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## EDITED BY

Sylvia Lorek,  
Sustainable Europe Reserch Institute, Germany

## REVIEWED BY

Dennis Soron,  
Brock University, Canada  
Kartika Anggraeni,  
Collaborating Centre on Sustainable  
Consumption and Production, Germany

## \*CORRESPONDENCE

Soumyajit Bhar  
✉ c-soumyajit.bhar@krea.edu.in

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# Sustainable consumption and the Global South: A conceptual exposition

Soumyajit Bhar\*

Environmental Studies and Psychology, Krea University, Sri City, India

Although deliberations around the idea of sustainable consumption have triggered pro-environmental consumption behaviors, empirical works show such consumption choices hardly manage to lower the overall environmental impacts of their total consumption baskets. Driven by corporate-led globalization, most developing countries have adopted the prevailing neoliberal economic model centered on growthism and developmentalism. What complicates the situation further is that this capitalistic economic model fetishizes the wealthy and valorizes aspirations that shape socio-culturally held notions of good life toward overconsumption, especially in the Global South. The discussion on sustainable consumption needs to expand its scope from the post-materialistic discourses in the Global North to realign itself better with the developmental discourse in the GS. Expanding this scope is easier said than done because of the fundamental dependency of the neo-liberal economic policy-driven developmentalism on consumerism. Once these macro-economic priorities percolate into socio-cultural priorities, further driving individuals' sense of the good life, it becomes even more challenging to decouple materialistically-oriented need-satisfiers from wellbeing. Therefore, it is to theorize how the act of consumption happens at the complex intersections of political-economic priorities, socio-cultural conventions, and individual aspirations for a better life, which is even more so relevant in the context of the GS. It is critical to understand, especially for the Global South, how these structural factors percolate into socio-cultural and individual priorities through the changing notions of the good life and eventually act as the fundamental sustaining factors that keep the prevailing political-economic arrangements running.

## KEYWORDS

Global South, good life, sustainable consumption, alternative economy, conceptual framework

## Sustainable consumption: History, scope, and gaps

It has become evident that unless we take the issue of opulence head-on, the looming climate crisis threatening humanity's very existence cannot be addressed at its core (Brand and Markus, 2017; Garcia et al., 2021; Newell et al., 2021; Sahakian et al., 2021). The literature on sustainable consumption has grown significantly in the last few decades to shape consumer behaviors toward more sustainable forms. Deliberations around the idea of sustainable consumption have triggered pro-environmental consumption behaviors, at least among the well-to-do sections of the Global North (henceforth GN). Empirical works, however, show that such consumption choices hardly manage to lower the overall environmental impacts of their total consumption baskets (Kastner and Matthies, 2014; Moser and Kleinhüchelkotten, 2018).

One of the default explanations put forth to expound on the impasse faced by consumer policies in the GN is

The quest for sustainability has run up against the unwillingness of privileged consumers to relinquish the lifestyles to which they have become accustomed. Accordingly, this inertia not only signals a moral lapse into hedonism, but reflects the degree to which the maintenance of personal identity has become linked to consumption (Soron, 2010, p. 173).

This impasse is partly owing to the “in-built limits of the prevailing rational choice model within the sphere of consumer policy” (Jackson, 2006, p. 110). Moreover, the “attitude-behavior” gap or the “value-action” gap is already a well-documented pattern observed in the case of individuals molding their consumption choices as per any socio-environmental concerns (Carrington et al., 2010; Young et al., 2010; Greenindex, 2012; Terlau and Hirsch, 2015). This literature also focused on the agency factors that drive consumption, including values, attitudes, knowledge, and intentions (Hurth, 2010). The underlying model of consumers in the sustainable consumption literature is simplified and ignores how everyday consumption practices are embedded within a nexus of values, non-instrumental motivations, emotions, self-conception, and cultural associations (Soron, 2010). Owing to this, studies on sustainable consumption fail to pay due importance to the identity-oriented, expressive, and aesthetic dimensions of prevailing consumption patterns situated at the intersection of individuals and society (Dobers and Strannegard, 2005; Soron, 2010). This simplified model of consumers is why sustainable consumption practices are not adopted in society (Soron, 2010). Another point to note is that pro-environmental consumption behaviors and values are developed as an extension of post-materialistic values, feasible and researched mainly in societies of the GN that have reached a certain threshold of material saturation in terms of standards of living (Inglehart, 2008; Zhou, 2010; Hurst et al., 2013).

Relatively less attention has been paid in this literature to the Global South (henceforth GS). However, in rapidly developing countries like India, there is an emerging upper class with consumption levels comparable to the global middle or upper-middle class (Bhar, 2021). At the same time, a significant section of the world population does not manage to lead any form of decent living, whereas another tiny section is living lifestyles that are clearly beyond any sustainability limits (Gore, 2015, 2020; Hardoon, 2015). The GS, where about 85% of the world’s population resides, is currently experiencing three phenomena simultaneously: (1) a sharp rise in income as well as consumption inequality (comparable to that of the Gilded Age<sup>1</sup>), (2) doing poorly in addressing or responding to the pressing environmental sustainability and justice concerns, and (3) rise in environmentally-impactful luxury consumption patterns as well as the emergence of consumerism as a predominant outlook toward life (Chancel and

Piketty, 2019; Bhar, 2021; Bhar et al., 2022). Driven by corporate-led globalization, most developing countries have adopted the prevailing neoliberal economic model, be it seemingly democratic or authoritarian, centered on growthism and developmentalism (Fuchs, 2007; Siddiqui, 2012). What complicates the situation further is that this capitalistic economic model fetishizes the wealthy and valorizes aspirations that shape socio-culturally held notions of good life toward overconsumption, in the GS at least as strong as in the GN (Bhar, 2021). The way the dominant idea of development in the GS has oriented through consumeristic pathways to higher individual freedom of consumer choice and material conveniences makes it more so important to understand the ramification of this in the GS. The very fact that this dominant economic model intrinsically depends on consumers’ insatiable desires as its most significant driver makes it inevitable to look for alternative economic models. In other words, conceptualizing alternative models becomes crucial as sustainable consumption cannot be achieved without bringing fundamental systemic change away from the prevailing neoliberal model that thrives on consumerism (Kallis et al., 2020).

Scholars show that the core problem of this age of consumerism is that we seem to have adopted material means like expensive cars, phones, and personal accessories to satisfy some of our fundamental needs and wants, such as security, companionship, and others (Jackson et al., 2004; Jackson, 2005). Decoupling those needs and wants from the prevailing materialistic need-satisfiers seems to be the only way toward a sustainable world (Jackson, 2005; Middlemiss, 2018). In that same vein, adopting more community-oriented and local economy-dependent ways of life is promoted, where a community-supported life can be the need-satisfier to human needs such as companionship (Ibid.).

In this sense, the sustainable consumption discourse needs to expand its scope from the post-materialistic perspective in the GN and realign itself better with the developmental discourse in the GS (Booth, 2020, 2021; Matthew, 2021). Spengler (2016), through defining sufficiency as a minimum and maximum, does indicate the need for this realignment of the sustainable consumption discourse in the GS. Expanding this scope of the discourse, however, is easier said than done because of the fundamental dependency of the neoliberal economic policy-driven developmentalism on consumerism both in GN and GS. Another challenge is that once these macro-economic priorities percolate into socio-cultural priorities, further mainstreaming individuals’ sense of the good life, it becomes even more challenging to decouple materialistically-oriented need-satisfiers from wellbeing. This decoupling, however, seems to be the only way forward for a sustainable and just future for all that offers a higher sense of wellbeing. The need is to develop a robust, theoretically grounded conceptual framework to guide necessary empirical research. In the following, I will present some leading questions and conceptual schemas, which will chart out possible trajectories for developing such a framework.

## Reviewing conceptual gaps in the sustainable consumption literature

Argues that the literature on sustainable consumption needs some novel insights to go beyond what denote as a technocratic

<sup>1</sup> Crabtree (2018) denotes the current economic condition in the country as “India’s New Gilded Age” where the level of stark inequalities can be equated with that observed in the late nineteenth century in the US.

“lever, knobs, and dials” approach for inducing or nudging changes in consumption behavior. Evans (2019) shows how even though different phases in the literature on sustainable consumption have emerged to fill various theoretical gaps, comprehensive conceptual frameworks still do not exist that link the macroeconomic factors with the everyday symbolic aspect of consumption. Warde (2010) and Warde (2014) suggests that acquisition, appropriation, and appreciation are either “the three fundamental dimensions of consumption” or the thematic preoccupations of successive waves of consumption scholarship. The literature on sustainable consumption developed substantially with the cultural turn within the sociology of consumption and with that, the focus of this literature moved from the acquisition to the appreciation dimension (Evans, 2019). In this turn, the focus came on the meaning creation aspects of consumption primarily through the lens of postmodernism (Evans, 2019). Consumption choices were seen as signifying “webs of cultural meanings which constitute symbolic resources for individual choice” (Warde, 2014, p. 281). The focus was also on examining consumption through the lens of individual choices. In the process, scholarly attention shifted from the acquisition and appropriation dimensions of consumption to the appreciation dimension (Evans, 2019). However, the most significant caveat was that the link between production and consumption was lost, with the acquisition dimension losing priority.

An overemphasis on individual consumer choice being stripped away from its situatedness at the intersection of socio-cultural and political-economic realms meant that the study of consumption was losing its fundamentally normative aspect of linking consumption to socio-environmental externalities (Evans, 2019). Social practice theory emerged at this juncture, focused on inconspicuous aspects of consumption, and did manage to dissolve the overemphasis on individual autonomy or will to power (Shove et al., 2012; Evans, 2019). And instead, the focus is brought on the habitual aspects of consumption. Various studies focusing on inconspicuous consumption patterns developed on this theory, and the point of analysis shifted from appropriation and appreciation aspects of consumption back to acquisition (Evans, 2019, 2020). This meant that the previous thrust on consumer culture and the connection with the larger economic forces were entirely lost. So, the need is to situate the act of consumption within the larger economic priorities and the consumer culture. Soron (2010), drawing from Wilk (2002) and Jackson et al. (2004), argues that a more fruitful line of inquiry would be to incorporate socially embedded approaches to sustainable consumption by recognizing the intricate relationship between individual agency and the social and cultural contexts in which individuals are situated. It also substantiates the need to understand better how such economic priorities through the category of the good life percolate into the priorities of individuals and socio-culturally accepted ways of doing things.

Not only the sustainable consumption literature, but even research on consumer culture in social psychology has also broadly taken a microsocial perspective, investigating consumer behaviors and choices through the lens of individual social cognitions (e.g., Bagozzi et al., 2002; Kardes et al., 2006; Wänke, 2009). McDonald et al. (2017) show the need to adopt a macrosocial perspective by analyzing the intersection between social psychological concepts of self-identity with neoliberal political economy and consumer

culture. By adopting a macrosocial perspective, McDonald et al. (2017) also build on critiques of experimental or mainstream social psychology that argue its individualistic ontology and positivist epistemology constrains its ability to look beyond the individual to understand how societal institutions shape psychological processes and their power relations (Pancer, 1997; Hepburn, 2003; Greenwood, 2004, 2014; Parker, 2007; Fox et al., 2009; Oishi et al., 2009). Along with the need to bridge the gap between agential persuasions and structural factors, what stood out from the above discussion was how political-economic factors play a critical role and demand better conceptual incorporation in the entire dynamic. Mathai et al. (2021) show how a political economy-based production-consumption framework argues for a position at the intersection of individual choice and structural forces to delineate pathways to achieve sustainable consumption.

The literature on sustainable consumption needs to incorporate a border conceptualization of consumers beyond rational economic beings who are expected to respond mechanistically to a greater amount of information or economic incentives and disincentives or even nudges to eventually adopt pro-environmental consumption behaviors (Soron, 2010). The upshot of such a model is that the moral onus of behavioral change squarely rests on individuals conceptualized as consumers. The role the structural factors play in this regard gets categorically ignored. The need is to conceptualize individuals as socio-culturally situated identity project-driven subjects (Bhar, 2019, 2021). Hurth (2010), by accentuating the findings of Giddens (1991) and Stryker and Burke (2000), notes that the self-concept or “identity as a narrative” appears to be a critical conceptual category by which agency and structure can be mediated. In that vein, Soron (2010) notes, “to be successful, efforts to encourage ‘sustainable behavior change’ must address the legitimate psycho-social anxieties, desires and identity need that, however counterproductively, have been channeled into consumer culture” (p. 179). Therefore, it is to theorize how the act of consumption happens at the complex intersections of political-economic priorities, socio-cultural conventions, and individual aspirations for a better life, which is even more so relevant in the context of the GS. Such a theorization needs to happen in the backdrop that people consume due to varied private motivations and environmental impacts of the consumption-production nexus are always unintended consequences (Akenji, 2013). It implies how critical it is to unearth the deeper motivations and values at the level of individuals that shapes one’s consumption patterns (Bhar, 2021). Not only to understand these motivations and values but also to shed light on the process of interaction between structural factors and agential persuasions through which these motivations and values emerge, sustain, and transform in diverse socio-cultural and political-economic settings. Such an understanding would also address the long-standing structure and agency divide in the sustainable consumption literature.

## Delineating the scaffolding of a conceptual framework

As already discussed, in the GS context, one more layer of complexity is the fundamental dependency of the neo-liberal economic regimes that drive the developmental trajectory on growthism fuelled by consumerism. In this manner, the globalized

consumer culture shapes the developmental aspirations of these nations. In this context, pathways toward sufficiency, I argue, would fail to offer a higher sense of individual wellbeing as long as the socio-culturally held developmental aspirations to materialistic conveniences shape notions of good life. Undoubtedly, GS needs leap-frogging pathways to realize a higher sense of individual wellbeing within a framework of sufficiency bypassing the post-materialistic routes. Naturally, along with the limitations listed above, I pose that a conceptual framing suited for the GS should shed light on how political-economic priorities percolate into the socio-cultural conventions that shape individual values and consumption choices.

My earlier work has established that the need is now to theorize better the political-discursive process through which these priorities percolate in the socio-cultural and individual realm and eventually give rise to dialogical feedback (Bhar, 2019). Such a conceptual framing should equally pay attention to the role individual values developed at the intersection of the “macro-social” milieu play in shaping consumption decisions and how aspiration and hope for a materialistically better life deeply moderate such a relationship (Bhar, 2019). The dimension of aspiration is particularly pertinent in the GS, where the overwhelming majority still live well below any objectively defined energy and materials required for a decent life. Therefore, better life in such a context means the energy and materialistically dominated standard of life privileged sections both globally as well as in pockets of affluence in the GS enjoy. The fact that the prevalent notion of a better life is materialistically oriented implies that even if, hypothetically, the large impoverished sections of the developing world are provided with an objectively-defendable decent standard of living, it might fail to offer any sense of sustained happiness or wellbeing. In this context, I propose that the notion of good life as a theoretical category can act as a bridge between structural factors and agential persuasions as it can capture what one values in life by encapsulating both the aspirational/symbolic and habitual/practices aspects of consumption patterns (Bhar, 2019, 2021).

The notion of the good life as a conceptual category is not new in the sustainable consumption literature. Scholarly works, theoretically and empirically, attempted to define the notion of the good life within a sustainability framework. The two most prominent approaches to empirically capture the conceptual category of the good life are the needs approach (e.g., Doyal and Gough, 1991; Max-Neef, 1991; Jackson et al., 2004) and the capabilities approach (e.g., Nussbaum, 1992; Robeyns and van der Veen, 2007; Burchardt and Vizard, 2011). The needs approach defines universal needs corresponding to realizing a good life. The capability approach focuses on defining the need-satisfiers that can help achieve those universal needs. Another recent approach developed as an empirical extension of the capability approach is Rao and Baer's (2012) decent living consumption approach. The approach based on Max-Neef's framework attempts to quantify the material basis necessary to realize a decent living consumption standard: a good life permitted under a framework of sufficiency. One overwhelming commonality among these approaches is that all these seem to focus excessively on the “what” aspect of the good life. In other words, different approaches attempt to define the good life, be it at the level of means like need-satisfiers or

ends as needs. Unpacking the good life only through a definitional lens will be limited in translating that good life into a real-world scenario. If supposed to happen democratically in a secular context and not expected as a top-down policy imposition, this translation would require a more holistic understanding of the good life both as a process and an outcome. Conceptualizing the dialogical interdependence between the good life as a process and as an outcome is critical to designing pathways that would help us achieve satisfaction or contentment within an ethic of sufficiency. Moreover, the good life as a process needs to pay attention to how the notion of good life is situated within a context shaped by the interplay between individual aspirations and political-economic and socio-cultural factors. The context here determines how the process will ensure the delivery of the outcomes.

At this juncture, the question is: how to conceptualize socio-culturally- and economically- prudent alternative pathways to a sustainable and just world for all that are particularly relevant for the GS and can simultaneously offer individuals a higher sense of wellbeing? Conceptualizing an alternative sense of community becomes crucial, as otherwise sustainable consumption within a framework of sufficiency, especially in the GS, cannot be achieved without bringing fundamental systemic change away from the prevailing neoliberal economic model that thrives on consumerism and orients socio-culturally held definitions of good life toward materialistic need-satisfiers (Kallis et al., 2020). Such communities could help decouple human needs from materialistic need-satisfiers toward a sustainable and just world for all, offering individuals a higher sense of wellbeing. It is not that such attempts toward alternative communities, be they concerted (like Auroville) or rather spontaneous (Hippie culture), are not being made in the past. Several examples of intentional communities or ecovillages worldwide look to find alternative sources of meaning in life beyond pursuing materialistic means (Liftins, 2013; LeVasseur and Warren, 2018; Dias and Loureiro, 2019; Gibbons, 2020). Evidently, the exclusivity that is embedded in such green or alternative ways of life, more often than not, makes such choices as symbols of status and thus attracts those who can afford such (intentionally) expensive tastes (Namakkal, 2021). Two critical questions in this regard that can shape future research trajectories are: does that mean one needs to experience first-hand energy and resource-dependent materialistic living thriving on the individualization project to choose an alternative way of life? In other words, does that mean individuals who are yet leading frugal and thus sustainable standards of life, primarily, due to lack of access and choice, can never consciously choose a more socio-culturally just version of low material-dependent ways of life?

Moreover, research focusing on conceptualizing alternative economic models tends to adopt a macroeconomic perspective and eventually, a top-down approach. However, my research shows how individuals, through their conception of good life, appropriate the larger macroeconomic priorities and in turn, feedback to the same system, giving rise to a self-sustaining process (Bhar, 2019). To elaborate through the example of India—although the creation of the idea of a new middle class in India was a political discursive process instituted post-economic liberalization, the individuals proactively kept appropriating those macroeconomic priorities in their good life definitions and aspiring to lead a life of the West or material opulence (Fernandes, 2000a,b). There are, however,



several examples of alternative value systems that look beyond homogenized definitions of a good life oriented toward individual material possessions and opulence in the GS and elsewhere. A thorough bottom-up understanding of those good life definitions, as attempted by initiatives such as Vikalp Sangam (Kothari, 2020; Das, 2021) and Buen Vivir (Balch, 2013; Acosta and Abarca, 2018), seems critical in delineating socio-cultural and techno-economical pathways for “leapfrogging” for the GS to address the concern of rising inequality without breaching sustainability limits. Both Vikalp Sangam and Buen Vivir are initiatives from the Global South that highlight true wellbeing (“the good life”) is only possible as part of a community.

In conclusion, I argue, the need is to develop a bottom-up microeconomic driven understanding of alternative economies that can successfully support alternative attempts to foster good and meaningful lives. It is like constructing alternative economic models that would uphold such alternatives as well as diverse sets of good life definitions. Any alternative economic model to the prevailing neo-liberalism cannot be possible unless the fundamental tendency to push toward individualization based on private material possessions is tackled at its roots. Undoubtedly it is valuable to approach the question of alternative economies by challenging the structural factors like the neo-liberal political economy dependent on and at the same time, driving insatiable consumer demand. However, to reiterate, it is equally important, especially for the GS, to understand how these structural factors percolate into socio-cultural and individual priorities through the changing notions of the good life and eventually act as the fundamental sustaining drivers that keep the prevailing political-economic arrangements running.

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## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares 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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