicated in structures of inequality, and how what is rendered valuable may stand in contrast to what is made invisible, discarded, or antagonized. Normative resistance can thereby be understood as a structurally embedded

effect constraining climate-oriented consumption, alongside factors such as the individualization of environmental responsibility, the value/action gap, knowledge asymmetries, rebound effects, and ethical fetishism (Boström & Klintman, 2019). Unlike such factors, normative resistance emerges from perceived unevenness in the attribution of ecological legitimacy, touching upon deeply embodied experiences of self-worth, recognition, and social belonging. As environmental pressures are partly driven by status competition, sustainability policies must also engage with the valuations attached to consumption (Roscoe & Isenhour, 2021). Thirdly, research should examine more closely how different social groups define sustainability, as well as the forms of resistance such definitions generate. The narratives and practices of resistance around such normativity are to be mapped out, as this may promote the development of inclusive eco-values. Fourthly, undervalued forms of eco-sustainability deserve greater recognition. The challenge is to avoid moral and political divides while enabling bottom-up initiatives to gain wider traction. Finally, these moves entail confronting tensions. Navigating them is a priority for their significance is structural: moral valuation should not be treated as a super-structural effect of sustainable consumption, but as a constitutive element of practice through which ecological worth, legitimacy, and resistance are continuously accomplished.

Conspicuous sustainable consumption is not the only way to address structural dynamics. The technological infrastructure, institutional configuration, and ordinary organization of practice remain crucial to understanding consumption and sustainability (Shove, 2003; Shove et al., 2012; Shove & Warde, 2002; Warde & Gronow, 2001). Recent work extends practice-theoretical approaches by emphasizing the entanglement of everyday consumption, infrastructures, and governance arrangements (Hansen & Bo Nielsen, 2023). Research also compellingly shows that reducing working hours can both advance social equity and environmental sustainability, offering an alternative to individualized strategies and pointing toward more humane, equitable capitalism (Schor, 2011; Fitzgerald & Schor, 2023). Within this broader field, conspicuous sustainability does not replace practice-theoretical or political-economic explanations but adds an analytic focus on the political and moral dynamics through which sustainable practices become differentially recognized and valued. Addressing this requires taking all three pillars of sustainability seriously, with questions of equality placed at the center. The generative tension of this configuration helps us better understand today's challenges: rethinking social divisions while also attending to the effects of their visions, and problematizing mainstream accounts of the greening of demand by collectively valuing forms of eco-consumption that lie beyond the privileged.

5 The Ambivalence of Sustainable Consumption: The Symposium

It is precisely these tensions that the contributions to this Symposium address from different angles. Together, they show that sustainability is structured through morally and politically charged processes of valuation that are simultaneously enabling and divisive. This perspective has a twofold relevance: it revitalizes the study of sustainable consumption while elaborating on its tensions.

On this argument, Magnus Boström's "Symbolic Drivers of Unsustainable Mass Consumption: Embracing and Resisting Consumerism" (2026) argues that consumerism is sustained not only by economic infrastructures but also by cultural meanings, social comparison, and moral aspirations. Intensified by branding, social media, and widening inequalities, social comparison plays a central role as individuals seek both to fit in and to stand out (see also Boström, 2023). He thereby shows that affluent consumption, but also resistance to

consumerism, are matters of symbolic drivers and moral framing. Because anti-consumption may reinforce social distinctions and polarization, thoughtful communication and collective engagement can promote more inclusive pathways toward sustainable lifestyles. Josée Johnston and Emily Huddart, in “Consuming with Conscience? The Moral Privilege and Narrative Scale Paradoxes of Happy Meat” (2026), focus on ethically branded animal products marketed as local or sustainable. They develop the notions of the moral privilege paradox and the narrative scale paradox to show how ethical consumption can simultaneously enable care, reproduce exclusion, and obscure structural limits (see also Johnston et al., 2025). Sustainable consumption thus emerges as a field of enduring contradictions rather than a straightforward solution or mere status performance. The radical nature of such ambivalence is explored by Manisha Anantharaman and Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier’s “Market Inequalities and Ecological Distinction: The Moral Ruses of Sustainable Consumption across the North-South Divide” (2026). From a comparative perspective, they show how middle-class environmental lifestyles exclude poorer and working-class groups, who lack the resources to participate in green consumption (see also Anantharaman, 2023; Dubuisson-Quellier, 2021). They argue that this dynamic of inequality has been largely overlooked in climate policy and public discourse, despite being crucial for the present and the future of sustainability. Further global reach is provided by Arve Hansen’s “Consumption, Sustainability and Variegated Consumer Societies: Development and Distinction in Late-Socialist China and Vietnam” (2026). Focusing especially on mobility and food, he demonstrates how capitalist consumer societies take similar yet variegated forms across different developmental contexts. His emphasis is on how rapid material growth is intertwined with distinction and how new forms of green and conspicuous consumption emerge within globally uneven systems of provision, reinforcing class-based aspirations and inequalities. Finally, Paolo Magaudda and Roberta Sassatelli, in “Quiet Luxury. Simplicity, Sustainability, and the Rearticulation of Status in Consumer Culture” (2026), examine the reconfiguration of simplicity in contemporary consumer culture. They show how sustainability, moral value, and social distinction are co-produced through meanings, materialities, and competences. Rather than simply displacing consumerist logics, these practices rearticulate status through pleasurable restraint, estheticized craft, and embodied competence.

These contributions nuance the issue of sustainable consumption and distinction in different, yet complementary, ways. Their common thread is to try to overcome apocalyptic readings of the urgent climate predicament while remaining critically attentive to its contradictions.

Traveling across different spatialities, practices, and methodologies, the Symposium tries to capture the complexity of conspicuous sustainability. Consumers’ sustainable initiatives should neither be dismissed as a mere ideological twist that individualizes responsibility nor celebrated as a standalone means of producing significant economic or political change. Sustainability thus emerges not simply as the sum of individual actions or a policy goal but as a normative regime through which subjectivity and worth are produced and contested. In this field, inequality is not an external distortion but an internal condition, shaping who can respond to moral calls, how responsibility is distributed, and how compliance with and resistance to unsustainable affluence are articulated. Moral and affective dimensions are inseparable from the positional logics through which ecological legitimacy is produced and recognized. Multiple rationalities and narratives coexist, generating shifting relations of power, recognition, and refusal. Emulation may still operate in productive ways, but only if the visibility attached to sustainable consumption becomes less tightly bound to privilege and more capable of bringing into view practices, competences, and ways of living that remain socially undervalued despite

their ecological significance. The challenge is not only to green demand but to broaden the social basis of ecological legitimacy.

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