Editorial: Insights in sustainable consumption: 2022

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Editorial on the Research Topic
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Introduction

Sustainable Consumption (SC) research has developed into a well established interdisciplinary field of inquiry that regularly delivers cutting-edge scientific and policy-relevant knowledge on key issues such as energy use, mobility and food consumption. The significance of SC research is also reflected in the growing number of journals and Research Topics that are dedicated to (un)sustainable consumption topics, including the Sustainable Consumption Section in Frontiers in Sustainability. Moreover, recent developments across different areas of environmental and climate policy have shown the urgent need to better understand demand-side issues, further increasing the relevance of SC research. The latest IPCC report (AR6) aptly demonstrates this, especially the report of Working Group III which draws explicit attention to demand-side issues and measures (IPCC, 2022).

The idea behind the Research Topic entitled "*Insights in sustainable consumption: 2022*" was to invite contributions from international scholars in the field that capture fresh empirical insights and novel conceptual and methodological developments and that reflect on current challenges, and future perspectives in sustainable consumption. The Research Topic also reached out to early career researchers, to get their perspectives on the future of SC research.

Contributions to this Research Topic demonstrate the growing diversification of SC research regarding topics, concepts and methodologies. Topics include urban planning practices, ICT ownership and use, food consumption, embodied shopping experiences and post-COVID-19 consumption patterns. It is also possible to detect some overarching themes across different papers, including the impact of digitalisation on consumption. Conceptually, contributions to this Research Topic reflect an ongoing engagement within the research community with core questions concerning the interplay between societal structures and human agency, with a strong focus on more or less routinised everyday practices and their resource requirements and consumption-related consequences. In addition, questions of SC governance and related aspects of (political) power and influence remain of central importance (e.g., Mont et al.; Hirth et al.). Regarding methodological choices, this Research Topic aptly demonstrates the diversity of tools available, ranging from systematic and criteria-led analyses of documents, policy papers and reports to scientifically rigorous empirical research in the field that captures consumption-related attitudes, norms and practices in different countries.

Questions of scale also continue to occupy a prominent position within the field. Articles in this Research Topic evidently cover different temporal, spatial and cultural scales. Examples of local planning strategies to foster sustainable mobility (e.g., Samson and Freudendal-Pedersen) complement "big picture" discussions of global trends toward digitalisation and consumption (e.g., Hynes). Also perspectives from the Global South contrast with contributions from high-consumption countries located in the Global North. Even within the latter group of countries, differences between countries regarding how SC is viewed, practiced and governed are clearly discernible. At the same time, systematic comparisons of different cultures of consumption remain scarce, pointing to future research opportunities that pursue this line of inquiry.

The topic of time and time use also plays a significant role across different articles, although this is not always made explicit. For example, a number of contributions clearly show the diverse impacts of shifts in time use on consumption, most notably the growing acceleration of social and economic activities. As Samson and Freudendal-Pedersen in their contribution to this Research Topic observe, "[...] time is perceived as a limited resource in everyday life which drives (un)sustainable practices." Changing how people view and use time, including those professionals who make urban planning decisions that shape how much time it takes to move between sites of production and consumption, or work, education and leisure, can thus be of fundamental importance for the future of SC. This last point seems particularly pertinent given that many calls for sustainable consumption either implicitly or explicitly assume a radical transformation of how citizens use their time (cf. Rau, 2015). In fact, an emphasis on transforming time use clearly feeds into many SC initiatives, including those that seek to reconnect consumers of food to the world of agricultural production and that encourage people to re-engage with the "temporal logic" of growing and cooking their own food (Hennchen and Schäfer).

What potential future developments in the field can be gleaned from the current collection of articles in this Research Topic? Finding ways to better understand and possibly reconfigure the role of consumption as a central aspect of many everyday practices continues to be of utmost importance. In particular, grasping the diversity of consumption-related social, cultural and material aspects and their complex interactions remains a huge task. For example, the question of how to change values and norms in society to promote a reduction in resource consumption continues to loom large. Similarly, there is ample evidence throughout the paper that citizens' capacity to question, challenge and transform unsustainable consumption needs to be strengthened on a global scale. At the same time, recent efforts in different parts of the world to change how people consume, and what, have shown their conflict potential, especially when SC is perceived to be the pre-occupation of a wealthy "green" elite. Issues of justice, fairness, wellbeing, and adequate accessibility to goods and services thus deserve sustained attention from SC scholars well into the future. These points also closely relate to recent Frontiers in Sustainability Research Topics which address questions of care and sustainable consumption (RT "Sustainable Consumption and Care") as well as issues of sufficiency (RT "From an Ethic of Sufficiency to its Policy and Practice in Late Capitalism").

A major challenge that will continue to be relevant into the future is to build up and maintain channels for an effective science-society-policy dialogue. Many of the findings presented in this RT are highly important to SC advocates and policy makers, especially those insights that relate to societal structures that fuel unsustainable consumption and possible governance processes for the promotion of SC. However, the extent to which scientifically rigorous work reaches the realms of SC activism and policy remains unclear. More work will thus be needed in the future to make SC research matter. Targeted science communication, new publication formats that are easily accessible to decision makers and a choice of language that can be understood by scientific and non-scientific audiences alike could all contribute to a more inclusive and effective science-society-policy dialogue.

Summary of contributions

The research team headed by Doris Fuchs (Hirth et al.) in collaboration with the EU1.5°Lifestyles Consortium emphasizes the need for a more systematic approach to the concept of "structures" and their impact on (un)sustainable consumption. Their contribution invites readers to think more deeply about different types of structures, how they may or may not restrict the agency of individuals in particular ways, and how these restrictions may in fact support the development and adoption of more sustainable consumption patterns at the societal level. By revisiting the long-established structure-agency dilemma, Hirth et al. promote a new and innovative way of thinking about (un)sustainable consumption. Importantly, they use a systematic review of existing research to ground their significant conceptual arguments in empirical observations. As a result, a rich and nuanced picture of shallow and deep structural influences emerges, offering fresh insights into barriers and enablers of 1.5° lifestyles.

Samson and Freudendal-Pedersen call for radical changes in everyday practices of food, mobility, and housing. Drawing on qualitative interview data from Denmark, they point to the impact of (perceived) time consumption on whether more or less sustainable consumption decisions are taken to structure everyday life. The authors highlight the important role urban planning plays in this context and the dominance of approaches to infrastructure planning that favor car-based mobility. To illustrate an alternative perspective on urban space organization, they use the 15-min city concept which postulates that basic urban amenities should be reachable by walking or cycling within 15 min. Samson and Freudendal-Pedersen argue that by providing sufficient resources within walking or biking distance, sustainable consumption opportunities can become more time efficient and thus support the sustainable transition.

Moser and Bader analyse grassroots sustainability initiatives that aim to solve sustainability problems through different forms of experimentation with new patterns of consumption and production. Their work thus complements dominant research on individual pro-environmental behavior. Combining social innovation theory and environmental psychology, Moser and Bader develop and subsequently test various assumptions using a cross-sectional online survey. Their analysis reveals that (1) participation in sustainability

initiatives may have beneficial effects on resource-efficient everyday consumption behavior but (2) that awareness and consideration of user needs is indispensable for scaling up sustainability initiatives beyond the small circle of highly aware and engaged initiators, with a view to engaging the broader public.

Mont et al. analyse the challenge of researching, recommending and applying policies for sustainable consumption that ensure a dignified life for the entire population of the world within planetary boundaries. Through an integrative literature analysis they identify the frequent appearance of a three-step approach, classifying policies that intend to improve, change or reduce consumption. For each category they provide three examples. Recognizing how far Western societies are from sustainable consumption levels, they advocate for further research on winners and losers of the sustainability transition, with a view to supporting effective policy making through the provision of convincing arguments how different groups can benefit in the short and long term.

Hynes tackles the problem that digital Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) bring which were once lauded for their potential to dematerialize society. Based on literature review he provides a broad range of examples how ICTs, and the digital companies behind it, are now imposing additional burdens on the planet. This is not only due to additional energy and material consumption of personal electronics use but also, e.g., due to close collaboration of digital tech companies with fossil fuel companies to accelerate oil and gas extraction. With his article Hynes alerts us to the immense power and influence digital tech companies have over our lives, how they may propel the environment toward collapse and how they influence public opinion.

Hennchen and Schäfer offer a deeper understanding of changing food systems from a socio-ethical perspective. Based on empirical insights that rest upon primary qualitative and quantitative data analysis and an analysis of the relevant literature, they compare citizen shareholder companies with community supported agriculture initiatives and food co-ops. Participation in these innovations sends important signals to the dominant food regime to reward producers for sustainable practices and the establishment of stronger producer-consumer relationships and to motivate consumers to assume shared responsibility for sustainable food system transitions. Here, food innovations generate social cohesion between different actors along the production-distribution-consumption chain. Overall, Hennchen and Schäfer's findings reveal that all food innovations show a rather low level of inclusiveness, although efforts are made to overcome barriers to access. Instead, these initiatives tend to appeal to certain population groups but not to others. Taken together, however, these food innovations complement each other by providing opportunities for people with different motivations and resources to play an active role in food transitions.

Boström et al. analyse the long-term transformative potential of the COVID 19 experience toward more sustainable lifestyles and reduced consumption. Through a content analysis of semi-structured interviews carried out in Sweden and Ireland – countries with very different COVID 19 restrictions – they found that people did not generally long for material objects: they missed meeting people, cultural/sports events but also traveling abroad. Yet some increased their consumption of goods out of boredom. The authors conclude that some long-term lifestyle changes are likely but that these are neither widespread nor consistent across all domains of everyday life. While some practices that emerged during the pandemic will likely remain (like working from home), others will need much external encouragement to continue, including material, technological and infrastructural support by governments and other collective actors. The most encouraging finding by the authors is that the collective memory of different ways to organize daily life and consumption needs offers opportunities to think differently and try out alternatives, remembering what was possible in times of crisis. The fact that people have shown that they can adapt to difficult circumstances and handle limits and restrictions could open up promising pathways toward future consumption-related sustainability transformations.

Solér in her article shows how an embodied view of fashion shopping can increase our understanding of unsustainable shopping practices more generally and help to promote shopping for sustainable products. Based on literature review from marketing and consumer studies, her social and situated embodiment perspective highlights how socio-material marketplace elements configure shopping outcomes. Her findings show that efforts to promote sustainable garments through information provision, such as eco-labeling, will not lead to any major changes in fashion shopping. Instead, she argues unsustainable fashion shopping practices only can change if supply and communication practices in the fashion marketplace change.

Finally, Bhar develops a conceptual exposition on sustainable consumption and the Global South. Reviewing gaps in the sustainable consumption literature, he outlines a conceptual framework which recognizes that corporate-led globalization has led to individual development aspirations of high wellbeing based on material consumption. This, he argues, may hinder any sense of sustained happiness or wellbeing even when people were provided with an objectively defendable decent standard of living. A new understanding of a good life is thus needed which rests upon concepts such as the needs approach or the decent living concept based on the capabilities approach. Moreover, alternative conceptualisations for a good life have to go hand in hand with alternative economic models. Unless the fundamental tendency to push toward individualization based on private material possessions is tackled at its roots, alternative economic models cannot materialize. Thus, Bhar is convinced, recognizing the dialogical interdependence between the good life as a process and as an outcome is critical to designing pathways toward individual satisfaction or contentment within economic models based on sufficiency.

We hope that the diverse contributions to this Research Topic offer valuable insights to SC scholars and activists around the world and that they will inspire ground breaking future SC research.

Author contributions

HR: Writing—original draft. SL: Writing—original draft.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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