The social imaginary of modern consumer disposal – A Consumer Culture Theory study of disposal practices among consumers in Denmark

PhD dissertation

Cristiano Smaniotto

Aarhus BSS
Aarhus University
Department of Business Development and Technology
2022

Table of contents

List of figures

List of tables

Abstract

This dissertation investigates consumer disposal through the lens of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). Driven by the fundamental question of how social and cultural formations influence consumption phenomena, CCT research has produced valuable insights into the identity and value pursuits guiding consumer disposal practices. Yet investigations of the socio-historical structures underlying these practices remain scarce. Attending to these structures can however help us better understand why consumers in modern society dispose of things like they do and, therewith, what we can do to prevent the formation of waste.

Accordingly, this dissertation aims to advance knowledge on the socio-historical structuring of disposal by addressing the question of how the social imaginary informs consumer disposal practices in modern society. Drawing on a philosophical interpretation of the social imaginary as the individual and collective capacity to create undetermined representations, the dissertation explores the social imaginary representations underlying consumer disposal practices in Denmark. It does so through three empirical studies employing a mix of qualitative methods, including interviews, (netnographic) observations and

document analyses. In addition, a fourth theoretical paper discusses more broadly how the social imaginary of marketing theory contributes to the performative reproduction of a socio-economic order based on waste generation.

The findings illustrate how the social imaginary creates a tension between the present and a potential future that triggers consumer disposal practices. Specifically, they show that consumers dispose of their everyday objects in order to guard themselves from potential risks or, on the contrary, to fulfill some fictional expectations of themselves and others. They also illustrate how these future imaginations are qualitatively informed by collective representations of subjectivity and society that define the zeitgeist of modern disposal. Overall, these findings carry important theoretical implications regarding the role of the imaginary in value formation and social order institution. They also point to some practical suggestions for preventing waste both at the individual and collective level.

Resumé

Denne afhandling undersøger affaldsbortskaffelse med udgangspunkt i Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). Drevet af det grundlæggende spørgsmål om, hvordan sociale og kulturelle formationer påvirker forbrugs fænomener, har CCT-forskning givet værdifuld indsigt om de identitet- og værdiforfølgelser, der styrer forbrugernes bortskaffelsespraksisser. Undersøgelser af de sociohistoriske strukturer, der ligger til grund for disse praksisser, er dog stadig sparsomme. Alligevel kan en mere dybtgående indblik i disse strukturer hjælpe os med bedre at forstå, hvorfor moderne forbrugere skiller sig af med ting, som de gør. Og dermed hvad vi kan gøre for at støtte en mere effektiv affaldsforebyggelse til gavn for mennesker og miljø.

Formålet med afhandling er derfor at fremme viden om den sociohistoriske strukturering af forbrugerbortskaffelsespraksisser ved at undersøge hvordan det sociale imaginære formerer disse praksisser. Gennem en filosofisk fortolkning af det sociale imaginære, som vedrører individets og kollektivitets medfødte evne til at skabe ubestemte repræsentationer, vil denne afhandling undersøge, hvordan repræsentationer af det sociale imaginære indskriver sig i

affaldsbortskaffelsespraksisser blandt forbrugere i Danmark. Dette afdækkes gennem tre empiriske undersøgelser, der involverer en række kvalitative forskningsmetoder, herunder interviews, (netnografiske) observationer og dokumentanalyser. Derudover argumenteres i en fjerde artikel for, hvordan markedsføringsteoriens sociale imaginære bidrager til den performative gengivelse af en samfundsøkonomisk orden baseret på affaldsproduktion.

Resultaterne viser at det sociale imaginære skaber en spænding mellem nutiden og en potentiel fremtid, som udløser forbrugernes bortskaffelsespraksisser. Specifikt viser de, at forbrugerne skiller sig af med deres daglige genstande for at beskytte sig mod potentielle risici; eller omvendt for at opfylde nogle fiktive forventninger til sig selv og andre. Derudover viser de hvordan disse fremtidsforestillinger er kvalitativt karakteriseret af kollektive repræsentationer af subjektivitet og samfund, der definerer den moderne affaldsbortskaffelses tidsånde. Samlet set bidrager denne afhandling til CCT-viden ved at vise det imaginæres centrale rolle i værdiskabelsen og samfundsordres (re)institueringen. Desuden peger den på nogle praktiske forslag til at forebygge affald både hos den enkelte og i samfundet.

List of papers

This dissertation is based on the following papers:

- Nøjgaard, M., Smaniotto, C., Askegaard, S., Cimpan, C., Zhilyaev, D., & Wenzel, H. (2020). How the dead storage of consumer electronics creates consumer value. *Sustainability*, *12*(14), 5552.
- Smaniotto, C., Peronard, J.P., & Ballantyne, A.G. (20XX). Back from the future: how fictional expectations affect consumer valuation and disposition of objects.
- Smaniotto, C. (20XX). Starting with the man in the mirror: ethical subjectivation and the reflexive constitution of responsible subjects.
- Smaniotto, C. (20XX). The imaginary (re)institution of marketing theory.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation wouldn't have been possible without the support of a number of people. This page is dedicated to them (including those I may have clumsily forgot to mention).

First, I would like to thank Aarhus University for giving me the opportunity to pursue this PhD. A special thank goes to the leaders and colleagues of the Department of Business Development and Technology in Herning. You have always shown interest in and support to my project, even when we had our paradigmatic differences (I am not talking about you, Anne. I know you like interpretivist research. Also, you are an excellent co-author and a caring colleague). I really appreciate it.

Thank you to my readers. This work is literally intended for you. I am of course talking about the PhD assessment committee. I am truly grateful that you found the time and will to read this thesis. I hope you won't make me change my mind. (But seriously, a heartfelt thank you. I know how many tasks academics are expected to deal with).

Thank you to my supervisors. A big thank you to Jean-Paul, who was key to make this all happen. Your enthusiasm and seemingly boundless intellectual curiosity have been (and still

are) great source of motivation. Also thank you to Søren, who agreed to get onboard as co-supervisor. Your ability to turn any of my tentative ideas into an intellectually stimulating conversation has been (and still is) truly inspiring. And to both of you: thank you for (more or less directly) encouraging me to read Castoriadis. Your suggestion made the whole process more painful, confusing and stressful that it could have been. But also much more enriching, both professionally and personally.

Thank you to the Department of Marketing at Aalto University in Finland for hosting my research stay abroad. While it was cold outside, you made sure it would be warm inside (and we are talking about Finland… I guess I have spent too much time in Scandinavia). My time there gave me new energy and perspectives. A special thanks in this regard goes to my (office-)mates – Hunter, Oscar, and Petra.

Thank you to my family and friends. I am not really sure how you managed to bear my moods, complaints, absences and critiques of modern consumer society during the past three years. Yet you did – and you never stopped encouraging and believing in me. It may not have always seemed so, but your support and love meant a lot to me. I just wanted to let you know that I

understand if you don't feel like talking to me for some time now. Let's call it even.

And last but not the least, thank you to the person who has been there with me in the backstage the whole time. You more than anyone, Nathalie, know what a journey and emotional rollercoaster this thesis has been for me. I am beyond grateful for your support, comprehension and advice. And I am sure you are thrilled to hear that it is now time for me to get back to do some more cooking at home.

1
Introduction

Setting the scene: the social problem of waste

Waste disposal is one of the greatest challenges of modern society. Forecasts indicate namely that solid waste[1] will grow worldwide by 70% by 2050 – more than doubling population growth over the same period (Kaza et al., 2018). This increase is problematic because the production and disposal of waste is associated with a host of social and environmental issues, including resource depletion, water and air pollution, animals harming, the spread of diseases, the rise of informal economies and the formation of infrastructural break-downs (Kaza et al., 2018). Studies further show that developed countries lead this detrimental race, as their higher consumption levels translate into higher waste levels (Kaza et al., 2018; Wiedmann et al., 2020).

---

[1] The OECD (2007) defines solid waste as 'useless and sometimes hazardous material with low liquid content' (728).

Until recently, European policies have focused on improving the technologies and methods for treating waste (Bartl, 2014). Yet successful technological advances (e.g. more effective composting, higher recycling ratios, more efficient energy recovery systems) have been proving insufficient to lower the pressure of waste on the environment (Chen et al., 2020), as they address the symptoms rather than the causes of the problem (Bartl, 2014). Research has therefore suggested that waste reduction efforts should be guided by more holistic principles of prevention, rather than treatment (Bartl, 2014; Chen et al., 2020; Kaza et al., 2018). That is, instead of focusing on efficiently managing waste that is already produced, we should strive towards effectively preventing its formation. Circular economy models (where the by-products of production and consumption processes are, ideally, indefinitely reinvested as resources within the system, without environmental spillovers) can be regarded as an instance of this societal shift towards an ideology of waste prevention.

Yet if we are to effectively prevent waste, we must take into account its profound social embeddedness. As the failure of technological advances to reduce waste attests, waste is not a mere technical issue that can be treated as such. This is because

the production and disposal of waste is deeply connected to the organization of society. This point is probably most clearly illustrated by the influential work of British anthropologist Mary Douglas. In *Purity and Danger* (2003), Douglas shows namely how cultural categorizations of purity and impurity (e.g. waste) are at the very heart of social organization. In a more provoking fashion, French sociologist Dominque Laporte (2002) similarly argues that the creation of modern society (and subjectivity) rests on the development of an ever more efficient, material as well as symbolic, system to separate humans from the most dangerous waste of all: their feces[2]. These insights point to the fact that the production and management of waste cannot be separated from questions of social organization.

In particular, the production of waste (of all types, and not only human excrements) is central to the organization of modern capitalist society. Capitalist society is namely founded upon the logic of infinite (economic) expansion (Castoriadis, 1981). This

---

[2] Laporte builds his Foucauldian governmental analysis on Freud's observation that the beginning of civilization can be traced back to the time when humans started to walk upright. Upright walking allowed humans to distance themselves from the ground and, therewith, from their excrements. Human excrements became then symbols of our repudiated animal condition, something we should separate ourselves from in the most categorical manner.

logic is practically translated by company marketing activities into the continuous creation of new needs and desires among consumers and, importantly, a concomitant instinctive urge to dispose of things (Packard, 1961). In the capitalist utopia (or *dys*topia, depending on the point of view), 'the haunting problem of [market] saturation has been vanquished' (3) by a systemic and spontaneous product disposability, which also eliminates marketers' concern for demand stimulation (Packard, 1961). In this light, waste disposal emerges as a fundamental (and possibly, the most fundamental) issue for scholars of marketing and consumer culture.

Disposal in Consumer Culture (Theory)

In light of the above, this PhD project investigates waste disposal through the lens of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). As emphasized by the authors of what has been later referred to as the CCT 'manifesto' (Bode and Østergaard, 2013), CCT is not a 'grand theory', but a 'family of theoretical perspectives' addressing the fundamental question of how modern consumer culture is (re)produced (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, 868; see also Arnould and Thompson, 2007). Put differently, CCT is not a theory per se, but an academic field of inquiry. In the geographical

landscape of modern science, the field is located within the broader disciplines of marketing and consumer research. Historically, CCT was indeed born out of a discontent with the theoretical and methodological 'axioms of microeconomics and cognitive psychology' (Thompson et al., 2013, 155) which dominated consumer research in the 1980s (and arguably, still dominate) and which reduced consumption to a set of choices made by economically rational individuals, thereby downplaying the influence of social and cultural formations. Challenging the prevailing positivist paradigm, harbingers of the CCT field (see for example Belk, 1987) turned then to interpretivist approaches to offer a more anthropological and sociological understanding of consumption and market phenomena. Today, almost 40 years later, CCT research remains characterized by an orientation towards interpretivist epistemologies and a reliance on a plurality of theories and (almost exclusively) qualitative methodologies, which are often drawn from a variety of neighboring disciplines in the social sciences and humanities.

Consistent with the field's overall goal of retaining cultural complexity in analyses of consumption (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), CCT studies on disposal has gone far beyond traditional decision-making perspectives largely present in the

parent marketing field. While an extensive literature review is beyond the scope of this introduction (since each of the individual studies included in the dissertation provides a specific and targeted literature review), I present here a brief summary of CCT's most prevalent approaches to the study of disposal/disposition[3]. It should be noted that this summary is intended as a heuristic device to help the reader and I think (critically) about existing CCT studies on disposition, and not as a systematic literature review of these studies. Furthermore, as it always happens when 'sorting things out' (Bowker and Star, 2000), the proposed classification does generate some waste. The attentive reader may indeed find that some studies are missing from, while others are (or could be) present in two or more of the suggested categories. This is due, however, not only to the author's likely oversights; but also to the world's remarkable capacity to escape and challenge our classifications of it.

The first (earliest and most widespread) approach to disposition in CCT research draws upon (social) psychology and microsociology insights to emphasize the *identity logics* guiding

---

[3] In the CCT literature, disposal and disposition (and sometimes dispossession) are used as synonyms. Accordingly, the present dissertation uses these terms interchangeably.

consumer objects disposal (Cappellini and Parsons, 2012; Cherrier, 2009; Cherrier and Murray, 2007; Cherrier and Ponnor, 2010; Curasi et al., 2004; Fernandez et al., 2011; Guillard, 2017; Lastovicka and Fernandez, 2005; Phillips and Sego, 2011; Price et al., 2000; Roster, 2014; Sego, 2010; Türe and Ger, 2016). Leaning on symbolic interactionism recognition that objects have symbolic value (i.e. they are imbued with social and cultural meanings) (Richins, 1994) and are, therefore, used by individuals to define and communicate their sense of self (Belk, 1988), these studies show that consumers rely on different modes of disposition to extend their individual and group identity in space and time or, on the contrary, to detach themselves from an (undesired) past self. These studies are important because they call attention to the fact that disposition is not guided by consumers' rational considerations of objects utility, but by (emotional) reactions to the symbolic meanings (e.g. memories, narratives, feelings) attached to these objects. However, these studies focus mostly on consumers' lived experiences of disposition of special possessions (e.g. family heirlooms) which generally occur during peculiar life moments (e.g. life transitions) and leave thereby the impression that disposal functions as a seamless transfer of value (i.e. meanings) from one party to

another. Put differently, the identity logic approach shows limited appreciation of how the very activity of disposal participates in the (trans)formation of the value(s) attached to disposed objects.

This issue is taken up by a second stream of CCT research on disposition. Leaning on insights from economic anthropology and social geography, this second group of studies reflects upon the *exchange logics* driving consumers' evaluation and associated disposition of objects (Brosius et al., 2013; Cappellini, 2009; Cheetham, 2009; Cherrier and Türe, 2020; Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2009; Dyen et al., 2018; Eden, 2017; Gollnhofer, 2017; Hirschman et al., 2012; Parsons, 2007; Philip et al., 2015; Roux et al., 2018; Sherry Jr, 1990; Suarez et al., 2016; Türe, 2014). In particular, these studies consider disposition as an essential exchange activity through which value(s) circulate throughout society. Accordingly, they illustrate how objects value(s) are produced, negotiated and eventually transferred (or destroyed) through the interactions of a host of heterogenous (human and non-human) entities during disposal. Crucially, these studies highlight the fact that waste (and value) classifications are not fixed upon objects, but are on the contrary continuously and collectively renegotiated. However, most of these studies pay little attention to the larger socio-historical structures

undergirding disposition, promoting the (mis)conception that modern disposal practices and related value pursuits are trans-historical and, therewith, inevitable phenomena. Yet as Strasser's (1999) social history of trash illustrates, disposition practices have acquired utterly new meanings with the emergence of modern industrial society, even though similar practices had existed for the most part of human history. This means that disposition is also influenced by some larger socio-historical forces that go beyond the interactions inherent in the very act of exchange.

This aspect is acknowledged by the third identified research stream which, inspired by macro-sociological concepts and approaches, investigates indeed the embeddedness of disposition into a larger socio-historical context (Cherrier and Türe, 2020; de Coverly et al., 2008; Gollnhofer et al., 2019; Guillard and Roux, 2014; Yngfalk, 2016). Attending to the *social logics* of disposition, these studies examine how socio-historical formations – such as norms (Guillard and Roux, 2014), discourses (Cherrier and Türe, 2020; de Coverly et al., 2008; Yngfalk, 2016), and value regimes (Gollnhofer et al., 2019) – inform consumer disposition in modern consumer culture. Importantly, these studies point to the fact that consumers' value(s) pursuits in

disposal (cf. the approach presented above) make sense, and thus are enabled, only within the framework defined by these socio-historical structures. This third approach to researching disposition is, however, still in its infancy in the CCT field and, therefore, investigations of the socio-historical character of modern disposition remain scarce.

Study aims and research question

As the previous paragraphs illustrate, CCT research recognizes the profound social embeddedness of waste disposal. The studies reviewed above suggest indeed that waste is not merely the inevitable by-product of consumption processes, but rather a contingent category whose meanings and values change through space and time. Moreover, these studies highlight that disposal is not simply a question of choosing the right bin (or choosing whether to dispose at all), but a social activity implicated in processes of identity formation, value(s) circulation and social ordering. However, as mentioned above, research on the broader social structures underpinning modern consumer disposition remains scarce in the CCT literature. And yet, paying attention to these structures is paramount to advance 'more satisfactory accounts of why certain practices of consumption unfold like they

do' (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011, 396). In other words, expanding our knowledge of the social forces governing modern disposition practices can help us better understand why we dispose of things and, therewith, what we can do to prevent waste.

Accordingly, this dissertation aims to advance extant CCT knowledge of the social logics underpinning disposal in modern consumer society. In particular, it explores how the *social imaginary* informs modern disposition practices. Put it briefly, drawing on Castoriadis' (1922-1997) philosophical interpretation of the concept, I define the social imaginary as the essential and irreducible human capacity to give form to representations which are not determined by anything existing "in reality" (e.g. in nature) (Castoriadis, 2016), such as money, capital, economy, God, and waste. This capacity manifests itself both at individual level, as the images created by the radical imagination; and at the collective level, as the indeterminate and open-ended network of shared representations that characterizes every society as a specific socio-historical formation (and thus different from other societies) (Castoriadis, 1987).

Investigations of the social imaginary in disposition (and consumption more in general) are virtually absent in the CCT literature. To the best of my knowledge, Bajde's (2012) study is

the only one that connects the social imaginary to issues of object circulation in relation to the phenomenon of charitable donations; yet the study does not address disposal per se. This is unfortunate because waste is a rather illustrative instance of social imaginary representation which is not determined by anything existing "outside" society. Waste does not in fact exist in nature, since any "by-product" of natural processes is ultimately reabsorbed into life at the macro-systemic level (Kennedy, 2012). In this sense, waste is a product of the human imagination – just like money, capital, the economy, and God.

In this light, we can also see that there is nothing inherently rational, or functional about our disposal practices. As Douglas' (2003) analysis mentioned above brilliantly illustrates, modern conceptions of waste (as a form of dirt) and related ordering practices are indeed the result of systemic categorizations whose origins are to be found in ancient religious beliefs, rather than in rational and scientific ideas. For instance, it is absurd that huge amounts of human feces are dumped every day, despite their high functional value as fertilizers – as Laporte (2002) provokingly remarks. In this sense, modern disposal practices are the expression of waste representations that are rooted not on function, or reason, but on imaginations, fantasies,

and beliefs. Advancing our theoretical understanding of how these imaginary representations underlie modern disposal practices is then of utmost importance to better comprehend why we dispose of things and, therewith, facilitate the spread of waste prevention logics in society at large. Therefore, in line with this theoretical and practical aim, this PhD project investigates the following research question:

How does the social imaginary inform consumer disposition practices in modern consumer society?

Study overview

The overarching question presented above guide the inquiries conducted by the individual studies included in the dissertation. Although guided by different questions and methods, all the studies reported here explore different manifestations of the social imaginary and their influence on consumer disposal activities in Denmark (with the exception of Article 4 which, as indicated below, discusses more in general the implications of the social imaginary for marketing theory).

As discussed more in detail in Chapters 3 and 6 (see in particular Article 3's methodological section in Chapter 6),

modern day Denmark constitutes a peculiar context for studying disposal. Research shows indeed that higher levels of wealth normally translate into higher level of waste (Kaza et al., 2018). As one of the world's wealthiest nations (in terms of GDP per capita – IMF, 2021), Denmark is no exception: with 844 kilograms per inhabitant in 2019, the country has the highest level of waste per capita in Europe (Statista, 2021). This situation is partly explained by the fact that Denmark is also one of the European countries with the most efficient waste management system (Statista, 2021). Around 25% of the country's overall waste is indeed burnt and converted into energy by its national district heating system (Miljøstyrelsen, 2020), which was established in the 1970s by the Danish government as the world was facing an oil crisis and a consequent upsurge in oil prices (Hirsbak, 2020). Premised on waste management principles (rather than prevention principles), this system plausibly facilitates (or at a very minimum does not hinder) the production of waste, since this is repurposed materially and ideologically as energy resource. These socio-historical conditions make

Denmark a particularly relevant context to study the social imaginary of modern disposition[4].

On this backdrop, the first two articles explore how consumers' imagination of the future influences their valuation and disposal of objects. Specifically, Article 1 employs qualitative interviews to investigate consumer storage of unused (and most of time, functionally useless) technological objects. The findings indicate that this paradoxical behavior is motivated by consumer imagination of potential future risks. Similarly, Article 2 draws on a mix of focus groups and personal interviews to explore consumer experiences of the future in connection with everyday disposal. The study identifies a host of fictional expectations (Beckert, 2016) through which individuals experience their own and their objects future, and shows how these expectations retrospectively guide consumer disposal practices. The third article explores more broadly the collective representations enabling consumer disposition. Drawing on a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), Article 3 investigates namely how consumers constitute themselves as responsible

---

[4] Denmark's Lutheran heritage also present a peculiar contextual feature. As discussed in Chapter 3 and Chapter 6, the Lutheran imaginary of social order is indeed central to individuals' formation of responsibility for their own waste.

subjects through their waste prevention efforts. The findings emphasize the central role played by the myth of the conscious subject, the ideology of utilitarian conservation and the Lutheran imaginary of social order in enabling the process of individual responsibility formation. The fourth article is instead a theoretical paper which discusses the implications of (Castoriadis' interpretation of) the social imaginary for (post)structuralist marketing theory. In particular, the paper argues for the need of reclaiming the autonomy (or self-determination) of human activity in marketing theories, as this represents the ontological condition for the institution of an alternative social order – one that is not based on the production of waste.

Thesis structure

The thesis comprises 8 chapter. The current chapter (Chapter 1) provides an introduction to the overall PhD study. In particular, it situates the study within the field of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), while presenting the theoretical and practical rationale for conducting this research. Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical foundations underlying the present dissertation, which is based on the concept of the social imaginary. The chapter is intentionally kept short, as a more detailed theorization of the social imaginary

can be found in Article 4 (see Chapter 7). Chapter 3 accounts for the methodology behind the study. It clarifies the paradigmatic assumptions, research design, research context, data collection methods and analytical procedures which this PhD study is based on. Chapter 4, 5, 6, and 7 report respectively Article 1, 2, 3, and 4, which are the individual studies included in the dissertation. As the final chapter, Chapter 8 offers a summary of the articles main findings and concludes with a discussion of their theoretical and practical implications.

References

Arnould E and Thompson C (2007) Consumer culture theory (and we really mean theoretics): dilemmas and opportunities posed by an academic branding strategy. *Research in consumer behavior* 11: 3.

Arnould EJ and Thompson CJ (2005) Consumer culture theory (CCT): Twenty years of research. *Journal of Consumer Research* 31(4): 868-882.

Askegaard S and Linnet JT (2011) Towards an epistemology of consumer culture theory: Phenomenology and the context of context. *Marketing Theory* 11(4): 381-404.

Bajde D (2012) Mapping the imaginary of charitable giving. *Consumption Markets & Culture* 15(4): 358-373.

Bartl A (2014) Moving from recycling to waste prevention: A review of barriers and enables. *Waste Management & Research* 32(9 Suppl): 3-18.

Beckert J (2016) *Imagined futures: Fictional expectations and capitalist dynamics.* Harvard University Press.

Belk RW (1987) The role of the Odyssey in consumer behavior and in consumer research. *ACR North American Advances*.

Belk RW (1988) Possessions and the extended self. *Journal of Consumer Research* 15(2): 139-168.

Bode M and Østergaard P (2013) 'The wild and wacky worlds of consumer oddballs' Analyzing the manifestary context of consumer culture theory. *Marketing Theory* 13(2): 175-192.

Bowker GC and Star SL (2000) *Sorting things out: Classification and its consequences.* MIT press.

Brosius N, Fernandez KV and Cherrier H (2013) Reacquiring consumer waste: Treasure in our trash? *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* 32(2): 286-301.

Cappellini B (2009) The sacrifice of re-use: the travels of leftovers and family relations. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 8(6): 365-375.

Cappellini B and Parsons E (2012) Practising Thrift at Dinnertime: Mealtime Leftovers, Sacrifice and Family Membership. *The Sociological Review* 60(2_suppl): 121-134.

Castoriadis C (1981) From ecology to autonomy. *Thesis eleven* 3(1): 8-22.

Castoriadis C (1987) *The imaginary institution of society.* Mit Press.

Cheetham F (2009) Out of control? An ethnographic analysis of the disposal of collectable objects through auction. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 8(6): 316-326.

Chen DM-C, Bodirsky BL, Krueger T, et al. (2020) The world's growing municipal solid waste: trends and impacts. *Environmental Research Letters* 15(7).

Cherrier H (2009) Disposal and simple living: exploring the circulation of goods and the development of sacred consumption. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 8(6): 327-339.

Cherrier H and Murray JB (2007) Reflexive Dispossession and the Self: Constructing a Processual Theory of Identity. *Consumption Markets & Culture* 10(1): 1-29.

Cherrier H and Ponnor T (2010) A study of hoarding behavior and attachment to material possessions. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* 13(1): 8-23.

Cherrier H and Türe M (2020) Value dynamics in ordinary object disposal. *Journal of Business Research* 116: 221-228.

Curasi CF, Price LL and Arnould EJ (2004) How individuals' cherished possessions become families' inalienable wealth. *Journal of Consumer Research* 31(3): 609-622.

de Coverly E, McDonagh P, O'Malley L, et al. (2008) Hidden mountain: The social avoidance of waste. *Journal of Macromarketing* 28(3): 289-303.

Denegri-Knott J and Molesworth M (2009) "I'll sell this and I'll buy them that": eBay and the management of possessions as stock. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 8(6): 305-315.

Douglas M (2003) *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo.* Routledge.

Dyen M, Sirieix L, Costa S, et al. (2018) Exploring the dynamics of food routines: a practice-based study to understand households' daily life. *European Journal of Marketing*. DOI: 10.1108/EJM-10-2017-0775.

Eden S (2017) Blurring the boundaries: Prosumption, circularity and online sustainable consumption through Freecycle. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 17(2): 265-285.

Fernandez KV, Brittain AJ and Bennett SD (2011) "Doing the duck": Negotiating the resistant-consumer identity. *European Journal of Marketing* 45(11): 1779-1788.

Gollnhofer JF (2017) Normalising alternative practices: the recovery, distribution and consumption of food waste. *Journal of Marketing Management* 33(7-8): 624-643.

Gollnhofer JF, Weijo HA and Schouten JW (2019) Consumer Movements and Value Regimes: Fighting Food Waste in

Germany by Building Alternative Object Pathways. *Journal of Consumer Research* 46(3): 460-482.

Guillard V (2017) Understanding the process of the disposition of a loved one's possessions using a theoretical framework of grief. *Consumption Markets and Culture* 20(5): 477-496.

Guillard V and Roux D (2014) Macromarketing Issues on the Sidewalk: How "Gleaners" and "Disposers" (Re)Create a Sustainable Economy. *Journal of Macromarketing* 34(3): 291-312.

Hirsbak S (2020) *Affald - udvikling i Danmark*. Available at: https://denstoredanske.lex.dk/affald_-_udvikling_i_Danmark.

Hirschman EC, Ruvio A and Belk RW (2012) Exploring space and place in marketing research. *Marketing Theory* 12(4): 369-389.

IMF (2021) World Economic Outlook Database. In: Fund IM (ed).

Kaza S, Yao L, Bhada-Tata P, et al. (2018) What a Waste 2.0 - A Global Snapshot of Solid Waste Management to 2050. *The World Bank*.

Kennedy G (2012) *An Ontology of Trash: The Disposable and Its Problematic Nature.* Suny Press.

Laporte D (2002) *History of shit.* MIT Press.

Lastovicka JL and Fernandez KV (2005) Three paths to disposition: The movement of meaningful possessions to strangers. *Journal of Consumer Research* 31(4): 813-823.

Marcus GE (1995) Ethnography in/of the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24(1): 95-117.

Miljøstyrelsen (2020) Affaldsstatistik 2019.

OECD (2007) Glossary of statistical terms.

Packard V (1961) *The waste makers.* London: Longmans.

Parsons L (2007) Thompson's rubbish theory: exploring the practices of value creation. *ACR European Advances*.

Philip HE, Ozanne LK and Ballantine PW (2015) Examining temporary disposition and acquisition in peer-to-peer renting. *Journal of Marketing Management* 31(11-12): 1310-1332.

Phillips BJ and Sego T (2011) The role of identity in disposal: Lessons from mothers' disposal of children's possessions. *Marketing Theory* 11(4): 435-454.

Price LL, Arnould EJ and Curasi CF (2000) Older consumers' disposition of special possessions. *Journal of Consumer Research* 27(2): 179-201.

Richins ML (1994) Valuing things: The public and private meanings of possessions. *Journal of Consumer Research* 21(3): 504-521.

Roster CA (2014) The art of letting go: Creating dispossession paths toward an unextended self. *Consumption Markets and Culture* 17(4): 321-345.

Roux D, Guillard V and Blanchet V (2018) Of counter spaces of provisioning: Reframing the sidewalk as a parasite heterotopia. *Marketing Theory* 18(2): 218-233.

Sego T (2010) Mothers' experiences related to the disposal of children's clothing and gear: Keeping Mister Clatters but tossing broken Barbie. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 9(1): 57-68.

Sherry Jr JF (1990) A Sociocultural Analysis of a Midwestern American Flea Market. *Journal of Consumer Research* 17(1): 13-30.

Statista (2021) *Municipal waste statistics*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Municipal_waste_statistics.

Strasser S (1999) *Waste and want : a social history of trash.* New York: Metropolitan Books.

Suarez M, Dias Campos R, Moreira Casotti L, et al. (2016) So hard to say goodbye? An investigation into the symbolic aspects of unintended disposition practices. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 15(5): 420-429.

Thompson CJ, Arnould E and Giesler M (2013) Discursivity, difference, and disruption. *Marketing Theory* 13(2): 149-174.

Türe M (2014) Value-in-disposition Exploring how consumers derive value from disposition of possessions. *Marketing Theory* 14(1): 53-72.

Türe M and Ger G (2016) Continuity Through Change: Navigating Temporalities Through Heirloom Rejuvenation. *Journal of Consumer Research* 43(1): 1-25.

Wiedmann T, Lenzen M, Keyßer LT, et al. (2020) Scientists' warning on affluence. *Nature communications* 11(1): 1-10.

Yngfalk C (2016) Bio-politicizing consumption: Neo-liberal consumerism and disembodiment in the food marketplace. *Consumption Markets & Culture* 19(3): 275-295.

2
Theoretical Foundations

As mentioned in introduction, this PhD study explores how the *social imaginary* informs disposition activities in modern consumer society. The aim of this section is to provide a framework for understanding the concept of the social imaginary which serves as theoretical foundation for the entire dissertation. It should be noted that this framework provides the structure on which the dissertation stands, as it informs my theoretical and analytical comprehension of the phenomena under investigation; yet, like the foundations of a building, this structure remains mostly under surface in the individual articles (with the exception of Article 4), as these do not directly mobilize the theoretical concepts exposed here.

Specifically, this PhD study leans on Cornelius Castoriadis' (1922-1997) philosophical interpretation of the social imaginary. While a more comprehensive introduction to Castoriadis' thesis can be found in Article 4, I outline here some its most fundamental aspects. Similar to Taylor (2002; 2004)

(mobilized by Bajde's [2012] study on charitable donation mentioned above), Castoriadis regards the social imaginary as a sort of 'background' which allows individuals to make sense of their activities. Yet while Taylor confines this background to the political imagination possessed by a community of individuals – that is, to the ways in which certain individuals imagine their rights and obligations towards one another – Castoriadis' interpretation extends it to encompass the whole of a society's (self-)understanding. As the French-Greek philosopher puts it, the social imaginary 'posits and defines, each time, what is for the society under consideration information, what is mere noise, and what is nothing all' (Castoriadis, 2010, 69), thereby in-forming the "background" of a society's overall experience, comprehension and knowledge of the world.

It is important to note that, in the sense intended here, the social imaginary 'is not a substance, not a quality, not an action or a passion' (Castoriadis, 1987, 369). As Taylor (2002) also notices, the social imaginary 'is not a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society' (91). Yet while Taylor conceives the social imaginary in static terms (as, indeed, a background), Castoriadis' notion better highlights its fundamentally unstable, fluid and indeterminate character. In

Castoridian terms, the social imaginary is the *vis formandi* (Castoriadis, 2016), the creative force that unceasingly institutes the social universe. Revisiting Askeegard and Östberg's (2019) metaphor of the social imaginary as the 'dark matter' of social sciences (which tends to reproduce a a reification of the imaginary as some kind of substance – indeed, dark *matter*), we can think of the imaginary as *dark energy,* the unrepresentable void[5] that fills 68% of all space and is responsible for its continuous expansion. Contrary to dark matter, which consists of particles, dark energy has no essence, but it is pure cosmic creation, the *vis formandi* of the natural universe. Similarly, we can think of the social imaginary as pure social creation, the *vis formandi* of the social universe.

This creative force manifests itself at the individual level as *radical imagination*, or what philosophers of the mind call "psyche". Importantly, the psyche/imagination does not correspond to the individual's mind, or its contents; rather, it is an originary emergence of representations, a 'surging forth of a representative flux, of images and figures of all kinds'

---

[5] Physicists have never been able to represent dark energy, but they can measure its effects.

(Castoriadis, 1987, 323), which have no determined ties with the environment in which they develop, but emerge 'out of nothing' (Castoriadis, 1987). Colours are an instance of this originary surging forth of representations: no physical law can indeed explain why we see specific colours for specific electromagnetic wavelengths (which is the form taken by colors in the physical universe) (Castoriadis, 1997, 178). In this sense, the radical imagination is the capacity of the living Being (i.e. biological life) to in-form a 'world of its own' (Castoriadis, 1997).

Although the imagination transverses the entirety of biological life, the *human* imagination presents a particular form of radicality. While the non-human imagination is subject to the constrains of biological functionality (Castoriadis, 1997, 263) (i.e. physical representations in the non-human are aimed at all times at biological conservation), the human imagination presents instead a certain degree of autonomy, as it can create representations which have absolutely no correlate (nor function) in the natural world – such as God, nation, money, capital, waste, and so forth (i.e. social imaginary significations, as explained below). This autonomy of the human imagination is at basis of the capacity for *quid pro quo*, that is, the capacity to represent something in place of something else (Castoriadis, 1987), which

is expressed, for instance, through language and phantasy. More in general, the autonomy of human imagination is what makes possible and necessary the institution of society.

The institution of society is indeed the social imaginary 'in the primary sense of the term' (Castoriadis, 1987, 369), that is, the capacity of the 'the anonymous collectivity' (Castoriadis, 1997, 131) to institute a world of shared representations. This capacity rests on the individual imagination, which makes the creation of representations possible at all; but at the same time, it also exceeds it. It is indeed the social imaginary that ensures the survival of the imagination which, because of its autonomy from biological functionality, drives the individual towards death[6]. The imagination can then survive only through socialization, that is, through the imposition of socially instituted 'ways of acting and thinking' (Castoriadis, 2010, 65) which define the conditions of existence for (the individuals of) a society.

These conditions are sanctioned by the indeterminate network of collective representations, or more properly, *social*

---

[6] The human psyche drives the individual towards death because it is originally oriented towards solipsistic representational pleasure. This is the pleasure of relating everything, that which is every *representation* (for the psyche nothing exists outside representation) to itself (Castoriadis 1997; 2007)

imaginary significations (SSIs) that confers 'meaning on everything that might present itself, "in" society as well as "outside"'[7] (Castoriadis, 1997, 313). SSIs are self-referential significations (Castoriadis 1987, 365) that exist in and through an indefinite and open-ended network of referral (Castoriadis, 1997). "Economy", for instance, has no referent other than itself and can signify something only in reference to a host of other significations, such as capital, credit, investment, finance, enterprise, and so forth (the symbol "tree", on the contrary, signifies a concrete external referent). By instituting indeterminate networks of SSIs, the social imaginary in-forms what for each society is its 'proper world', thereby defining its specific socio-historical character.

In short, the social imaginary is the unceasing and undetermined creation of psychical and social representations that in-form a society's universe. This interpretation of the social imaginary is particularly suitable to account for the indeterminacy of waste, while attending to the socio-historical conditions (that is, the social imaginary representations) defining modern disposal

---

[7] "Outside only in a formal sense. Of course, from the perspective of the social imaginary, what is "outside" society is unrepresentable and, therefore, it cannot exist.

practices. Furthermore, the social imaginary as conceived here also allows us to study individual disposition activities and discourses as socially (that is, socio-historically) constituted, going beyond the individual-collective dichotomy which characterizes other notions of the social imaginary (see discussion section in Bajde's [2012] study).

References

Askegaard S and Östberg J (2019) *Nordic consumer culture: State, market and consumers.* Springer.

Bajde D (2012) Mapping the imaginary of charitable giving. *Consumption Markets & Culture* 15(4): 358-373.

Castoriadis C (1987) *The imaginary institution of society.* Mit Press.

Castoriadis C (1997) *World in fragments: Writings on politics, society, psychoanalysis, and the imagination.* Stanford University Press.

Castoriadis C (2007) *Figures of the Thinkable.* Stanford University Press.

Castoriadis C (2010) A society Adrift. *Interviews & Debates (1974-1997).* 3.

Castoriadis C (2016) Radical imagination and the social instituting imaginary. *Rethinking imagination.* Routledge, pp.136-154.

Taylor C (2002) Modern social imaginaries. *Public culture* 14(1): 91-124.

Taylor C (2004) *Modern social imaginaries.* Duke University Press.

3
Methodology

This section accounts for the methodology behind the present PhD study. It starts with a clarification of the ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions (i.e. the scientific paradigm) underlying the work. This is followed by an explanation of the research design and context. Finally, procedures of data collection and analysis are considered. Before delving deeper into these considerations, it should be noted that this dissertation is based on a collection of scientific articles. This means that while the following considerations are general and applies to the entire PhD project, the research design, data collection and analytical procedures were adapted each time to the aims and questions of the individual articles. More specific methodological explanations can therefore be found in these articles.

Scientific paradigm

This PhD study draws upon an interpretivist research paradigm. A central ontological assumption of interpretivism is that reality is 'socially constructed, multiple, holistic, contextual' (Tadajewski, 2016, 438). From an interpretivist standpoint, reality is then continuously (re)constructed by 'particular actors, in particular places, at particular times, *[who]* fashion meaning out of events and phenomena through prolonged, complex processes of social interaction involving history, language, and action' (Schwandt, 1994, 22). This also means that interpretivism is not concerned with a reality *sui generis* (as explained below, such reality may exist, but it is independent from our knowledge of it), but the reality of the social (that is, human) world.

This is because interpretivism is based on the fundamental epistemological assumption that our knowledge of the world is always inexorably *mediated*. Consistent with the theoretical framework applied to this dissertation, it should be noted that this mediation occurs not only through the procedures and tools employed in knowledge production; but also, and more profoundly, through the re-presentations inexorably created by the human (individual and collective) imagination. Accordingly,

interpretation is not merely a 'methodological option', but 'the very condition of human inquiry itself' (Schwandt, 1994, 224). In this sense, within an interpretivist frame, whatever reality may lie beyond our imagination remains to us inaccessible.

These ontological and epistemological assumptions are reflected in interpretivism axiological tenets. Since reality is recursively constructed and our knowledge of it always inexorably mediated, the overriding goal of interpretive research is not to explain the truth of social phenomena (Shankar and Goulding, 2001; Tadajewski, 2016), but to provide an understanding of these phenomena that (critically) (re)informs existing interpretations of the world (and, ideally, facilitates social change) (see also Article 4 and the "Data analysis" section here below).

Research design

Cresswell and Poth (2018) define research design as 'the entire process of research from conceptualizing a problem to writing research questions and on to data collection, analysis, interpretation, and report writing' (52). The same authors identity five dominant approaches to research design in the social sciences: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory,

ethnography, and case study. It should however be noted that interpretivist research is most often characterized by an emergent research design (Shankar et al., 2001), meaning that the 'process of [interpretivist] research' is recursively adapted to the study's provisional interpretations. In this sense, the research design functions in interpretivist studies as an orientation to inquiry rather than a set of formalized procedures.

In line with an interpretivist epistemology, the current PhD project is also characterized by an emergent research design. Moreover, this research design is not even consistent throughout the whole project, but is adapted every time to the aims and questions addressed by the different empirical studies included in the dissertation. Specifically, the first two articles present traits of 'phenomenological research' (Cresswell and Poth, 2018), as they examine consumers' lived experiences of disposition, which are collected in the form of personal and focus group interviews (more details about the data collection methods are provided below). However, in contrast to traditional phenomenological research, the aim of these studies is not to describe consumers' subjective life-worlds, that is, the meanings individually attributed by consumers to, in the specific case, their disposal practices; but rather to explore the collective (future)

representations guiding these practices – such as potential risks and fictional expectations identified by the studies.

The third article is instead premised upon the principles of ethnographic research, as it investigates 'the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of a culture-sharing group (Harris, 1968)' (which in the specific case corresponds to Denmark's [imagined] community of waste reducers) through the use of (among others) observational methods. It should be noted that, contrary to traditional single-sited ethnographic studies, Article 3 is based upon a *multi-sited ethnography* (Marcus, 1995), as it "follows" (*and* constructs – as discussed above, the interpretivist epistemology posits that [the object of] knowledge is inevitably constructed) a cultural formation (i.e. ethical practices) across different spatio-temporalities.

Research context

Before describing the data collection methods connected to the research designs identified above, this section briefly introduces the socio-historical context of this PhD research, that is modern day Denmark (for a more exhaustive introduction of the context, please see Article 3). Two contextual features emerged during my

research as especially relevant to better understand the phenomenon of consumer disposition: Denmark's material and ideological infrastructure of waste disposal, and country's Lutheran religious heritage.

For what concerns the first, it should be noted that Denmark is one of countries in Europe that manages waste more efficiently (Statista, 2021). This is largely because of the national district heating system established by the Danish government in the 1970s (as the world was facing an oil crisis and a consequent upsurge in fossil fuel prices) that today burns roughly 25% of the country's overall waste to convert it into energy (Miljøstyrelsen, 2020). Yet while efficient at handling waste (and while generally recognized as a "green" country), Denmark is also very effective at producing it: with 844 kilograms per inhabitant in 2019, the country has indeed the highest level of waste per capita in Europe. These socio-historical conditions – and especially the ideological principles of waste management (against prevention) which the country's overall disposal activities are premised upon – make Denmark a particularly relevant context to explore the modern imaginary of disposal.

Furthermore, Denmark's political orientation is characterized by a widespread social democratic ideology. Within

the frame of this ideology, the individual and the collectivity are regarded as linked by a mutually constitutive relation, rather than a mutually exclusive one (Nelson, 2017). Historical research suggest that this peculiar view is rooted into the principles of Lutheran religion, which maintain that the individual is responsible for his own salvation through the pursuit of vocational work aimed at serving others (Kahl, 2005; Larsen, 2021; Nelson, 2017). As thoroughly illustrated by Article 3, these politico-religious contextual elements are central to the formation of a sense of responsibility among individuals for their own consumption waste.

Data collection methods

The following paragraphs present the data collection methods employed in this project. They clarify the methodological considerations underlying specific method choices, highlighting in particular the coherence between the methods used, the project epistemological assumptions and the studies specific theoretical aims (for an overview, see Table 1). Specific details about data collection procedures (e.g. informants recruitments, document selection, etc.) can be found in the methodology section of the individual articles. Overall, it should be noted that the chosen data

collection methods were aimed at exploring individual and collective representations, which the social imaginary, as the dark energy of the social universe, manifests itself through.

Personal interviews

Qualitative researchers employ personal interviews to access 'the categories and logic by which [an individual] sees the world' (McCracken, 1988, 9), as in poststructuralist analyses (e.g. (Moisander et al., 2009; Holt, 1997; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995); or to provide descriptions of 'the lifeworld of the individual, [and] the content and pattern of daily experience' (McCracken, 1988, 9), as in existential-phenomenology studies (e.g. Cherrier and Murray, 2007; Thompson, 1996; Thompson et al., 1989). Aligned with a poststructuralist perspective, this dissertation regards interviews as 'cultural talk' (Moisander et al., 2009), that is, as an instantiation of broader culturally constructed narratives, beliefs, ideas and meanings (Thompson et al., 1994) – what I, drawing on Castoriadis, call the social imaginary.

Accordingly, the three empirical studies presented below make use of interviews to tap into the social imaginaries framing and enabling consumer disposal activities. The (potential) risks perceived by consumers in relation to the (non-)disposition of

their technological objects (see Article 1); the fictional expectations motivating their everyday disposition practices (see Article 2); and basic notions of subjectivity and society underlying their waste reduction efforts (see Article 3) are indeed all instances of a social imaginary which speaks through the individual.

Across all studies, the preferred interview format was semi-structured. Interview topics and questions were then prepared in advance and organized in an interview guide (Bernard, 2006). The guide usually started with grand-tour questions (McCracken, 1988), while subsequent questions were tailored so as to retain consistency with the study specific theoretical inquiry. Importantly, interview guides were not used as check-lists, but as prompting devices to elicit discussion. This means that informants had considerable lead in the conversation and were gently prompted back "on track" only when the discussion derailed towards directions deemed to be irrelevant to the study. Overall, the semi-structured format allowed to combine flexibility and focus, ensuring the role of informants as knowledge co-creators.

Finally, it should be noted the majority of personal interviews were collected in informants' homes and were then

accompanied by ethnographic observations (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994). Observations were collected in the forms of notes recording the researcher's immediate reflections of consumer domestic sites (where the majority of consumer disposition activities unfold); and photographs capturing details that could not be 'fully explained by verbal descriptions' (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994, 488). Notes and photographs complemented the text provided by interview transcripts, thereby expanding the basis for analytical interpretation (Arnold and Fischer, 1994).

Focus group interviews

Focus group interviews bring together a number of people which together discuss a specific theme (Justesen and Mik-Meyer, 2012). Because of their interactive nature, focus groups allow researchers to capture meanings and representations as they emerge from the interaction between the individual lived experience and the larger social formations which shape this experience (Tadajewski, 2015). In this sense, focus groups are a valuable tool to explore social imaginary representations, such as the fictional expectations investigated by Article 2.

The format of the focus groups which Article 2 draws upon was unstructured, as no interview guide was prepared before the interviews. Participants were informed about the topic of the discussion (i.e. disposal habits), but they were left to lead the conversation. The interviewers assumed the role of moderators, offering prompts for discussion when needed while ensuring that each informant had the opportunity to engage in the conversation. During the interviews, moderators also employed elicitation techniques – such as sentence completion and word association exercises (Donoghue, 2000) – aimed at 'generating cultural talk' (Moisander et al., 2009, 342) that could stimulate the emergence of covert representations.

Netnography

Netnography is a qualitative research approach to study cultural phenomena in Internet-mediated settings (Kozinets et al., 2014). Netnographic data comprises both computer-mediated communications of and with online community members, and observations of these communicative interactions (Kozinets, 2006). Similar to focus groups, netnography allows researchers to

capture cultural meanings and narratives as they emerge from social interaction. Yet contrary to focus groups, which are staged, netnography can be considered a naturalistic approach to data collection, as it records social interactions at those sites where they naturally occur (Belk et al., 1988).

As in traditional ethnography, there is 'a spectrum of [netnographic] research participation' (Kozinets, 2006, 133), which goes from 'pure participation' to 'pure observation'. The netnography conducted in connection with Article 3 study was purely observational, as I did not actively participate in the discussions held by the analyzed Facebook group (although I introduced myself to the group as a researcher). The observational approach was deemed consistent with the aim of the study, which was not to describe the lived experience of community members, but to interpret their (online) interactions in light of the phenomenon of responsibility formation. The rationale behind the choice was that purely observational approaches minimize the researcher's impact on the members' interactions, thereby ensuring the research naturalistic character (see Costello et al., 2017).

The collected netnographic data amount then mainly to archival data, that is, data present on the page (such as existing

posts and comments), which are not prompted by the researcher (Kozinets, 2015). I manually collected this data, visiting the page on a regular basis for about 2 years while recording relevant conversations through screenshots. Archival data was further complemented by observational notes. Overall, the netnographic dataset proved central to identify the themes of moralization and intensification that constitute part of the model of individual responsibility formation advanced by Article 3.

Document analysis

A document is referred here as any kind of written or visual text which is created independently from the research. Document analysis is then the procedure through which documents are selected, reviewed and analyzed during a qualitative study (Bowen, 2009). Documents are important not only as sources of triangulation; but also because they allow researchers to account for the 'tacit shaping of cultural viewpoints' (Humphreys and Thompson, 2014, 883) occurring through the dissemination of the ideas put forth by the documents themselves.

Article 3 dataset includes three documents in the form of zero-waste and sustainable consumption lifestyle guides. The books were selected after an initial immersion with the study topic

(i.e. consumer waste reduction) because of their resonance within the context under investigation. These guides constitute 'prescriptive texts…whose main aim is to propose some rules of conduct…[and] provide individuals with the tools to question, examine and shape their [consumption] conduct, and form themselves as ethical subjects' (Foucault, 1984, 22). In this sense, the selected documents were paramount to obtain a richer understanding of the social imaginary representations mobilized by consumers to develop (a sense of) individual responsibility for their own waste.

Table 1 - Data collection overview

	Study aim	Research question	Dataset
Article 1 How the Dead Storage of Consumer Electronics Creates Consumer Value	To understand why consumers choose to keep technological objects which are functionally useless.	How does the storage of end-of-life electronics create consumer value?	29 personal interviews with Danish consumers. Length: between 45m and 2h
Article 2 Back From the Future: How Fictional	To explore how consumer future	How do fictional expectations affect	13 personal interviews with Danish

Expectations Affect Consumer Valuation And Disposition Of Objects	imaginations influence their disposal practices.	consumer valuation and disposition of objects?	consumers. Length: between 45m and 2h

5 focus group interviews with students at a Danish university |
| **Article 3** Starting with the Man in the Mirror: Ethical Subjectivation and the Reflexive Constitution of Responsible Consumer Subjects | To account for how consumer responsibility is formed at the individual level. | How do consumers constitute themselves as ethical subjects? | 19 personal interviews with Danish consumers. Length: between 1h and 2,5h + observational ethnographic notes (35 single-spaced pages) + photographs (120 pictures)

101 Facebook posts and related comments (1000+ data entry points in total) + observational netnographic notes (10 singled-spaced pages) |

Analytical procedures

While the exact analytical procedures differ across the different empirical articles, data analysis is generally premised on the principles of hermeneutic philosophy (see Arnold and Fischer, 1994; Thompson et al., 1994). A basic tenet of hermeneutics is that interpretation is the ontological condition of understanding. This means that we can understand, and thereby know, only through interpretation (Arnold and Fischer, 1994). Furthermore, in hermeneutic philosophy understanding is 'always situated within a network of culturally shared knowledge, beliefs, ideals, and taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of social life' (Thompson et al., 1994, 433)[8], and each individual's understanding reflects a slightly different version of this network (because each individual has a different social, cultural and experiential network). Therefore, the findings provided by

---

[8] In this sense, consumers' understandings of, for instance, their own disposition practices are never entirely individual, but they are always a reflection of culturally constituted networks of interpretation, that is, the social imaginary.

interpretive, hermeneutical investigations are always 'a fusion of interpretive perspectives, or "horizons", between researchers and research informants' (Thompson et al., 1994, 434), which gives form to a new (social) reality.

These principles have methodological consequences. In particular, the fusion of horizons is obtained through the hermeneutic circle of interpretation (Thompson et al., 1994). This is an iterative, part-to-whole process of qualitative data interpretation (Thompson et al., 1989; Thompson et al., 1994), which reflects the assumption that 'the meaning of a whole text is determined from the individual elements of a text, while, at the same time, an individual element is understood by referring to the whole of which it is a part' (Arnold and Fischer, 1994, 63). In practical terms, the hermeneutic circle translates in the following approach, which generally guided the analysis of all the empirical articles.

First, each text (e.g. interview transcript, book, or post) is read independently and "broken down" into different parts, or codes. These initial codes are then re-interpreted and revised in light of the "whole" of the specific text under investigation (for instance, after reading a whole interview transcript, the researcher may notice that different codes convey the same underlying

meaning). Once every text has been coded, the different parts (texts and codes) are related to each other *across* the totality of data (the whole). At this point, the researcher looks for commonalities (and differences) across the parts and within the whole. Finally, after discussing possible interpretations with the research team, or the research community at large, and confronting the findings with existing theories, the researcher develops an account 'in which all passages in the text are woven into a coherent interpretation' (Arnold and Fischer, 1994, 63). Importantly, the aim of this process is not to attain data validation, but to improve the researcher's 'interpretive vision' (Thompson et al., 1989), so that s/he can shed new light on a certain phenomenon, and thereby participate in the reconstruction of (social) reality.

The following four chapters will show how the methodology outlined here above was mobilized to answers the questions addressed by the papers included in the dissertation.

References

Arnold SJ and Fischer E (1994) Hermeneutics and consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research* 21(1): 55-70.

Arnould EJ and Wallendorf M (1994) Market-oriented ethnography: interpretation building and marketing strategy formulation. *Journal of Marketing Research* 31(4): 484-504.

Belk RW, Sherry JF and Wallendorf M (1988) A Naturalistic Inquiry into Buyer and Seller Behavior at a Swap Meet. *Journal of Consumer Research* 14(4): 449-470.

Bernard HR (2006) *Research Methods in Anthropology : Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches.* CA, UNITED STATES: AltaMira Press.

Bowen GA (2009) Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative research journal*.

Cherrier H and Murray JB (2007) Reflexive Dispossession and the Self: Constructing a Processual Theory of Identity. *Consumption Markets & Culture* 10(1): 1-29.

Costello L, McDermott M-L and Wallace R (2017) Netnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16(1).

Cresswell JW and Poth CN (2018) Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Donoghue S (2000) Projective techniques in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Sciences* 28.

Foucault M (1984) *Histoire de la sexualité II: L'usage des plaisirs.* Éditions Gallimard.

Holt DB (1997) Poststructuralist lifestyle analysis: Conceptualizing the social patterning of consumption in postmodernity. *Journal of Consumer Research* 23(4): 326-350.

Humphreys A and Thompson CJ (2014) Branding disaster: Reestablishing trust through the ideological containment of systemic risk anxieties. *Journal of Consumer Research* 41(4): 877-910.

Justesen LN and Mik-Meyer N (2012) *Qualitative research methods in organisation studies.* Gyldendal.

Kahl S (2005) The religious roots of modern poverty policy: Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed Protestant traditions compared. *Archives Européennes de Sociologie/European Journal of Sociology/Europäisches Archiv für Soziologie*. 91-126.

Kozinets RV (2006) Netnography 2.0. In: Belk RW (ed) *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing*. Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, UNITED KINGDOM: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.

Kozinets RV (2015) Netnography: Redefined. 2nd ed.: London: Sage.

Kozinets RV, Dolbec P-Y and Earley A (2014) Netnographic analysis: Understanding culture through social media data. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis*. 262-276.

Larsen M (2021) Investigating the lutheran roots of social democracy in Ingeborg Holm. *Scandinavian Studies* 93(4): 505-532.

Marcus GE (1995) Ethnography in/of the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24(1): 95-117.

McCracken G (1988) *The long interview.* Sage.

Miljøstyrelsen (2020) Affaldsstatistik 2019.

Moisander J, Valtonen A and Hirsto H (2009) Personal interviews in cultural consumer research – post-structuralist challenges. *Consumption Markets & Culture* 12(4): 329-348.

Nelson RH (2017) *Lutheranism and the Nordic spirit of social democracy: A different Protestant ethic.* Aarhus Universitetsforlag.

Schwandt TA (1994) Constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry. *Handbook of qualitative research* 1(1994): 118-137.

Shankar A, Elliott R and Goulding C (2001) Understanding consumption: Contributions from a narrative perspective. *Journal of Marketing Management* 17(3-4): 429-453.

Shankar A and Goulding C (2001) Interpretive consumer research: two more contributions to theory and practice. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*.

Statista (2021) *Municipal waste statistics*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Municipal_waste_statistics.

Tadajewski M (2015) Focus groups: history, epistemology and non-individualistic consumer research. *Consumption Markets & Culture* 19(4): 319-345.

Tadajewski M (2016) Remembering motivation research: toward an alternative genealogy of interpretive consumer research. *Marketing Theory* 6(4): 429-466.

Thompson CJ (1996) Caring consumers: Gendered consumption meanings and the juggling lifestyle. *Journal of Consumer Research* 22(4): 388-407.

Thompson CJ and Hirschman EC (1995) Understanding the socialized body: A poststructuralist analysis of consumers' self-conceptions, body images, and self-care practices. *Journal of Consumer Research* 22(2): 139-153.

Thompson CJ, Locander WB and Pollio HR (1989) Putting consumer experience back into consumer research: The philosophy and method of existential-phenomenology. *Journal of Consumer Research* 16(2): 133-146.

Thompson CJ, Pollio HR and Locander WB (1994) The spoken and the unspoken: a hermeneutic approach to understanding the cultural viewpoints that underlie consumers' expressed meanings. *Journal of Consumer Research* 21(3): 432-452.

4

How the Dead Storage of Consumer Electronics Creates Consumer Value[9]

Mikkel Ørholm Nøjgaard, Cristiano Smaniotto, Søren Askegaard, Ciprian Cimpan, Dmitry Zhilyaev, and Henrik Wenzel

Abstract

Consumers across the globe tend to store their small electronic devices when they reach their end-of-life instead of disposing them. This is a problem because if end-of-life devices are not recovered from consumers' homes, the devices cannot be re-used or recycled, leading to increased production. We study what

---

motivates consumers to store their end-of-life devices by looking at how storage creates consumer value. Applying a practice-based understanding of value, we find that storage is a social practice that generates value by protecting consumers from four different kinds of risk: practical risks, existential risks, environmental risks, and moral risks. Storage gives consumers a sense of security in their everyday lives and thus generates what we call 'security value'. This notion implies that even though end-of-life devices sit idle in consumers' homes, their value-generating capacity remain active. The findings have implications for the role of consumers in reverse logistics strategies for sustainable systems.

Keywords: circular economy; storage; consumer electronics; consumer value

Introduction

Several studies have documented that consumers across the globe tend to store their small electronic devices[10] when they reach their end-of-life instead of disposing them (Bovea et al., 2018; Hanks et al., 2008; Jang and Kim, 2010; Ongondo and Williams, 2011;

---

[10] In this paper, electronics or electronic devices refer to information and communication technology consumer electronics (e.g., smartphones, laptops, and tablets), unless otherwise specified.

Rathore et al., 2011; Speake and Yangke, 2015; Yin et al., 2014; Ylä-Mella et al., 2015). This 'dead storage' of devices represents a problem to the transition towards a circular economy, that is, a 'regenerative system in which resource input and waste, emission, and energy leakage are minimised by slowing, closing, and narrowing material and energy loops' (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017, 766). By this definition, dead storage amounts to a serious leak in the material loops of the economy. When end-of-life devices sit idle in consumers' homes, they cannot be re-used or recycled. This is particularly problematic because many electronic devices contain raw materials in finite supply (such as copper, gold, palladium, and silver). The failure to recover end-of-life devices means that the materials they contain are lost and that new finite-supply materials must be extracted (Wilson et al., 2017). What is more, recent research suggests that there is significant economic potential in recovering wasted electrical and electronic equipment (D'Adamo et al., 2019; Parajuly and Wenzel, 2017). It is therefore important to understand why consumers choose to keep their end-of-life devices.

A series of studies exploring consumers' rationale for storing end-of-life electronic products attributes this behavior to the residual value electronic products are perceived to possess

after they are retired from use (Hanks et al., 2008; Jang and Kim, 2010; Nowakowski, 2019; Rathore et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2017). The studies argue that, even after retirement, the products may still fulfil some function to consumers or may be expected to do so in the future. Some phones, for example, function as 'secondary phones' (Wilson et al., 2017) to be called into use if consumers lose or break their primary phone. Therefore, even if end-of-life electronics hold no or very little value on the market, consumers may still find them valuable and, consequently, worth retaining. The studies thus suggest that it is this perceived value that poses a fundamental barrier to the efficient recovery of electronic waste and the circular flow of the precious resources involved in producing small consumer electronics.

We build on and extend this insight. While previous studies have described the different types of value consumers ascribe to end-of-life electronic products (e.g. the value of having a 'secondary phone'), no study has so far theorized how these products become valuable to consumers. Towards that end, we draw on recent contributions within consumer research that advocate taking a practice approach to value (Arnould, 2014). In this perspective, value does not solely reside in products themselves (e.g. a fixed external value) nor in the minds of

consumers (e.g. an entirely subjective value perception). Rather, the value of products also depends on how the products are used and the kinds of problems they are used to address. Value, put differently, partly arises from practices. Following this line of thinking, we consider storage as a value-creating practice. Hence, our central research question is: How does the storage of end-of-life electronics create consumer value?

The article is structured as follows. First, we conceptualize value and conceptually link it to practices of storage. We then present our methodology – in-depth interviews with 29 consumers conducted in their homes – and proceed with the analysis. In the analysis, we find consumers' value experiences of storage closely related to perceptions of risk: storage serves as a risk management strategy and provides consumer value by promising security against different types of risks. In this way, storage generates what we term 'security value'. We identify four discourses of risk that underlie consumers' value experiences: practical risk, existential risk, environmental risk, and moral risk. Finally, we show how our findings have implications for the conventional understanding of 'dead storage' and for practice-informed discussions of value.

Theory

Value

Discussions of value are central to the concept of circular economy. In Webster's (2021), definition, a circular economy is an economy that 'aims to keep products, components and materials at their highest […] value, at all times' (116). Despite this centrality, conceptual discussions of what value is and what is valuable are lacking in the circular economy literature. Most commonly, the value of resources seems to be determined in relation to the economic potential they hold to companies and economies (i.e. economic prosperity) or the environmental benefits their circulation imply (i.e. environmental quality). As Kirchherr et al. (2017) suggest in their comprehensive review of 114 circular economy definitions, there is much less concern with the value that the circulation of resources brings to consumers.

Recently, however, there has been increasing interesting in consumers within the circular economy literature, as well as multiple calls for more attention to the role of consumers in implementing circular practices (Camacho-Otero et al., 2018; Hobson, 2016; Kirchherr et al., 2017; Merli et al., 2018; Mylan, 2015; Peronard and Ballantyne, 2019; Schulz et al., 2019). Much

of this attention has so far been directed at consumers' acceptance of circular solutions (Kuah and Wang, 2020; van Weelden et al., 2016; Wurster and Schulze, 2020). But as Camacho-Otero et al. (2018) argue, 'change [towards a circular economy] is not only about acceptance' (17). Where consumers' active participation in circular solutions is crucial for these solutions to succeed, consumers need not only to accept them but also to care about them. The concept of consumer value holds promise for understanding why consumers care enough about some practices to engage in them and not about others. For example, as the studies on consumer storage of end-of-life electronics previously cited indicate (Wilson et al., 2017), the value consumers attach to their end-of-life electronics motivates consumers to store them instead of disposing them for recycling. Consumer value is thus a key concept for understanding the motivational structures of consumer circular behaviors and misbehaviors. But how can we conceive of consumer value? What is it and how does it come about? Graeber (2001), in his monumental work on the notion of value across human societal forms, underlines that there are basically three ways we have considered value. It has been presented as a sociological concept often termed 'social value' and referring to a social norm concerning what is ultimately

considered good and desirable in society. It has been also been conceived economically as an 'exchange value', indicative of the "price", i.e. the amount of resources that someone is willing to give up, in order to acquire something in an exchange process. Finally, it has been considered linguistically as 'meaningful difference', i.e. the value of something is what sets it apart from other phenomena (of different value).

If Graeber paints with a very broad theoretical brush in his quest for an anthropological theory of value, consumer researchers have excelled in micro-distinctions in terms of forms value underlying consumption practices and choices. Karababa and Kjeldgaard (2014) try to bring some order to the plethora of notions of value found in consumer research. They are critical of the axiological approach of Holbrook (1999)which gives the impression that 'a particular set of values are inherently human values' (Karababa and Kjeldgaard, 2014, 123). This axiological approach, like so many other social psychological value schemes, becomes problematic in terms of respecting the multitude of contexts that are found among consumers worldwide. Values in the marketplace, Karababa and Kjeldgaard argue, must rather be 'conceptualized as cocreated through the practices of a multiplicity of actors, such as consumers, companies, the media,

the state, and brand communities, operating in the marketplace' (Karababa and Kjeldgaard, 2014, 124).

This practice-based approach is taken up and developed by Arnould (2014), who in his call for a praxeology of value starts out by reminding us that 'practices consist of discursive knowledge and tacit knowledge sometimes grouped together as competences, materials and affective engagements' (Arnould, 2014, 129). In his insistence on the need for a praxeology, Arnould is aligned with another anthropologist interested in consumption, Daniel Miller (2008), who suggests that value should be considered less as something there "is" or, in other words, an attribute of objects, but rather as something one "does". This perspective suggests that the value of end-of-life electronics is not fixed and static but rather arises from what consumers do with them – e.g. by storing them. The consumer value of stored devices may very well be linked to physical and functional condition of the devices, as others have suggested (Fang and Rau, 2017). But rather than assuming this, the practice-based perspective encourages us to consider the value of the stored device in relation to what purposes the practice of storage serves. If a device is not stored for its future functionality, for example, its functional deterioration might have little influence on the value

it holds to consumers. So, if the value of end-of-life electronic products do not reside within themselves, how may storage transform such products into valuable consumer possessions?

Storage and value

Drawing on Cwerner and Metcalfe (2003), we define storage as a practice of ordering things. Depending on where things are stored, this ordering has implications for the value assigned to the them. For example, the same object, say a t-shirt, assumes very different value whether it is placed in the bin, or in the drawer. In the bin (a space for transiently storing rejected things, until the arrival of garbage collectors), the t-shirt is temporarily stripped of its value and becomes trash (Thompson, 1979) (few would indeed dare to wear a t-shirt straight out of the bin); whereas when in the drawer, the same t-shirt is still assigned potential use value. In this way, storage is essential in maintaining order since, by managing and transforming the value assigned to things, it determines our relation to them and, consequently, the way we act towards them.

The assignment of value through storage goes beyond differentiating things between waste and non-waste. Studying people's practices of storing things in the garage, Hirschman et al. (2012) explain that the garage bestows a specific value on the

items stored there: not valuable, not waste, but something in between. Many of these mixed-state items are classified as more than halfway-waste (simply waiting for the next occasion to be thrown out). They are items that, although presently useless, are believed to possess "potential" utility for future situations, i.e. 'potential value [that] has yet to be proven or accessed' (Hirschman et al., 2012, 384). For consumers, items stored in the garage function as a 'hedge fund' that secure them against the uncertainties of the future (what if one day I need that?).

Cherrier and Ponnor (2010) similarly propose that hoarders store things to protect themselves from future uncertainties. The authors draw on Beck's (1992) notion of 'risk society' to explain that rapid technological development and the rise of global capitalism has generated as a series of risks (e.g. the risk of global warming and sudden shortages of critical resources) that consumers face in their daily lives. Hoarding consumers are found to accumulate items in an attempt to cope with the potential materialization of these global risks. In this way, Cherrier and Ponnor (2010) emphasize the intimate link between material possessions and security, making it apparent that the value of storage (and of stored things) partly derives from the sense of security that storage instills in consumers.

Furthermore, the hoarders of Cherrier and Ponnor (2010=
saw storage as a way to resist the 'throwaway society' they
thought themselves to be living in. Storing items instead of
disposing them (even if they had no functional value) was seen as
a reflection of the hoarders' commitment to bringing about a more
sustainable society and protecting the environment. Storage, in
other words, classified certain items as 'not-waste', items not
contributive to 'the current wasteful society' (Cherrier and
Ponnor, 2010, 19) and therefore valuable.

Finally, consumers even assign identity value to their
possessions through the practice of storage. For example, through
curatorial practices, such as collecting (Belk, 1988; Belk, 2013),
cherishing family heirlooms (Curasi et al., 2004; Epp and Price,
2009; Türe and Ger, 2016) and hoarding (Cherrier and Ponnor
2010), consumers cultivate a symbolic connection with their
histories, values, and relationships, forging emotional attachment
to their possessions and imbuing them with identity value. In all
these practices, storage is paramount to the classification of the
curated items as valuable extensions of consumers' identity. The
role played by storage in attaching identity value to objects
becomes apparent when storage is not or cannot be practiced.
Indeed, under conditions of nomadic (Bardhi et al., 2012) or

access-based consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012), which for different reasons limit consumers' ability to store their items, identity value is absent in objects (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017).

In sum, we suggest that storage practices serve as conduits (Hetherington, 2004) for negotiating the value assigned to things. Crucially, storage separates value from waste but also assigns different kinds of value to objects by classifying them in diverse ways (e.g. as security in an uncertain world, the protection of the environment, identity extensions, etc.). In the findings that follow, we explain how our informants classified their stored end-of-life electronics and how storage became a value-generating activity given these classifications.

Material and Methods

The study was part of a larger project investigating the flow of electronic products towards disposal within a circular economy framework. The ultimate objective of the project was to understand how to facilitate circulation and reutilization of such products, which often end up in landfills. More specifically for this paper we examined consumers' experiences of storage and disposal practices. As the divestment of things is a reflexive practice reproducing social narratives (Belk, 2013), we based our

analysis on in-depth interviews with the aim of understanding consumers' emic interpretation of those narratives. When convenient to the study participants, we conducted a naturalistic investigation in their homes (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994). In those cases, interviews were supported by the researcher's observations, written down during the interview, or conveniently right after, in the form of fieldnotes. Fieldnotes captured the researcher's immediate reflections on the discussion and descriptions of the spatial surroundings of the encounter, especially of those places where consumers kept their used technology. These spatial descriptions focused on the design of the rooms, the objects stored in there and the perceived level of order and clutter, i.e. traces of the circulation of objects within and through the home. Overall, observations enriched our basis for analytical interpretation of the interview data (Arnold and Fischer, 1994).

The final data set amounts to 29 interviews lasting between 45 minutes and 2 hours. The interviews were semi-structured (McCracken, 1988), guiding the discussion from a general talk about circular economy to the peculiarities of the informants' everyday disposal behavior of technological objects. Mobile phones were often mentioned during the interviews, yet

as we show in the findings, they were not the only type of technological object discussed. The number of collected interviews was decided following the principle of informational redundancy (Sandelowski, 1995) (see Figure 1). During the last interviews, no new information was added to that previously collected, and we hence concluded that informational redundancy had been reached. Furthermore, as data analysis proceeded iteratively and simultaneously with data collection, we made sure that the gathered data was sufficient to reach inductive thematic saturation. i.e. the point where identification of new codes in the data ceases (Saunders et al., 2018). As no new codes emerged at the end of the preliminary analysis, we deemed the number of interviews to be satisfactory for our research purposes.

Figure 1 - Research process
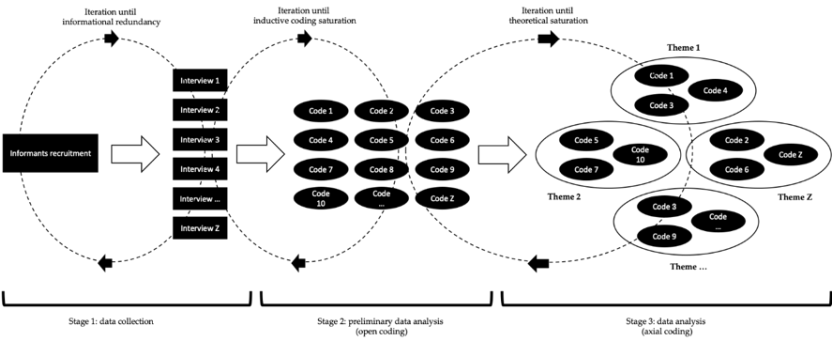
The study participants were all Danish citizens between 23 and 82 years old. They were recruited from a pool of survey responses stemming from an earlier phase of the overall project. In the survey, people had the opportunity to leave their email address, whether available for a follow-up interview. As the present research is qualitative and exploratory in nature, it must be noted that our purpose is not to make general statements about a specific (and constructed) sample of a larger population; but 'to gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions according to which one culture construes the world' (McCracken, 1988, 17). In other words, we are not interested in assessing how many people within a more or less homogeneous group possess certain characteristics that may explain their storage behaviour. We are interested in exploring the qualitative relations that characterize storage as a phenomenon of the culture in which it is performed. Therefore, discussions about the 'statistical logic' (Seale et al., 2004, 435) underpinning our "sample" are less relevant. More important than the representativeness of our recruited participants is their 'social significance' (Seale et al., 2004, 435), that is, the fact that informants have 'direct and personal knowledge of some event [the storage of unused electronic products, in our case] that

they are able and willing to communicate to others' (Sandelowski, 1995, 180).

Table 2 - Informant demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Housing
Andreas	M	27	Master	Clerk	House
Anja	F	30	Bachelor	Unemployed	Flat
Birger	M	67	Primary school	Retired	House
Charlotte	F	30	Bachelor	Nurse	Flat
Claes	M	25	Master	Student	Flat
Dennis	M	23	High school	Unskilled worker	Flat
Dorthe	F	25	High school	Student	Flat
Dagmar	F	28	Bachelor	Unemployed	Flat
Eva	F	63	Bachelor	Librarian	House
Esben	M	24	High school	Student	Flat
Henrik	M	68	Bachelor	Retired	House
Ida	F	24	High school	Student	Flat
Jonas	M	30	Master	Student	House
Juliane	F	26	Bachelor	Student	Flat

Kristian	M	49	Professional bachelor	Unskilled worker	Flat
Leif	M	50	Bachelor	Retired	Flat
Morten	M	27	Bachelor	Unemployed	House
Mathias	M	23	High school	Student	Flat
Maja	F	29	Master	Clerk	Flat
Margrethe	F	28	High school	Student	Flat
Niklas	M	27	High school	Student	Flat
Robert	M	29	High school	Student	Flat
Theis	M	76	Bachelor	Retired	Flat
Tobias	M	30	Master	Unemployed	Flat
Torben	M	29	Bachelor	Student	Flat
Troels	M	24	Bachelor	Student	Flat
Tyra	F	82	Professional bachelor	Retired	House
Wendy	F	24	Professional bachelor	Student	Flat
Xin	F	30	Bachelor	Student	Flat

However, we recognize possible limitations related to the sociodemographic composition of the cohort of study participants

(summarized in Table 2). We sought to approximate gender equality (the final sample consists of 41% women and 59% men) and covered a range of different educational backgrounds. Yet our sample is still disproportionate in terms of age (the majority are between 20 and 30 years old), education (the majority are students) and housing (the majority live in flats). We are aware that the predominance of these sociodemographic variables may affect our informants' perspectives on and experiences of technology disposal and storage and, with them, the results of our study. But to reiterate the point made above: the present study is exploratory and has no claim about the representativeness of the sample, nor the generalizability of the findings in relation to the sample.

We conducted a thematic analysis of the data in order to explore consumers' experiences of their disposal practices (Ritchie et al., 2013). The analysis proceeded inductively, as we did not commence with a fixed theoretical agenda in mind, but rather with a commitment to understand why consumers keep or discard their technology. In the preliminary stage of the analysis, the researchers involved in data collection independently read the transcribed interviews and proceeded with open coding to form initial meaning categories describing informants' reflections on

their experiences of technology storage and disposal. These categories were recursively compared and discussed within the research team to ensure inductive thematic saturation, i.e. the point where no new codes emerge (Saunders et al., 2018). In the later stage of the analysis, we proceeded with axial coding to identify relationships among the preliminary categories (Charmaz, 2006). At this stage, categories were related to each other and to existing theory on the topic, and thus iteratively reinterpreted 'in a continuous back and forth process of relating parts to the whole' (Thompson et al., 1989, 141). This hermeneutic, back-and-forth process (Thompson et al., 1994) continued until theoretical saturation (Saunders et al., 2018), i.e. until we reached a comprehensive interpretation of the data in light of existing theory. As a result, we identified the theme of risk as the common underlying framework through which our study participants make sense of the practice of storage of unused technology. The different connotations of this theme (i.e. the different risks) and further explanations of the findings are discussed in the next section.

Results

In the findings, we address how storage transforms end-of-life electronics into valuable possessions. We find that this transformation happens because storage serves as a practice of managing four types of risk that consumers experience in their lives: practical risks (i.e. risks to the stability of consumers' everyday practices), existential risks (i.e. risks to consumers' sense of self), environmental risks (i.e. risks to the environment), and moral risk (i.e. risks of acting wastefully). This classification should be understood as 'ideal types' of risk in the Weberian sense. They are thus not the risk perceptions of any one individual but rather serve to capture the predominant patterns among the risk perceptions our informants articulated.

Practical Risk

Most of our informants saw storing used electronic devices as a way of insuring themselves against the risks that losing or breaking their devices would pose to the stability of their everyday lives. For modern consumers, electronic devices have become central to carrying out a multitude of daily practices, such as work, study, parenting, banking and leisure practices. If consumers suddenly find themselves without their devices, these

practices are at risk of breaking down. For this reason, keeping a "safety stock" of used electronics, as one informant called it (Mathias), is essential for ensuring that consumers can go about their daily business without worrying about the unexpected loss or breakdown of their smartphones, laptops, or tablets.

In line with previous research (Wilson et al., 2017), our findings suggest that the storing of smartphones is particularly pervasive. Smartphones kept for insurance against risks to the stability of everyday life go under various names: 'emergency phone', 'SOS phone', 'spare phone', 'back-up phone', or an 'insurance'. The very naming of these devices – e.g. 'emergency phone' and 'SOS phone' – indicates what is perceived to be at stake: Losing one's phone represents nothing short of an emergency. Consider also Ida, who tells us that she has "her whole life" in the digital calendar on her smartphone. Metaphorically, losing her phone would be equal to the uprooting of her life. Juliane articulates a similar stance:

> Well, I've been down at one of those Apple repair stores, and every time I'm there they say that they have a ton of work and that it [i.e. Juliane's computer] will be lying on a shelf and they can't tell me when it's done. And I can't… I can't do without my computer.

> Because we have the desktop computer at home, which
> you can't bring anywhere. I mean, I have classes, I
> have student jobs. So, I can't do without my computer
> for like 2 weeks, 3 weeks.

Juliane's words evoke the phantomic presence of an unbearable risk associated to "make do without a computer" (that is, a portable computer). When asked what she would do in case of a sudden breakdown of her (already malfunctioning) laptop, she expresses risk-related anxiety through a reluctance to even think about such a negative scenario: "I don't know. I have to figure that out. I don't hope that that happens." In this respect, our findings echo and extend Robinson and Arnould's (Robinson and Arnould, 2019) observation of the 'hysteresis of the battery', the 'unpleasant unpredictability' and resultant unsettling feelings brought along by battery-based technologies. Robinson and Arnould (2019) describe this 'discomfort of unpredictability [as] the 'what', 'if' and 'might' of insufficient energy' (13). Our findings suggest that such discomfort is not only experienced in relation to depleting energy gauges but also in relation to electronics more generally. That is, our informants articulated feelings of discomfort towards the 'what if' of breaking, losing or "having to make do without" electronics. In this way, keeping an

insurance device becomes a way of managing the 'unpleasant unpredictability' of electronics. It provides consumers with easily accessible replacement devices and thereby reduces the discomfort evoked by the 'what-if' scenarios in which a replacement device would be needed.

End-of-life devices are not only kept to replace consumers' primary devices, as described above, but also to protect them. For many of our informants, stored devices for example served as 'sacrificial devices' (Wilson et al., 2017), devices that can be used for occasions where the devices are at augmented risk of getting lost or breaking (e.g. at festivals or during traveling). Typically (but not exclusively), phones are at the center of this narrative. As Dorthe puts it, she stores her old phone, "if I were to need one that could take a beating". Though intended for future use, sacrificial devices typically remain in storage and only, if at all, leave storage for very brief periods. Put simply, their functionality is potential, not realized. Thus, akin to what Hirschman et al. (2012) write of many items consumers store in their garages, sacrificial devices 'may be kept and stored "just in case" the opportunity arises for its use in the future' (372).

To summarize, the storage of end-of-life devices helps consumers manage the practical risks brought about by the

entrenchment of electronic devices in their daily practices. In this way, storage creates value as a form of contingency planning: It is in part some imagined future emergency (e.g. the loss of a phone) or exacting event (e.g. a festival) that makes end-of-life electronics valuable to the consumer.

Existential Risk

Consumers do not only store their devices to manage risks related to their everyday practices. They also store devices as a way of protecting themselves against the loss of identity that losing control of their electronic belongings might entail. Storage helps consumers create a sense of existential security by managing two types of existential risks. First, storing helps consumers maintain a connection with material memories (e.g. pictures) or material extensions of themselves (e.g. an old, beloved phone), and second, storing helps consumers shield themselves from the misuse and manipulation of sensitive, identity-defining data.

Forgetting the Self

For some consumers, storing old electronics is a way of holding on to some memory that is important to their sense of self. Storing these devices keep their memories safe and their identities intact. An extreme example of this is Jonas, who, by his own initiative,

has made a document listing all the smartphones he has ever owned. The document contains pictures of the phones accompanied by small anecdotes recounting the memorable experiences Jonas has had with his phones. Jonas' commemorating of his devices reflects his deep emotional bond to them. Storing these treasured phones is a way for Jonas of remembering and commemorating important periods of his life. Speaking of another kind of device, one of his old computers, Jonas explains:

> Hell, you build an emotional relationship to these things. That's probably also one of the reasons that I don't get rid of it. I have an old Macintosh 3G I remember playing with when I was little. I mean, I can't get rid of that. I've just acquired an old Mac Classic from 1986, it's actually a Macintosh SE from 1986, and I did that because it was the first computer I used as a child. Then I could sit in my room and play Shuffle Pops. It's nostalgia. It's love for the machine. So I had to have it. And it now sits in my house.

Wendy provides another, albeit somewhat different, example of storing a device as a way of memorializing one's past self. Wendy holds onto an old Nokia phone to maintain a connection with a

lifestyle she once led and even keep the option of reverting back to this lifestyle open:

> And the other one [i.e. the other phone Wendy stores] is a Nokia push-button mobile phone, which I have a dream of one day using for going 'off the grid'. But, well, it's not going to happen, but I keep it if I one day feel like doing that.

Both Jonas and Wendy exemplify how storage can transform stored possessions into 'personal memorabilia' (Belk, 1988) or 'memorials to self-history' (Hirschman et al., 2012). The stored electronics may in this way be viewed as 'a personal archive or museum that allows [consumers] to reflect on [their] histories and how [they] have changed' (Belk, 1988, 159). Our findings thereby support the claims of previous studies that suggest (Huang and Truong, 2008; Wilson et al., 2017) that consumers store their devices because of their emotional attachment to them. However, we also move beyond these studies in showing that sometimes the attachment is to the device itself and not just to the personal data it stores. Our study thus evidences Ylä-Mella et al.'s (2015) speculation that old devices may acquire value as a 'representation of [consumers'] personality' (381).

Where the value of end-of-life electronics to manage practical risks derive in part from their future functionality (e.g. to act as a replacement phone), the value of storing devices as personal memorabilia is disconnected from the functionality of the stored devices. As Cherrier and Ponnor (2010) write in their study on hoarding behavior, '[a]s objects are found to serve as vessels for memories, they are removed from the bounds of functionality' (14). Except for cases (like that of Wendy) in which the devices are stored to allow our informants to return to some nostalgized period of their life, our informants did not expect their electronic memorabilia to return to active use and their functionality was therefore largely irrelevant. For owners of such devices, then, there may not be an 'optimal' time to discard them, as conceived by Fang and Rau (2017), as the consumer value of these devices do not decrease as their functional and physical properties deteriorate.

Sometimes, it is not the stored device itself that is linked to consumers' identities but rather the content of the devices. The devices that our informants kept in storage would often be regarded as storage units. They held photos, videos, and old school papers, and other digital artefacts that hold and express our informants' selves. Ida, for example, keeps a total of three devices

– two old computers and an old phone – because they all contain photos that are valuable to her. While Ida wants to dispose of these devices eventually, she is in no rush to do so. For now, the devices serve as a functional way of storing her photos as the devices are not in the way and do not take up much space:

> Well, I don't want to throw them out because I know that there are images on them. And then it's just something that I don't get around to doing because, well, they don't take up a lot of space and they are just in my closest.

Losing these devices would mean the loss of artefacts that might be important for consumers' self-concept. In this way, storing the devices represents a way for consumers for managing the risk of forgetting themselves.

Manipulating the Self

Our informants also expressed concerns in relation to other risks to the self. Many were concerned about what would happen to the sensitive data on their devices if they were to dispose of the devices. Our informants thought that this data posed an existential risk because it, in the wrong hands, would mean a lack of control of how one's self was projected to others (e.g. having photos shared against one's will) or result in the misuse of one's identity

(e.g. stealing one's personal information and selling or using it for financial gain). Eva, for example, sums up her reasons for storing multiple phones in her home: "I guess it's because I don't know if there's data on them that should be deleted". Another example is Jonas, who is only willing to pass devices on to people he knows personally:

> [E]ven if they [i.e. Jonas' friends] recovered some images of me or my girlfriend, I would know that they wouldn't misuse them, because they have, like, respect for me. I can trust them. Therefore, I wouldn't sell it [i.e. Jonas' phone] to people I don't know.

Interestingly, Jonas, as a computer science graduate and technology enthusiast, is extremely technically knowledgeable. But rather than granting Jonas a sense of control of his data and making him feel more at ease with disposing his devices, his technical knowledge alerts him to the risks of doing so:

> Interviewer: But would you feel safe that they [Jonas' private images] would be gone if you deleted them?
> Interviewee: No. Because they aren't [safe]. Unless you uninstalled your entire disc. Then I would have to install programs [to uninstall the disc] and then I would also have to trust those programs. And suddenly, I

would have to write the software myself and I'm too
lazy to do that.

For consumers concerned about these existential risks, storage represents a technique for maintaining a sense of complete control over what happens to their data. Storage, in other words, ensures that the data is not used for identity-destabilizing uses.

Whether used as a way of remembering one's identity or making sure it is not wrongfully manipulated, storage provides value to consumers by granting them a sense of existential control and security.

Environmental Risk

Storing electronic devices also provides value by giving consumers a way to manage the environmental risks perceived to be associated with disposal. In line with the findings of other studies (Hanks et al., 2008), our informants were worried that their disposed devices were not processed properly and therefore might end up in places where they would have a detrimental effect on their surroundings. Storing their devices was seen as a technique for making sure this did not happen. Morten makes this view explicit when he explains why he keeps over 10 phones in storage:

Over 10 phones, yes. […] I don't use them for anything, so I guess I could just throw them out. But – I've heard that if the phones go to the recycling center, it's not certain that they end up being recycled. They can also end up in Africa or some place and just collect scraps. That was just too much to take, not knowing where they actually ended up and if they were recycled properly. In any case, that's the problem for me – not knowing where they actually end up and if it is taken care of properly. So now they are just in my drawer.

Ida articulates a very similar view in relation to two computers she keeps stored:

[…] that's also one of the reasons I haven't thrown out those computers. It's because I don't know how to throw them out. I don't want to throw them somewhere where they are going to pollute and stuff seeps into the groundwater or is burnt. I don't want to be a part of that, I feel they pollute less in my closet.

Storage becomes a practice of controlling and containing the environmentally harmful effects that might follow from disposing one's devices – even if the devices are disposed for recycling, as Morten stresses. Like the hoarders studied by Cherrier and Ponnor

(2010), our informants felt responsible towards the environment and storage allowed them to live up to this responsibility.

This finding shows that some consumers perceive it to be more sustainable to store one's devices than disposing them for recycling. By keeping their devices in storage, consumers are in control and do not risk making themselves complicit to putting a strain on the planet. Interestingly, this view stands in complete contrast to the literature on the role of dead storage in the transition towards a more circular economy. This literature emphasizes the importance of minimizing the amount of hibernating electronic devices and portrays storage as a barrier to efficient electronic waste recovery (Wilson et al., 2017).

Moral Risk

A final type of risk experienced by our informants relates to a concern with needlessly letting things go to waste. This risk of being wasteful we term "moral risk", knowing well that morality is also involved in the other types of risk discussed here, in particular in the environmental risk. However, as noted by economic anthropology, frugality is a fundamental moral part of our joint human past (Wilk and Cliggett, 2018) and a central element in the moral foundation of all major religions (Lastovicka

et al., 1999). Even in what might arguably be one of the most "wasteful" of contemporary consumer societies, the United States, frugality runs like a red thread through its historical moral discourses (Witkowski, 2010). Hence, we find the term 'moral risk' appropriate due to its deep anthropological and sociological roots.

Boucher (2017) identified 14 different logics of frugality. For example, thrift is suggested one such logic of frugality, nostalgia another. As one informant (Charlotte) describes, these logics may be intertwined:

> We have a radio in the basement, which I think is really nice, so I don't want to throw it out. But it doesn't work very well.

While the fourteen logics certainly point to a multi-facetted phenomenon, they also carry a risk of lumping together different types of logics and behavioral frameworks that differ quite a lot, not least in terms of their conduciveness to sustainable behavior. As pointed out by Evans (2011), when it comes to sustainability issues it is important to distinguish between frugality and thrift, since thrift is basically saving economic resources in order to be able to spend it elsewhere or in other words, the art of doing more consumption with less money. In contrast, frugality is a direct

moral restraint on consumption and as such much more in line with ethical demands of sustainability. The notion of moral risk attached to violating principles of frugality suggested here corresponds roughly to what Boucher (2017) called moral, idealist and waste-not logics of frugality.

Consequently, and contrary to environmental risk, the concern here is not related to the generation of waste but rather to a concern of acting wastefully. Put differently, whereas environmental risk reflects our informants' perceived responsibility to the environment, this type of moral risk reflects on the one hand our informants' responsibility to the stored device itself (a responsibility that has also been recorded in hoarders [Cherrier and Ponnor, 2010]). On the other hand, this moral risk has roots in a deeper, cultural heritage of frugality that operates as a social imaginary (Castoriadis, 1987) instituting an anti-wasteful ethos in society in general.

Our informants felt anxious about carelessly disposing of a device that they felt had some kind of value – even if they themselves did not have any current use of the devices. Xin provides a good example of this deepfelt aversion towards wastefulness:

> Interviewer: You mentioned [storing] your iPhone. Do you have many of those at home?
>
> Interviewee: I have one that I've tried to sell. But now it's just at home. It's too old to sell anyway. It's still functional. So now I'm keeping it for our son if he one day wants a phone to play with. I would rather keep things if they have value.

Here, Xin recognizes that the phone has no financial value but yet keeps the phone because it still has 'value'. Thus, throwing away something that still has value would be seen as wasteful. This reluctance to discharge for no apparent reason, we suggest, has roots in an inherited ethos of frugality and the ensuing principles of "not throwing away things that work". This ethos explains the 'sense of guilt [consumers feel] about throwing [their] old phone away' (Wilhelm et al., 2011, 30), which other studies have suggested to be a motivation for storage. In our context, the moral risk of acting wastefully paradoxically may lead to a behavior that is not conducive to improving sustainability, since it impedes the entry of the material object into the circular economy. Our case thus provides a qualification of Evans' (2011) general observation that frugality (unlike thrift) can reduce environmental impact.

Discussion

As explained in the introduction, studies have previously argued that end-of-life electronics possess residual value to consumers and that this value makes consumers store their electronics instead of disposing them. Our analysis qualifies this conclusion. Taking a practice-based approach value, we argue that the residual value is not only an attribute of electronics but rather also arises from the practice of storage. Storage serves as an important practice for consumers living in a society increasingly preoccupied with risk and the uncertainty of the future (Giddens, 2007). Our analysis shows that, in the case of end-of-life electronics, storage provides a sense of security to consumers facing four different kinds of risk: practical risk, existential risk, environmental risk, and moral risk. Thus, we show that consumers sometimes prefer storage over disposal because storage provide them with what we call 'security value'. These findings have implications for how we think of 'secondary devices' and the practice of 'dead storage'.

Secondary Devices and Differentiated Storage

The first practical implication amounts to a rethinking of the notion of 'secondary devices'. Wilson et al. (2017) offer the term

of a 'secondary phone' to avoid thinking of stored end-of-life phones as redundant: 'secondary phone […] holds a different function for the user than their primary phone but is still valued and intentionally retained by the user' (521). Our findings support this classification. However, Wilson et al. (2017) further suggest that phones tend to become redundant when they are pushed from the status of a secondary device to that of a tertiary device, as consumers only need one 'spare phone'. In making this argument, Wilson et al. (2017) assume that all stored phones fulfil the same function (i.e. providing a spare), which obviates the need to store multiple phones.

However, as Wilson et al. (2017) note and our findings corroborate, consumers tend to store far more than just one end-of-life phone. Our findings suggest that this is in part because consumers' storage of end-of-life devices is not one homogenous stock of devices. They do not all serve as spare devices. Rather, stored devices tend to fulfil different functions and therefore hold different kinds of value to consumers. For example, our informant Wendy stores both an iPhone 5 and an old Nokia phone. Wendy stores the iPhone as a spare device (i.e. it is kept to manage practical risks) while she stores the Nokia phone as a memorial to her former lifestyle (i.e. it is kept to manage existential risks).

Another example is Esben, who stores both a phone as a backup device (i.e. a traditional spare phone) and a phone to bring to festivals (i.e. a sacrificial device). Our findings thus suggest to think of the collection of end-of-life devices consumers store as differentiated storages, consisting of differently valued devices. While it may not make sense for consumers to store two spare devices to manage the same kind of risk, as Wilson et al. (2017) correctly argue, it may make perfect sense to store multiple devices to manage different kinds of risks. Public and corporate actors should take these differentiated functions of end-of-life electronics into account in developing their reverse logistics strategies.

How Dead is Dead Storage?

Our findings also problematize labelling consumers' storage of end-of-life electronics 'dead storage'. This label carries connotations of inefficiency and passivity: If the stored device is 'dead', it serves no function and should therefore be put to better uses through recycling or refurbishment. Our study finds that the storage of end-of-life devices does serve a function, as it helps consumers manage risk. Wilson et al. (2017) in part address the inappropriateness of the dead-storage label when they qualify the

dead-storage period devices go through as a period of 'hibernation': 'hibernation […] suggests a latent value that although steadily reducing, could be 'reawakened' and recaptured' (522). But our findings suggest that this qualification does not go far enough. While the use value of stored devices may be 'latent', the security value is not. Security value is actively captured through storage. Thus, even when devices are not in use, their security-generating capacity is alive and wide awake, which the concept of 'hibernation' fails to recognize.

This value-generating capacity of 'dead storage' also implies that the current problem of 'dead storage' is not likely to be fixed through a top-down, purely technical approach. It might for example not be enough to simply inform consumers of the need to dispose of their electronics and then expect them to follow suit. As other studies have pointed out, many consumers are aware of the importance of waste recovery, but this 'awareness has not translated to recycling behavior' (Ylä-Mella et al., 2015, 374). Put differently, problem awareness constitutes but one of the criteria for the effective collection of end-of-life electronics (Welfens et al., 2016). And yet, discussions of how to solve the problem of dead storage has often centered around awareness-raising campaigns (Bovea et al., 2018; Nowakowski, 2019). We

suggest that proposals to manage 'dead storage' must move beyond an understanding of consumers as 'passive and rational recipients that will follow […] production-side signals when making decisions' (Camacho-Otero et al. 2010, 2), the way much circular economy literature treats consumers. Our findings show that consumers very well might be rational, but that they do not always follow a rationality of resource efficiency. For example, as storing end-of-life devices provided our informants with security value, storage seemed perfectly rational to them, even if they were aware that they were engaging in resource-inefficient behavior. Attempts to minimize 'dead storage' must therefore seek to 'speak' to this rationality and provide security value in other ways if they are to be successful in convincing consumers to dispose of their stored devices.

Table 3 - Overview of risks and possible routes of managing them

Ideal type of risk	Description	Alternative route to security value
Practical risk	Perceived risks to the stability of consumers' everyday practices	Collectivize the stock of end-of-life devices (e.g. by developing an infrastructure for renting spare and sacrificial devices)

Existential risk	Perceived risks to consumers' sense of self	Offer data securement services upon recovering end-of-life devices
Sustainability risk	Perceived risks to the environment	Give consumers a sense of control over the fate of their end-of-life devices (e.g. through a certification scheme ensuring responsible e-waste management)
Moral risk	Perceived risks of acting wastefully	Make the disposal of end-of-life devices feel less wasteful (e.g. by redesigning the recycling center)

So how might we go about compensating consumers for the security value they lose upon letting go of their stored devices? How can consumers feel protected from practical, existential, environmental, and moral risks without resorting to storage? We offer a few proposals for alternative routes of risk-mitigation. To mitigate practical risks, it might be beneficial to develop an infrastructure for the easy and expedient rental of spare devices. Collectivizing the stock of spare devices would mean that less devices would have to be stored and would at the same time make

consumers less inclined to keep their own personal stock. To mitigate existential risks, it is essential to help consumers retrieve the identity resources (images, videos, and other files) their old devices contain. Refurbishment stores could for example offer this as a service whenever they acquire consumers' old devices. To mitigate environmental risks, the challenge is to give consumers a sense of control over what happens to their devices after disposal. This might be done by introducing a certification scheme that e-waste management agencies can apply for to ensure consumers that they are handling e-waste in a responsible fashion. Finally, to mitigate moral risks, consumers must be made to feel like they are not letting resources go to waste when they are throwing out their electronics. One proposal would be to design recycling centers so that it is clear to consumers that the electronic items they leave behind there are handled differently from other trash. A designated area for delivering e-waste in which items are neatly arranged would tell consumers that these items are handled with care, that they have a future, and that they are thus wasted.

These are some of the proposals that arise from taking seriously the security value that consumers experience through storage. We have not, however, tested the effectiveness and

economic feasibility of the proposals above, and we call for future research to address this task.

References

Arnold SJ and Fischer E (1994) Hermeneutics and Consumer Research. *Journal of Consumer Research* 21(1): 55-70.

Arnould EJ (2014) Rudiments of a value praxeology. *Marketing Theory* 14(1): 129-133.

Arnould EJ and Wallendorf M (1994) Market-oriented ethnography: interpretation building and marketing strategy formulation. *Journal of Marketing Research* 31(4): 484-504.

Bardhi F and Eckhardt GM (2012) Access-based consumption: The case of car sharing. *Journal of Consumer Research* 39(4): 881-898.

Bardhi F and Eckhardt GM (2017) Liquid consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research* 44(3): 582-597.

Bardhi F, Eckhardt GM and Arnould EJ (2012) Liquid relationship to possessions. *Journal of Consumer Research* 39(3): 510-529.

Beck U, Lash S and Wynne B (1992) *Risk society: Towards a new modernity.* sage.

Belk RW (1988) Possessions and the extended self. *Journal of Consumer Research* 15(2): 139-168.

Belk RW (2013) *Collecting in a consumer society.* Routledge.

Boucher JL (2017) The logics of frugality: Reproducing tastes of necessity among affluent climate change activists. *Energy research & social science* 31: 223-232.

Bovea MD, Ibanez-Fores V, Perez-Belis V, et al. (2018) A survey on consumers' attitude towards storing and end of life strategies of small information and communication technology devices in Spain. *Waste Management* 71: 589-602.

Camacho-Otero J, Boks C and Pettersen I (2018) Consumption in the Circular Economy: A Literature Review. *Sustainability* 10(8): 2758.

Castoriadis C (1987) *The imaginary institution of society.* Mit Press.

Charmaz K (2006) *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis.* sage.

Cherrier H and Ponnor T (2010) A study of hoarding behavior and attachment to material possessions. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* 13(1): 8-23.

Curasi CF, Price LL and Arnould EJ (2004) How individuals' cherished possessions become families' inalienable wealth. *Journal of Consumer Research* 31(3): 609-622.

Cwerner SB and Metcalfe A (2003) Storage and Clutter: Discourses and Practices of Order in the Domestic World. *Journal of Design History* 16(3): 229-239.

D'Adamo I, Ferella F and Rosa P (2019) Wasted liquid crystal displays as a source of value for e-waste treatment centers: A

techno-economic analysis. *Current Opinion in Green and Sustainable Chemistry* 19: 37-44.

Epp AM and Price LL (2009) The storied life of singularized objects: Forces of agency and network transformation. *Journal of Consumer Research* 36(5): 820-837.

Evans D (2011) Thrifty, green or frugal: Reflections on sustainable consumption in a changing economic climate. *Geoforum* 42(5): 550-557.

Fang Y-T and Rau H (2017) Optimal consumer electronics product take-back time with consideration of consumer value. *Sustainability* 9(3): 385.

Geissdoerfer M, Savaget P, Bocken NM, et al. (2017) The Circular Economy–A new sustainability paradigm? *Journal of Cleaner Production* 143: 757-768.

Giddens A (2007) The consequences of modernity. 1990.

Graeber D (2001) *Toward an anthropological theory of value: The false coin of our own dreams.* Springer.

Hanks K, Odom W, Roedl D, et al. (2008) Sustainable millennials: attitudes towards sustainability and the material effects of interactive technologies. *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems.* 333-342.

Hetherington K (2004) Secondhandedness: consumption, disposal, and absent presence. *Environment and planning D: society and space* 22(1): 157-173.

Hirschman EC, Ruvio A and Belk RW (2012) Exploring space and
place in marketing research: Excavating the garage.
Marketing Theory 12(4): 369-389.

Hobson K (2016) Closing the loop or squaring the circle? Locating
generative spaces for the circular economy. *Progress in
Human Geography* 40(1): 88-104.

Holbrook MB (1999) Introduction to consumer value. *Consumer
value: A framework for analysis and research*. 1-28.

Huang EM and Truong KN (2008) Breaking the disposable
technology paradigm: opportunities for sustainable interaction
design for mobile phones. *Proceedings of the SIGCHI
conference on human factors in computing systems*. 323-332.

Jang Y-C and Kim M (2010) Management of used & end-of-life
mobile phones in Korea: a review. *Resources, Conservation
and recycling* 55(1): 11-19.

Karababa E and Kjeldgaard D (2014) Value in marketing: Toward
sociocultural perspectives. *Marketing Theory* 14(1): 119-127.

Kirchherr J, Reike D and Hekkert M (2017) Conceptualizing the
circular economy: An analysis of 114 definitions. *Resources,
Conservation and recycling* 127: 221-232.

Kuah AT and Wang P (2020) Circular economy and consumer
acceptance: An exploratory study in East and Southeast Asia.
J. Clean. Prod 247: 119097.

Lastovicka JL, Bettencourt LA, Hughner RS, et al. (1999) Lifestyle of the tight and frugal: Theory and measurement. *Journal of Consumer Research* 26(1): 85-98.

McCracken G (1988) *The long interview.* Sage.

Merli R, Preziosi M and Acampora A (2018) How do scholars approach the circular economy? A systematic literature review. *Journal of Cleaner Production* 178: 703-722.

Miller D (2008) The uses of value. *Geoforum* 39(3): 1122-1132.

Mylan J (2015) Understanding the diffusion of Sustainable Product-Service Systems: Insights from the sociology of consumption and practice theory. *Journal of Cleaner Production* 97: 13-20.

Nowakowski P (2019) Investigating the reasons for storage of WEEE by residents - A potential for removal from households. *Waste Manag* 87: 192-203.

Ongondo F and Williams I (2011) Greening academia: Use and disposal of mobile phones among university students. *Waste Management* 31(7): 1617-1634.

Parajuly K and Wenzel H (2017) Potential for circular economy in household WEEE management. *Journal of Cleaner Production* 151: 272-285.

Peronard J-P and Ballantyne AG (2019) Broadening the understanding of the role of consumer services in the circular economy: Toward a conceptualization of value creation processes. *Journal of Cleaner Production* 239: 118010.

Rathore P, Kota S and Chakrabarti A (2011) Sustainability through remanufacturing in India: a case study on mobile handsets. *Journal of Cleaner Production* 19(15): 1709-1722.

Ritchie J, Lewis J, Nicholls CM, et al. (2013) *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers.* sage.

Robinson TD and Arnould E (2019) Portable technology and multi-domain energy practices. *Marketing Theory*. DOI: 10.1177/1470593119870226.

Sandelowski M (1995) Sample size in qualitative research. *Research in nursing & health* 18(2): 179-183.

Saunders B, Sim J, Kingstone T, et al. (2018) Saturation in qualitative research: exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Quality & Quantity* 52(4): 1893-1907.

Schulz C, Hjaltadóttir RE and Hild P (2019) Practising circles: Studying institutional change and circular economy practices. *Journal of Cleaner Production* 237: 117749.

Seale C, Gobo G, Gubrium JF, et al. (2004) *Qualitative Research Practice.* London, UNITED KINGDOM: SAGE Publications.

Speake J and Yangke LN (2015) " What do I do with my old mobile phones? I just put them in a drawer": Attitudes and perspectives towards the disposal of mobile phones in Liverpool, UK. *Human Geographies* 9(2): 241.

Thompson CJ, Locander WB and Pollio HR (1989) Putting consumer experience back into consumer research: The philosophy and

method of existential-phenomenology. *Journal of Consumer Research* 16(2): 133-146.

Thompson CJ, Pollio HR and Locander WB (1994) The spoken and the unspoken: a hermeneutic approach to understanding the cultural viewpoints that underlie consumers' expressed meanings. *Journal of Consumer Research* 21(3): 432-452.

Thompson M (1979) Rubbish theory: The creation and destruction of value. *Oxford: Oxford University Press*.

Türe M and Ger G (2016) Continuity Through Change: Navigating Temporalities Through Heirloom Rejuvenation. *Journal of Consumer Research* 43(1): 1-25.

van Weelden E, Mugge R and Bakker C (2016) Paving the way towards circular consumption: exploring consumer acceptance of refurbished mobile phones in the Dutch market. *Journal of Cleaner Production* 113: 743-754.

Webster K (2021) A circular economy is about the economy. *Circular Economy and Sustainability* 1(1): 115-126.

Welfens MJ, Nordmann J and Seibt A (2016) Drivers and barriers to return and recycling of mobile phones. Case studies of communication and collection campaigns. *Journal of Cleaner Production* 132: 108-121.

Wilhelm W, Yankov A and Magee P (2011) Mobile phone consumption behavior and the need for sustainability innovations. *Journal of Strategic Innovation and Sustainability* 7(2): 20-40.

Wilk RR and Cliggett L (2018) *Economies and cultures: foundations of economic anthropology.* Routledge.

Wilson GT, Smalley G, Suckling JR, et al. (2017) The hibernating mobile phone: Dead storage as a barrier to efficient electronic waste recovery. *Waste Management* 60: 521-533.

Witkowski TH (2010) A brief history of frugality discourses in the United States. *Consumption, Markets and Culture* 13(3): 235-258.

Wurster S and Schulze R (2020) Consumers' acceptance of a bio-circular automotive economy: explanatory model and influence factors. *Sustainability* 12(6): 2186.

Yin J, Gao Y and Xu H (2014) Survey and analysis of consumers' behaviour of waste mobile phone recycling in China. *Journal of Cleaner Production* 65: 517-525.

Ylä-Mella J, Keiski RL and Pongrácz E (2015) Electronic waste recovery in Finland: Consumers' perceptions towards recycling and re-use of mobile phones. *Waste Management* 45: 374-384.

5

Back from The Future: How Fictional Expectations Affect Consumer Valuation and Disposition of Objects[11]

Cristiano Smaniotto, Jean-Paul Peronard, Anna Gammelgaard Ballantyne

Abstract

This article explores how representations of the future shapes consumer valuation and disposition of objects. Existing disposition research builds on a two-fold assumption: i) that objects derive value from the meanings attached to them throughout their historical circulation and ii) that this historically-imbued value determines their disposition. Drawing on a

---

qualitative study featuring focus groups and in-depth interviews, the present study challenges this assumption as it shows that consumers evaluate and dispose of objects by drawing on an entangled set of fictional expectations (of oneself, the recipient, the disposition outcome, and the planet) prefiguring a future which is not determined by the objects' past. Furthermore, the findings reveal that fictional expectations form the basis for an affective involvement that prompts consumers to engage with specific modes of disposition and even intervene into normalized object pathways. Overall, the study brings forth the future-oriented character of disposition and offers important implications concerning the affective and moral structure of disposition as well as the imaginative character of value, which open up new ways of thinking about object circulation and value creation.

Introduction

Recent projections estimate a 70% increase in global waste production by 2050 (Kaza et al., 2018). This growth is worrying because waste disposal is connected to the intensification of a

number of social and environmental issues, including resource depletion, water and air pollution, animals harming, the spread of diseases, the rise of informal economies and the formation of infrastructural break-downs (Chen et al., 2020; Kaza et al., 2018). In order to understand how we can halt (or at least reduce) this growth, we need more knowledge about why and how we dispose of things.

Accordingly, this article aims at further unpacking consumer disposal. Specifically, it builds on research at the intersection between disposition and valuation (Cherrier and Türe, 2020; Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2009; Gollnhofer et al., 2019; Türe, 2014) to explore how consumer representations of the future impacts the value of objects and their disposition. While much of existing consumer research builds on the anthropological assumption that an object's value derives from the meanings that are attached to it (Richins, 1994) during the course of its *past* "social life" (Appadurai, 1988), we explore how fictional expectations (Beckert, 2016) of the *future* affect the value that consumers ascribe to their items and, consequently, their circulation.

While consumer experiences of the future do appear in existing disposition studies (Cappellini, 2009; Cherrier and Türe,

2020; Gregson et al., 2007; Türe, 2014), these are considered as determined by existing social, cultural and cognitive structures (such as "value regimes", see Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2009; Gollnhofer et al., 2019). In other words, drawing on an ontological assumption widely present in the social sciences (Beckert and Suckert, 2021), existing disposition studies tend to reproduce a linear understanding of time which makes the future a mere effect of past and present conditions and, therefore, bound to happen (Welch et al., 2020). Yet as quantum physics discoveries over the last century suggest, the linearity of time and even the distinction between past, present and future are only a function of human perception, since at the microscopic level time and the difference between "cause" and "effect" do not exist (Rovelli, 2019). Furthermore, advances in the cognitive sciences show that the conduct of human beings – in contrast to the conduct of other animals, which may be "stuck in time" (Gilbert and Wilson, 2007) – is mostly driven by prospections (i.e. simulations) of the future, rather than by experiences of the past (Baumeister et al., 2016; Gilbert and Wilson, 2007; Seligman et al., 2013). These insights suggest that consumer experiences of the future cannot entirely be explained through a "path dependence" logic (Mahoney, 2000) by looking at existing

structures. Therefore, building on insights from the sociology of expectations (Borup et al., 2006), this paper posits that the future is an undetermined and open-ended event which does not merely succeed the present (and past), but acts back on its constitution.

Developing a deeper understanding of how the future influences disposition (and action more in general) is important because its representations are central to the pursuit of value in modern economies, as the institutions of money and credit testify (Beckert, 2016). For what concerns specifically disposition, there is an implicit assumption that consumers circulate their unwanted objects because they can imagine that these *will be* valuable. Otherwise, why not simply throw them away? This rhetorical question emphasizes the core of the problem: we will never fully understand why and how people dispose of things (and thus, we will never be able to reduce waste), if we do not account for how representations of the future impact consumers' capacity to assign value to their objects and eventually dispose of them. Based on this rationale, the following pages tackle the question of how fictional expectations of the future affect consumer valuation and disposition of objects.

The study draws on a qualitative analysis of focus groups and in-depth interviews with consumers living in Denmark. The

results indicate that consumers base their object valuations on an entangled set of fictional expectations (of oneself, the recipient, the disposition outcome, the planet) that are influenced, but by no means determined by objects' historical circulation. They also reveal that these fictional expectations form the basis for an affective involvement that prompts consumers to engage with specific modes of disposition and sometimes even intervene into normalized object pathways. These findings bear interesting implications concerning the affective and moral structure of disposition as well as the imaginative character of value, which open up new ways of thinking about the phenomena of object circulation and value creation.

Theoretical background

Value assessments affect the conduits (Hetherington, 2004) or modes of disposition (Albinsson and Perera, 2009) through which consumers manage their unwanted objects. For instance, elderly consumers dispose of special possessions – i.e. objects imbued with high symbolic identity value – by passing them on to close family members who they consider capable of preserving the "bundle of meanings" attached to such items (Price et al., 2000). Whether unable to find a worthy future owner within the family,

these consumers may turn to the market to identify a more suitable recipient (Price et al., 2000). Similarly, Lastovicka and Fernandez (2005) found that consumers rely on reselling to identify people with whom they share common identity traits, thereby ensuring that their special possessions are properly divested. Other studies indicate that value judgments also affect the disposal of everyday (that is, non-special) objects. Reselling used goods on eBay, for instance, hinges on the premise that sellers are able to recognize the economic worth of their objects and price them accordingly (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2009). Non-monetary exchanges – such as donation (Ritch, 2019) or swap (Albinsson and Perera, 2009) of used clothes – are based on consumer evaluations of the appropriateness of their unwanted objects in relation to the potential receivers. And more generally, consumers are found to turn to different disposal conduits (such as selling, gifting, donating, or binning) in an effort to match the value ascribed to their objects to the worth of the future owners (Türe, 2014). Importantly, these studies indicate that disposal is a reflexive act (Gregson et al., 2007) involving more or less implicit operations of valuation.

Drawing upon anthropological literature, existing consumer studies suggest that object valuation is guided by

"regimes of value" (Appadurai, 1986) (see Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2009; Gollnhofer et al., 2019; Türe, 2014). These are culturally embedded taxonomic structures imbuing things with various meanings (Appadurai, 1986) – such as their usefulness (utilitarian value), economic worth (exchange value), or capacity to signal a person's identity (identity value) (Albinsson and Perera, 2009; Richins, 1994). At the individual level, value regimes function as evaluative schemes that consumers (more or less consciously) mobilize when judging an object's value (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2009; Türe, 2014). For instance, the disposal of food that has passed its best-before date into the bin is guided by a value regime that associates "expired" food with zero utilitarian value and with negative meanings related to fears of contaminating oneself and others (such as beloved family members). At the same time, this value regime functions as a blueprint for object circulation (Appadurai, 1986), as it prescribes consumers to throw expired food into the bin. In short, value regimes guide consumer valuation and circulation of objects in disposal.

While the value regime interpretation is enlightening, it builds on the assumption that an object's value derives from its *past* "social life" (Appadurai, 1988). Yet, if we assume that an

object's value is determined by its past, for example, by the labor put into its production or by the memories connected to it, it remains unclear how and why some objects at certain points in time break free from existing value regimes and patterns of valuation. That is, if we solely focus on the past as explicative of valuation, we risk limiting our ability to fathom how and why new value(s) emerge, and how (discarded) objects reacquire value. This is unfortunate since precisely reimaging how objects reacquire value (for instance, turning someone's waste into a resource) is central to the development of a circular, more sustainable economy.

To overcome this theoretical and practical impasse, the present study shifts focus from the past to the *future* of objects. As Kopytoff (1988) noticed, individuals have "biographical expectations" towards things. That is, they imagine things as having not only a past, but also a future social life. While biographical expectations do appear, albeit rarely, in previous disposition studies ((Gregson et al., 2007; Türe, 2014; Cappellini, 2009; Cherrier and Türe, 2020), they are usually treated as consumer projections of an object's residual value and thus determined by the object's past. Drawing on the sociology of expectations (Borup et al., 2006), we posit instead that the future

life of objects experienced by consumers in disposal is influenced, but not determined, by objects' previous history. According to such non-deterministic perspective on temporal experiences, the future is as much as a cause as it is an effect of consumer valuation and related disposition of objects.

In particular, we draw on the work of Beckert (2016) to argue that consumers experience the future in everyday life in the form of fictional expectations. The identifier "fictional" stands to emphasize that consumer expectations are not the outcome of rational calculations (such as, say, weather forecasts); but stories created by the culturally-embedded imagination of individuals which helps them make sense of their experiences and practices. Because of their fictional character, expectations represent future events *as if* they were real (whereas, in fact, the future can only be imagined), thereby encouraging individuals to act towards their fulfillment (Beckert, 2013). In this sense, consumers' representations of an object's future in the form of fictional expectations are not the mere effect of the object's assigned value, but they act back on the constitution of its value as much as the past. Based on these considerations, the remainder of the paper explores how fictional expectations affect consumer valuation and disposition of objects.

Materials and methods

The study builds on two sets of qualitative data, namely focus group and in-depth interviews. Focus group interviews were deemed particularly suitable to explore how consumers' collectively construct experiences of disposal practices, as it is a recognized method for exploring how interpretations, motivations, arguments, and ideas evolve in a social setting (Morgan, 2010). The focus group format specifically encourages participants to share, exchange, motivate, and elaborate on their disposal practices and the reasons for undertaking specific practices. Such interactions allow to collect insights into different viewpoints and arguments which, in turn, illuminate the social construction of consumer valuation. Because of their interactive nature, focus group interviews provided the foundations for data analysis (Morgan and Hoffman, 2018).

We collected a total of five focus group interviews as part of an exercise for undergraduate students of qualitative methods for business research at a Danish university. The learning aim of the exercise was simply to familiarize students with focus group interviews as a qualitative data collection method. Participation was therefore entirely voluntary and it did not have any effect on

students' grades. We made sure to communicate this information clearly to the participants in order to ensure freedom of speech. As the course is taught both in Danish and English, three of the focus group interviews were conducted in Danish, while the rest were conducted in English. Each focus group contained between six and ten participants. The final sample consisted of 39 university students between 20 and 30 years of age, 38% males and 62% females. The majority of the participants were Danish, but other European nationalities were represented as well. The groups also comprised different types of households, including single individuals living with their parents, single individuals living alone, single individuals living in shared accommodations, individuals cohabiting with their partners, and spouses with and without children.

The focus group discussions aimed at exploring participants' experiences of everyday disposal and were designed as follows: after a first round of introduction, the participants did a sentence completion exercise (Donoghue, 2000) about their disposal habits. The exercise formed the basis for the ensuing discussion on attitudes and affects towards disposition. At a later stage, informants underwent an association exercise, where they were asked to assign examples of objects or object categories to

the five modes of voluntary disposition underlined by Albinsson and Pereira (2009) (i.e. sharing, exchanging, donating, recycling and ridding) . We added "keeping" as an option, since previous research has shown that storage is often used by consumers as a way to manage discarded objects (Evans, 2012; Hirschman et al., 2012; Nøjgaard et al., 2020). This second exercise was also followed up by a group discussion aimed at deepening informants' motivations for adopting the different modes of disposition. Overall, focus groups allowed us to explore collectively emerging meanings that would have been inaccessible, if we solely relied on individual-centered qualitative methods (Tadajewski, 2015).

The second dataset consisted of 13 personal interviews with consumers living Denmark. Long personal interviews allow researchers to develop a deep understanding of consumer (disposal) experiences and of the cultural meanings attached to these experiences (McCracken, 1988). In our case, interviews also served for triangulation purposes to confirm and refine the insights emerging from the focus groups. Interviewees were recruited through self-selection among the survey-respondents of a larger research project on disposal barriers to the circular economy. Survey-respondents were asked to enter their e-mail

address if willing to participate in a personal interview. The final composition of our interview sample can be found in Table 4. All interviews were semi-structured and conducted in Danish. They were led off by general discussions about the informants' emic understanding of circular economy and then progressed into more detailed questions about their experiences with object circulation. In this second part, informants were asked, for instance, how they dispose of a range of everyday possessions (e.g. plastic bags, clothes, and electronics), how they assess their value while disposing of them, and what factors impact their disposition.

Table 4 - Demographics of interview informants

Pseudonym	Gender/age	Education/occupation	Household
Anton	M/27	Master/office worker	Single, living with three roommates
Charlotte	F/30	Bachelor/nurse	Married, one child
Dicte	F/25	High school/student	Cohabit with partner, no children

Dorthe	F/28	Bachelor/unemployed	Single, living with parents
Ea	F/63	Bachelor/librarian	Married, two children (empty nest)
Harald	M/68	Bachelor/retired	Married, two children (empty nest)
Jannie	F/26	Bachelor/student	Cohabit with partner, no children
Mark	M/27	Bachelor/unemployed	Single, living with parents
Mette	F/29	Master/office worker	Married, no children
Nicolai	M/27	High school/student	Single, living alone
Tage	M/76	Bachelor/retired	Married, three children (empty nest)

Torsten	M/30	Master/office worker	Married, two children
Yali	F/30	Bachelor/student	Cohabit with partner, one child

Both the focus groups and in-depth interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim with the help of student assistants. We analyzed this material following the precepts of an abductive approach (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). During the first stage of the analysis, we proceeded with open coding (Charmaz, 2014), letting codes unfold directly from the empirical text and taking notes about emerging themes. In the second stage, we revisited the phenomenon studied in search of anomalies in the coded material (Belk and Sobh, 2018; Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). At this stage, we recognized the informants' reflections on an imaginary future as "theoretically salient" (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012) and reorganized our initial coding efforts around the question of how the future affects disposition. During the third stage of analysis, we looked for instances of fictional expectations in the data. Finally, once we reached thematic saturation (Saunders et al., 2018), we proceeded with axial coding

(Charmaz, 2014) to identify common patterns among the fictional expectations described below.

Before presenting the findings, we would like to acknowledge the methodological limitations of our study. We are aware that the final sample is not representative of a larger population, because of the majority of students and female among the informants. However, representativeness was not among the aims of our study, nor was the generalizability of the findings in relation to a specific population. Instead, our aim was to explore how certain cultural constructions (i.e. fictional expectations) affect the disposal and circulation of objects. For this reason, recruitment was not based on a "statistical logic", but on the "social significance" of informants, that is, on their 'direct and personal knowledge of some event' (180) (disposal, in the specific case) and willingness to communicate this knowledge to others (Seale et al., 2004). We welcome future research to develop further explanations of the impact of sociodemographic differences on consumer experience of fictional expectations in disposal.

Results

Our analysis shows that consumers experience the future in disposal in the form of an entangled set of fictional expectations of oneself (and one's group), the recipient, the disposition outcome, and the planet. The following sections illustrate how consumers come back from the future represented by these fictional expectations when assessing the value of objects and selecting the proper disposal conduits to get rid of them.

Expectations of oneself

The data indicate that disposal activities are accompanied by consumers' expectations of themselves. The following quote shows specifically how disposition is triggered by a failure to imagine a shared future with the things that we dispose of:

> *Rikke:* Because we always sort and decide like 'is this food good or not?'; 'what about these clothes?' – 'good enough'; 'sports equipment: will I use it or maybe I am just going to sit on the sofa and eat? And I won't need that?' – 'Maybe I will sell it'. I think sorting comes first. *(Focus group interview)*

For Rikke, sorting is an inevitable disposal operation and it is about assessing the value(s) of objects (e.g. the "goodness" of food or clothes) so that they can placed in the right conduit.

Interestingly, the quote reveals that sorting involves not only an assessment of object historical narratives (cf. Price et al., 2000), but also of future ones. More specifically, in order to establish whether to dispose of her sports equipment, Rikke must consider whether its future trajectory will intersect with her own. This suggests that disposition requires consumers not only to reflect upon the value of an object (Gregson et al., 2007; Türe, 2014), but also to imagine their own future.

In this connection, our analysis echoes previous research showing that consumers have a tendency to keep objects that they imagine as potentially useful in the future (Cherrier and Ponnor, 2010; Hirschman et al., 2012; Nøjgaard et al., 2020). Yet it also indicates that retaining things from circulation is not motivated by mere anticipation of the future; it can also be an active attempt to facilitate the realization of a desirable future for oneself or one's group:

> *Stine:* I can see at home that… I'm married, and my husband and I are not always – we don't always agree on how to sort things. I think he is very quick sometimes to say 'Okay, this is broken. We cannot use it'. Or we have a little leftover food, then 'We cannot use it anymore because it's too little. We are a big

family' – and he just disposes of it. Whereas I think like 'Ah, we have to prepare lunch packs.' *(Focus group interview)*

The quote suggests that keeping leftovers is a fundamental action in the realization of an imagined future for Stine's family. Her account shows that she is more prone than the husband to attribute value to a few leftovers, because she can imagine working them into the next day's lunch. So, by keeping the leftovers, Stine expresses a caring behavior towards her family members (Cappellini and Parsons, 2012; Evans, 2011) while enacting her imagination of a desirable future for them. Similarly, we found that consumers keep items when attempting to extend their family in a more distant future, such a generation that has yet to be conceived:

Interviewer: But that´s funny because it's games, toys, Lego [referring to the word association exercise]… And it is about 'You shouldn't throw them away'

Kirsten: I think they are going to regain value. Like my mother has an excessive number of toys in her attic, okay? Then one day she's going to use it. [general laughter] Uh, I think it's something that's fairly easy to keep.

> *Mikkel:* And you know it works for the next kid as well.
> Probably.
> *Kirsten:* And that's what she's hoping for.
> *(Focus group interview)*

Kirsten's mother keeps '*an excessive number of toys in her attic'* in the hope that her daughter's yet-to-be-conceived children will use them in the future. In this sense, disposition emerges here as a magical, propitiatory ritual through which consumers attempt to give form to a desirable future. So, contrary to what previous research on older consumers' transfer of special possessions found (Curasi et al., 2004; Price et al., 2000), we found that consumers dispose of things not to extend the past, but to enact fictional representations of the future.

Overall, we found that decisions to dispose of objects depend on the fictional expectations that consumers hold of themselves. Specifically, the section shows that disposition is consumers' attempt to reproduce a desirable future for themselves and their groups. These insights indicate that disposition is heavily influenced by fictional expectations of the future and not only by narratives of the past, as previous research highlights (Curasi et al., 2004; Lastovicka and Fernandez, 2005; Price et al., 2000).

Expectations of the recipient

Fictional expectations towards the recipient influence the value assigned to an object as well as the consumer's mode of disposition. Consider the following statement, where Frank reflects on when to dispose of things:

> *Frank:* I've just framed it differently: 'When the need for it / its usability ceases', like she said. I normally think that if others can use it, I am willing to take my stuff somewhere so that it can reused. But otherwise, I will just throw it away. *(Focus group interview)*

Frank's selection of disposal conduit does not depend on the value(s) which are currently attached to his "stuff", but on the value(s) that potentially will be attached to it. It is the pursuit of this future that motivates Frank to transfer his possessions instead of throwing them away. This observation challenges the distinction between "residual" and "potential" value (Türe, 2014) that disposal research is based upon. Frank is indeed ready to throw unneeded things away, unless he expects that *'others can use [them]'*. This means that the "residual" value of Frank's things is inextricably related to their potential value,

symbolized by fictional expectations of a potential recipient.

Furthermore, fictional expectations of recipients influence consumers decisions about the mode of transfer:

> *Dorthe:* Yes. That's what I actually use the most [i.e. secondhand stores]. It's really when I am in a hurry that I use the containers [for used clothes]. But otherwise, I always do it like that I take something with me and have a look in the store to see if there is something interesting. I think the difference is that those containers end up mainly in developing countries. Not that that's a problem, but it gives some sort of – I mean, then it must be alright. Sure, that's the case if you give to a second-hand store, too. But then it must be something usable. Maybe something warm, or something suitable for a summer season somewhere. Something which is a bit more practical. So, there's something you need to live up to, if you use the containers. *(Personal interview)*

Dorthe differentiates here between second-hand stores and clothing bins[12], as she expects that the two conduits will lead her

---

[12] "Clothing bins" refer to containers for used clothes usually placed in public spaces and managed by charity organizations.

clothes to different recipients. Specifically, she expects that clothes delivered personally to the second-hand store will be sold by it and, thus, remain in Denmark (as she explains during the interview, Dorthe also buys clothes in second-hand stores); while she imagines clothes disposed through clothing bins to *'end up mainly in developing countries.'*. Interestingly, Dorthe feels that she must to 'live up' to these expectations and transfer things that may be 'suitable' to the imagined recipient. This suggests that modes of disposition are affected by consumers' fictional representations of imaginary recipients in addition to individual, community, and item characteristics (Albinsson and Perera, 2009).

Finally, our analysis shows that fictional expectations towards the recipient connect to larger social imaginaries of power. Overall, we found that disposed objects circulate predominantly from higher to lower social strata (at best, they move laterally):

> *Mette:* Clothes, for example, I don't throw them away when I am done using them. If it is something expensive, I will try to sell it. If it isn't [expensive], if it is something a little bit worn, I'll send it to Africa. We put in a bag and we have some containers right in

front of our door. I think that there are others that may need it. Although it is worn, if they don't have anything, it is sure better than nothing. *(Focus group interview)*

Mette uses the market as a screening device (Price et al., 2000) to find a new owner who is worthy of her expensive clothes (see also Türe, 2014). But if her unwanted clothes are cheap and *'a little bit worn'*, she would rather *'send [them] to Africa'*. This suggests that Mette's ability to recognize her cheap and worn clothes as valuable is rooted in broader fictional expectations of a Global South made up of people who *'don't have anything'*. Similar to what is seen for Frank, Mette's discarded clothes acquire value with(in) her fictional expectations of a possible recipient. Moreover, by imagining that she is giving her clothes to indigent people, Mette reinterprets disposal as a benevolent act and herself as a moral person. So, fictional expectations play a central role in consumer experiences of moral value in disposal.

In sum, consumers assess the value of objects by drawing on fictional expectations of the recipient. Accordingly, these expectations influence consumers' mode of disposition and connect disposal practices to larger imaginaries of social

relations, thereby enabling consumers to experience moral value in disposal.

Expectations of the disposition outcome

Fictional expectations of the recipient are closely entangled with expectations of the outcome of a specific disposition mode. We found that consumers approach disposal with some sense of what they would like to obtain from disposing of an item in a certain way. As one informant reports:

> *Nicoline*: I also wrote recycling. But I am thinking mostly in economic terms, with a view to reselling the things I buy to someone else who can benefit from them. It doesn't necessarily have to be something that I give away for free, but it can also be something that I can cash in on later. In this sense, it becomes a sort of investment. *(Focus group interview)*

Nicoline has expectations about what she should gain from reselling her objects. She imagines reselling her items as an *'investment'* that she *'can cash in'* while making sure that there is *'someone else that can benefit from'* her things. So, similar to what has been found among heavy e-Bay users (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2009), fictional expectations of the disposition outcome impact consumer behavior even beyond disposal – as

shown by Nicoline, who buys things *'with a view to reselling [them]'*.

Furthermore, the data indicate that following failures in the realization of expected disposition outcomes, consumers may experience negative emotions that prompt them to intervene into an object pathway. In some cases, these interventions are intended to enact a more desirable future for one's objects:

> *Kaya*: I've also seen some documentaries about it [i.e. discarded clothes]. I don't believe in those clothing bins. We rely on a private person who drives the clothes directly to Ukraine himself. He has worked with some second-hand businesses – nothing like the Red Cross, which has its own products. There are so many documentaries [showing] how huge containers are simply dumped on a field in Africa. They are just lying there. And when you see it, you think – I believe people also think like 'Okay, so it doesn't matter a damn what I give'. Because I mean, they go through those piles themselves. *(Focus group interview)*

Kaya's fictional expectations of the future of her disposed clothes generate negative emotions (*'it doesn't matter a* damn *what I give'* – emphasis added) which push her to intervene in the normalized mode of disposition (i.e. donation) in the sense that

she now relies on *'a private person who drives the clothes directly to Ukraine himself'*. This suggests that fictional expectations are important catalysts of consumer interventions into normalized object pathways, such as those implemented by consumer food-waste movements in Germany (Gollnhofer et al., 2019).

But failed fictional expectations can in some cases push consumers to intervene into object pathways in ways that are meant to destroy an object's value:

> *Henrik*: It can also be a matter of principle. If you paid DKK 8-900 for a pair of trousers, or shoes, and you put it up for sale, and here comes someone saying 'I think it's DKK 60 worth'. Then I would rather throw it away than giving it to you – I think you're a jerk.
>
> *Different participants:* Yes.
>
> *Mia*: When you put something up [for sale], people often offer 27,000% less than what you asked for. And then I would rather throw it out, because I am annoyed [by the fact] that people take the liberty of doing something like that.
>
> *Interviewer*: Your inner dealer comes out?
>
> *Mia*: Yes, you sort of think that you've made a bad deal and so it is actually a better deal to throw it out. Instead of getting peanuts for it.

> *Josephine*: I realize that it's good if someone else can
> use it, but…
> *Henrik*: Not those people.
> *Mia and Josephine*: No.
> *(Focus group interview)*

This exchange indicates that if the fictional expectations of a financial gain obtained by reselling an expensive item are not met, informants are willing to sacrifice the item. This sacrifice does not signal self-transformation (Cherrier, 2009), nor does it communicate care, love or affection (Cappellini and Parsons, 2012; Türe, 2014). Here, the sacrifice serves to restore a disrupted order (*'a matter of principle'; 'a bad deal'*) and assuage the negative affects (*'you're jerk'; 'I am annoyed'*) spurred by the disappointment with unrealized fictional expectations of a desired future. Furthermore, getting rid of valuable items allow the informants to establish a symbolic boundary with 'those people' who threaten the expected future. Hence, when fictional expectations towards the disposition outcome fail to materialize, consumers may experience a moral tension which they attempt to solve by destroying valuable objects.

In short, consumers approach disposal with some fictional expectations of what the outcome of a disposition mode should

be (e.g. attaining economic, spiritual or moral value). This expected outcome may influence consumer valuation of objects even beyond disposal (e.g. during acquisition). Furthermore, fictional expectations of disposition outcomes form the basis for affective experiences during disposal. When these expectations fail to materialize, consumers experience negative emotions which may push them to intervene into normalized object pathways.

Expectations of the planet

The last set of expectations connects disposition to imagined future states of the planet. These expectations usually refer to gloomy imaginaries of environmental degradation that charge objects with negative value (as tokens of destruction). In an attempt to escape these daunting futures, consumers turn to disposal conduits which (allegedly) ensure the reutilization or recycling of objects. Consider Marko's words:

> *Interviewer*: What don't you like about disposing of things, instead?
>
> *Marko*: Well, as I've said in the beginning, uh, the problem in Slovakia is that [waste] almost all the time ends up in the same pile. So, even recycling… It will probably not be recycled, or properly disposed of. It

> will just be trash… A pile of trash. And I don't like the
> feeling that it will be just lying somewhere for
> hundreds of years.
>
> *(Focus group interview)*

Marko imagines a dreary future for his (and other Slovakian consumers') discarded objects, as he sees them become *'a pile of trash… just lying somewhere for hundreds of years'*. As a stack of useless matter that outlives its creators far into the future, Marko's discarded items represent a disturbing loss of value. This fictional expectation awakens negative emotions in our informant who comes to perceive his recycling efforts as meaningless. On the other hand, when consumers can imagine that their disposal practices help avoid such gloomy scenarios, they attribute value to their items and disposal activities:

> *Maiken*: The knowledge I built up by learning how to
> sort things makes it [possible] that I deep down
> generate value every time I do it [an. recycle]. This may
> extend [the lifespan of] Earth by two minutes, maybe.
> Throughout my whole lifetime, it creates value. *(Focus
> group interview)*

Maiken imagines that recycling allows her to *'generate value'* by *'extending [the lifespan of] Earth by two minutes'*. Put

differently, she believes that her recycling efforts help avoid (or at least delay) a future doomsday. Hence, fictional expectations of the planet are central to interiorization of sustainability discourses which, according to existing research (Cherrier and Türe, 2020; Guillard and Roux, 2014), motivate consumers to recycle and recirculate objects.

However, our data also indicate that not all consumers are equally able to associate the planet's future with their disposal activities:

> *Josephine*: In Vestager municipality – where I come from – we have three huge trash cans, for example for plastics. When the sausage package is empty, my mum washes it with a brush. You must rinse it and wash it before it can get into the trash can. She stands there and uses time on something that anyway will go into bin! I think this is completely insane.
>
> [the discussion continues]
>
> *Josephine*: When you cannot see what's the effect, I think I'm like 'Yeah, sure…'
>
> *Louise*: And when there are so many others in the world who don't do it, it doesn't really matter if I do it or not.
>
> *(Focus group interview)*

Both Josephine and Louise show negative attitudes towards recycling (Josephine even defines her mother's recycling efforts as *'completely insane'*). Interestingly, these negative attitudes stem from informants' inability to connect fictional expectations of the planet to their disposal efforts (*'When you cannot see what's the effect, I think I'm like "Yeah, sure…"'*). Josephine and Louise are simply not able to imagine (the way Maiken does, for instance) how recycling helps ensure the future of the planet. Our data indicate that this failure of the imagination is common even among more conscious consumers, who sometimes regard fictional expectations of the planet as abstract and difficult to relate to:

> *Anton*: We don't know how big the problem really is. Like with cigarette stubs. You think 'It's just paper. That's not so bad. It will just dissolve.' But there is much more than just paper in the filter. You don't even think that birds eat it. I really like birds, so when I learn that 'birds eat cigarette stubs, they get sick and die from it', then I know 'Ouch! So, I can't throw them on the ground'. Because I really like birds, and that speaks to me. […] I think we try a lot with sustainability in general, the survival of the planet and that sort of things, but it can easily get too fluffy. I can't relate to

the fact that the planet is going bankrupt, I mean, damn it, it is already. I can't relate to that. But I can bloody well relate to some blackbird dying. I don't want blackbirds to die. I really like blackbirds. So, in that sense, it strikes a bit closer to home, doesn't it? It could be different things: it decreases biodiversity, so you can't grow your pretty flowers. Or honey bees, or I don't know, whatever. *(Personal interview)*

As it emerges from the interview, Anton cares about the environmental consequences of his consumption (for example, he buys only second-hand clothes, avoids plastic packaging, and repairs broken objects). Yet he claims that it may be difficult for him to connect fictional expectations about *'the survival of the planet'* to his discarded things (in this case, cigarette stubs). As he reports, he can better relate to something that '*strikes a bit closer to home'* – like blackbirds. The fictional expectation of blackbirds eating Anton's stubs and dying because of it permeates those stubs with negative value and persuades Anton to divert them from ending up *'on the ground'*.

In brief, fictional expectations of the planet connect consumer disposed objects to imagined future states of the Earth. When consumers regard them as real, fictional expectations of the

planet become powerful emotional images which imbue discarded objects with negative value and encourage consumers to divert them from the ridding conduit of disposal.

Figure 2 - Fictional expectations of consumer disposition
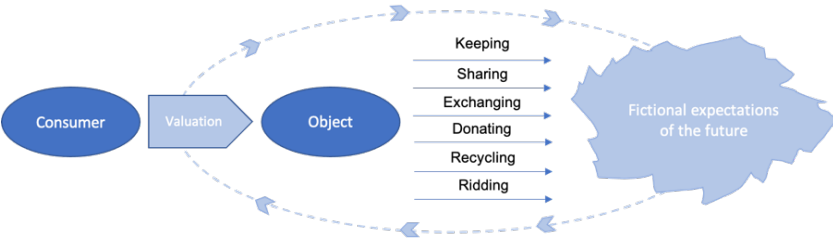
Discussion and conclusions

This study explored how the future shapes object valuation and disposition. Drawing upon sociological theory, we posited that an object's future biography is embedded in an entangled set of fictional expectations (Beckert, 2016) held by consumers involved in disposal activities. Our analysis revealed four types of fictional expectations (of future consumption, the recipient, the disposition outcome, and the planet) which consumers attempt to realize while disposing of objects. The results indicate that objects do not circulate (only) because of their historically imbued value, but because by disposing of things consumers try to reproduce a

desirable social order prescribed by fictional expectations of an imagined future. These findings bear interesting implications for marketing research at the nexus between disposition and valuation and open up new ways of thinking about these phenomena.

First, the present article brings forth the imaginative and future-oriented character of everyday disposal. Previous research found that concerns for the future motivate consumer storage of objects (Cherrier and Ponnor, 2010; Hirschman et al., 2012; Nøjgaard et al., 2020) and transfer of special possessions (Curasi et al., 2004; Price et al., 2000). Our study extends these findings by showing that consumers are confronted with the future even during the disposal of everyday items. Specifically, we found that disposition is consumers' attempt to produce a desirable future for themselves and their groups. This insight suggests that desire is a central force behind object disposal (Packard, 1961); and more generally, that (everyday) disposition is driven to a great extent by consumer emotions and imaginations other than by reflexive concerns to transfer the value of an object (Türe, 2014), fashion a new lifestyle (Cherrier and Murray, 2007) or change identity (Phillips and Sego, 2011). Therefore, we encourage future research to analyze the affective dimensions of disposal. In

this respect, the "cycle of desire" (Belk et al., 2003) represents an interesting starting point for investigating how fictional expectations structure consumer *'hopes for an altered stated of being'* (p. 348) which fuel desire as well as disposal. Future studies could also consider the role of fictional expectations as affective templates that channel, govern, and articulate consumer emotions in disposition.

Second, our results nuance existing perspectives on the morality of disposition. Our analysis shows namely that consumers' attempts to act morally by extending the lifespan of objects through circulation (Cherrier and Türe, 2020; Türe, 2014) follow underlying fictional expectations of the recipient. Specifically, we found that disposed objects tend to move predominantly from higher to lower social strata. This suggests that the expression of sustainability concerns (like extending the lifespan of objects) and related experiences of moral value in disposal are only possible within the instituted social order articulated by fictional expectations of the recipient. Furthermore, our findings suggest the sacrificial disposal of valuable items is not always a selfless and altruistic act through which consumers establish tighter social bonds with others (Cappellini and Parsons, 2012; Cherrier, 2009; Türe, 2014). In fact, we found that

consumers may sacrifice valuable items by ridding them to establish symbolic boundaries with others when expected disposition outcomes are not realized. This suggests that fictional expectations have a normative function, as they regulate what consumers ought to expect from a certain mode of disposition. And when fictional expectations fail to realize, consumers experience a moral tension that may lead them to destroy valuable objects. Future research should therefore delve deeper into the normative character of fictional expectations and its impact on disposition.

Third, the present study bears implications for research on object valuation. By showing that consumers value objects on the basis of their fictional expectations of what these may do or signify in an imagined future, our findings challenge the premise that things acquire value through their "historical circulation" (Appadurai, 1988). This insight contributes to improve existing understandings of object potentiality. Previous studies recognize indeed that consumers assess the potentiality (or potential value) of objects in their evaluations (see (Cherrier and Türe, 2020; Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2009; Gregson et al., 2007; Parsons, 2007; Türe, 2014). Yet it remains unclear what constitutes this potentiality, which refers at best to some inherent

quality of objects, or *'some aspect of them [which] has simply been brought to our attention'* (Parsons, 2007, p. 392). Our analysis suggests instead that the potentiality of objects lies not in objects themselves, nor or their qualities, but in the fictional expectations which they are ascribed to. Indeed, for our study participants, it did not matter what and whether *had* value; the expectation that something *may* have value was enough for them to experience it and act towards it. Future research should then explore the individual and social processes through which objects are embedded into (and separated from) specific fictional expectations. For instance: how do fictional expectations of the future enter and shape the value regimes which normalize object pathways (Gollnhofer et al., 2019)? Which actors contribute to make some fictional expectations (and related value outcomes) more likely than others? And how do alternative fictional expectations emerge? These questions inspired by the current study are of central importance for a radical rethinking not only of what has value, but also what value is ought to be.

References

Albinsson PA and Perera BY (2009) From trash to treasure and beyond: the meaning of voluntary disposition. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 8(6): 340-353.

Appadurai A (1986) Introduction: commodities and the politics of value. *The Social Life of Things*. pp.3-63.

Appadurai A (1988) *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective.* Cambridge University Press.

Arnould EJ and Thompson CJ (2005) Consumer culture theory (CCT): Twenty years of research. *Journal of Consumer Research* 31(4): 868-882.

Baumeister RF, Vohs KD and Oettingen G (2016) Pragmatic prospection: How and why people think about the future. *Review of General Psychology* 20(1): 3-16.

Beckert J (2013) Imagined futures: fictional expectations in the economy. *Theory and Society* 42(3): 219-240.

Beckert J (2016) *Imagined futures: Fictional expectations and capitalist dynamics.* Harvard University Press.

Beckert J and Suckert L (2021) The future as a social fact. The analysis of perceptions of the future in sociology. *Poetics* 84.

Belk R and Sobh R (2018) No assemblage required: On pursuing original consumer culture theory. *Marketing Theory* 19(4): 489-507.

Belk RW, Ger G and Askegaard S (2003) The fire of desire: A multisited inquiry into consumer passion. *Journal of Consumer Research* 30(3): 326-351.

Borup M, Brown N, Konrad K, et al. (2006) The sociology of expectations in science and technology. *Technology Analysis & strategic management* 18(3-4): 285-298.

Cappellini B (2009) The sacrifice of re-use: the travels of leftovers and family relations. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 8(6): 365-375.

Cappellini B and Parsons E (2012) Practising Thrift at Dinnertime: Mealtime Leftovers, Sacrifice and Family Membership. *The Sociological Review* 60(2_suppl): 121-134.

Charmaz K (2014) *Constructing grounded theory.* sage.

Chen DM-C, Bodirsky BL, Krueger T, et al. (2020) The world's growing municipal solid waste: trends and impacts. *Environmental Research Letters* 15(7).

Cherrier H (2009) Disposal and simple living: exploring the circulation of goods and the development of sacred consumption. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 8(6): 327-339.

Cherrier H and Murray JB (2007) Reflexive Dispossession and the Self: Constructing a Processual Theory of Identity. *Consumption Markets & Culture* 10(1): 1-29.

Cherrier H and Ponnor T (2010) A study of hoarding behavior and attachment to material possessions. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* 13(1): 8-23.

Cherrier H and Türe M (2020) Value dynamics in ordinary object disposal. *Journal of Business Research* 116: 221-228.

Curasi CF, Price LL and Arnould EJ (2004) How individuals' cherished possessions become families' inalienable wealth. *Journal of Consumer Research* 31(3): 609-622.

Denegri-Knott J and Molesworth M (2009) "I'll sell this and I'll buy them that": eBay and the management of possessions as stock. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 8(6): 305-315.

Donoghue S (2000) Projective techniques in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Sciences* 28.

Evans D (2011) Beyond the Throwaway Society: Ordinary Domestic Practice and a Sociological Approach to Household Food Waste. *Sociology* 46(1): 41-56.

Evans D (2012) Binning, gifting and recovery: the conduits of disposal in household food consumption. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30(6): 1123-1137.

Gilbert DT and Wilson TD (2007) Prospection: Experiencing the future. *Science* 317(5843): 1351-1354.

Gollnhofer JF, Weijo HA and Schouten JW (2019) Consumer Movements and Value Regimes: Fighting Food Waste in

Germany by Building Alternative Object Pathways. *Journal of Consumer Research* 46(3): 460-482.

Gregson N, Metcalfe A and Crewe L (2007) Moving things along: the conduits and practices of divestment in consumption. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32(2): 187-200.

Guillard V and Roux D (2014) Macromarketing Issues on the Sidewalk: How "Gleaners" and "Disposers" (Re)Create a Sustainable Economy. *Journal of Macromarketing* 34(3): 291-312.

Hetherington K (2004) Secondhandedness: Consumption, Disposal, and Absent Presence. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 22(1): 157-173.

Hirschman EC, Ruvio A and Belk RW (2012) Exploring space and place in marketing research: Excavating the garage. *Marketing Theory* 12(4): 369-389.

Kaza S, Yao L, Bhada-Tata P, et al. (2018) What a Waste 2.0 - A Global Snapshot of Solid Waste Management to 2050. *The World Bank*.

Kopytoff I (1988) The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process. In: Appadurai A (ed) *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge University Press, pp.70-73.

Lastovicka JL and Fernandez KV (2005) Three paths to disposition: The movement of meaningful possessions to strangers. *Journal of Consumer Research* 31(4): 813-823.

Mahoney J (2000) Path dependence in historical sociology. *Theory and Society* 29(4): 507-548.

McCracken G (1988) *The long interview.* Sage.

Morgan DL (2010) Reconsidering the role of interaction in analyzing and reporting focus groups. *Qualitative health research* 20(5): 718-722.

Morgan DL and Hoffman K (2018) A System for Coding the Interaction in Focus Groups and Dyadic Interviews. *Qualitative Report* 23(3).

Nøjgaard M, Smaniotto C, Askegaard S, et al. (2020) How the Dead Storage of Consumer Electronics Creates Consumer Value. *Sustainability* 12(14): 5552.

Packard V (1961) *The waste makers.* London: Longmans.

Parsons L (2007) Thompson's rubbish theory: exploring the practices of value creation. *ACR European Advances*.

Phillips BJ and Sego T (2011) The role of identity in disposal: Lessons from mothers' disposal of children's possessions. *Marketing Theory* 11(4): 435-454.

Price LL, Arnould EJ and Curasi CF (2000) Older consumers' disposition of special possessions. *Journal of Consumer Research* 27(2): 179-201.

Richins ML (1994) Valuing things: The public and private meanings of possessions. *Journal of Consumer Research* 21(3): 504-521.

Ritch EL (2019) 'From a mother to another': creative experiences of sharing used children's clothing. *Journal of Marketing Management* 35(7-8): 770-794.

Rovelli C (2019) *The order of time.* Penguin.

Saunders B, Sim J, Kingstone T, et al. (2018) Saturation in qualitative research: exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Quality & quantity* 52(4): 1893-1907.

Seale C, Gobo G, Gubrium JF, et al. (2004) *Qualitative Research Practice.* London, UNITED KINGDOM: SAGE Publications.

Seligman ME, Railton P, Baumeister RF, et al. (2013) Navigating Into the Future or Driven by the Past. *Perspect Psychol Sci* 8(2): 119-141.

Tadajewski M (2015) Focus groups: history, epistemology and non-individualistic consumer research. *Consumption Markets & Culture* 19(4): 319-345.

Timmermans S and Tavory I (2012) Theory Construction in Qualitative Research. *Sociological Theory* 30(3): 167-186.

Türe M (2014) Value-in-disposition Exploring how consumers derive value from disposition of possessions. *Marketing Theory* 14(1): 53-72.

Welch D, Mandich G and Keller M (2020) Futures in Practice: Regimes of Engagement and Teleoaffectivity. *Cultural Sociology* 14(4): 438-457.

6

Starting with the Man in the Mirror: Ethical Subjectivation and the Reflexive Constitution of Responsible Subjects[13]

Cristiano Smaniotto

Abstract

The consumer responsibilization literature has offered valuable insights into the institutional processes of consumer responsibility formation. Yet it has not accounted for how responsibility is formed at the individual level. Drawing on Foucault's theorization of ethics, the present article explores the micropolitics of everyday life to investigate how individuals

---

[13] This article is under author's revision. The target outlet is *Journal of Consumer Research*. Expected submission date is within 4 months.

participate in the formation of their own responsibility as consumers. Basing on a multi-sited ethnography of consumer waste reduction practices, the article theorizes the ethical subjectivation process through which consumers actively constitute themselves as responsible subjects. The findings reveal that this process comprises three phases: (1) problematization of consciousness, (2) moralization of conduct, and (3) intensification of subjectivity. In these phases, consumers subject themselves to, respectively, diagnostic, disciplinary, and presentational techniques to translate different discursive formations into a responsible conduct. Besides illustrating how responsibility is formed at the individual level, the findings bear implications for existing research on consumer subjectivity, morality and religion.

Introduction

The upkeep of consumeristic lifestyles in affluent economies is deemed to be the main cause of environmental degradation (Wiedmann et al., 2020) and yet ethical, or responsible consumption remains a niche phenomenon (Carrigan and Attalla,

2001; Eckhardt et al., 2010; Holt, 2012). Until recently, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) research considered ethical consumption as an identity project of resistance through which consumers attempt to reconfigure the discursive and material structures underpinning mainstream market institutions and consumption practices (Chatzidakis et al., 2012; Cherrier, 2009; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Thompson and Arsel, 2004; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007a; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007b). Yet as noticed by Giesler and Veresiu's (2014) seminal article on consumer responsibilization, this perspective does not help us explain how responsibility is formed.

Consumer responsibilization studies started then to investigate the socio-cultural processes underlying the formation of consumer responsibility, in order to offer account of how and why certain individuals bestow upon themselves the responsibility to tackle global challenges through their consumption activities (Bajde and Rojas, 2021; Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014). This body of work has so far particularly contributed to an improved understanding of the *subjectification* processes (i.e. the government of others, Hamann 2009) through which institutional actors – such as international foundations (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014), national governments

(Coskuner-Balli, 2020) and non-profit organizations (Bajde and Rojas, 2021) – constitute consumers as responsible subjects by mobilizing different 'techniques of domination' (Foucault, 1988) through the deployment of market (inafra)structures (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014), governmental dispositives (Coskuner-Balli, 2020), and affective apparatuses (Bajde and Rojas, 2021). Other studies focused more specifically on individual reflexive experiences of responsibilization, showing that consumers may not only resist institutionalized subjectivities (Eckhardt and Dobscha, 2018), but also give form to complementing market structures in response to perceived institutional failures to take care of social challenges (Gollnhofer and Kuruoglu, 2018). Despite the brilliant insights put forth by these studies, we still lack a theoretical account of how responsibility is formed at the individual level. This knowledge is however fundamental to advance our understanding of consumer responsibilization, since as Foucault (1988) notices, individual transformation occurs at the intersection of techniques of domination deployed by institutional actors and the 'techniques of the self' actively performed by individuals to become a certain kind of subject.

To fill this gap, the present article focuses on the micropolitics of everyday life to theorize how consumers develop

responsibility for their consumption. Theoretically, I draw on Foucault's later studies (Foucault, 1984b; Foucault, 1984a; Foucault, 2005; Foucault et al., 2010; Foucault, 2018). These studies explore the reflexive work carried out by social elite individuals in the Socratic, Hellenistic and Roman period (up until early Christianity) to attain an ethical, self-governing subjectivity. This work was performed as a set of self-techniques which, importantly, were not aimed at personal gratification or empowerment (as in neoliberal fashion), but at reclaiming responsibility over one's conduct (that is, the motives and drivers of one's actions) so as to limit one's power and ensure others' freedom (Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1987).

Building on these theoretical insights, I investigate the reflexive work performed by consumers to become ethical, self-governing subjects. Empirically, the study draws on data from a 3-year multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) of waste reduction practices among consumers in Denmark, since reducing waste 'implicat[es] the self in a process of reflexivity' (Hawkins, 2006, 5). It should then be noted that Denmark is a peculiarly interesting context for studying the formation of consumer responsibility in connection with waste reduction because, despite its green image, the country has the highest level of waste per capita in Europe

(Statista, 2021); and because its Lutheran cultural heritage underlines a mutually constitutive relation existing between individual and collective responsibility (Nelson, 2017). Based on these premises, this study addresses the following research question: how do consumers constitute themselves as ethical subjects?

The findings show that consumers actively participate in the formation of individual responsibility as they undergo a subjectivation process comprising three stages: (1) problematization of consciousness, (2) moralization of conduct, and (3) intensification of subjectivity. During these phases consumers understand and constitute themselves as ethical subjects by performing a host of, respectively, diagnostic, disciplinary and presentational self-techniques ultimately aimed at reclaiming control over one's consuming conduct.

Overall, the present study speaks and contributes to three interrelated consumer research streams that are relevant to understanding consumer responsibility formation. First, as mentioned above, research produced valuable insights into the subjectification processes mobilized by institutional actors to constitute different types of (responsible) subjects. For instance, Giesler and Veresiu (2014) show how problem-solving activities

in the context of the World Economic Forum trigger a four-fold process (of personalization, authorization, capabilization, and transformation) that contribute to the material and discursive formation of the responsible consumer subject. In a similar study, the same authors identify another four-fold process (of envisioning, exemplifying, equipping and embodying) through which a host of institutional actors (among which politicians, marketers and researchers) shape the ethnic consumer subject in Canada (Veresiu and Giesler, 2018). Building on these studies, Coskuner-Balli (2020) shows how US government has since the 1980s deployed legal, security and disciplinary dispositives that discursively articulate the citizen-consumer subjectivity. And Bajde and Rojas (2021) demonstrate how another type of dispositive – the affective dispositive (or apparatus) is mobilized by market intermediaries to create affective-entrepreneurial subjects. Although insightful, these studies pay arguably little attention to consumers and, therefore, the process through which these 'adopt' (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014) or 'embody' (Veresiu and Giesler, 2018) institutionally-prescribed subjectivities remains unclear. Building on the insight that consumers are in fact active in constituting their own subject positions (Karababa and Ger, 2011; Sandikci and Ger, 2010), the present study offers then

a theoretical account of how consumers transform themselves in order to adopt, or embody a certain subjectivity position.

Second, responsibility is also a moral issue, since it implies the mobilization of ideological value judgments. Indeed, among the subjectivity studies mentioned above, Giesler and Veresiu (201) identify the neoliberal ideology of shared responsibility as central to heightening the moral significance of the responsible consumer subject; Coskuner-Balli (2020) further shows that in the US the national mythology of the American dream is at least as important as neoliberal ideology to the discursive formation of a moralized citizen-consumer; Karababa and Ger (2011) demonstrate how Ottoman coffeehouse goers drew on countervailing discourses to reject a strict Islamic ideology and (re)moralize their hedonic consumption practices; and Sandikci and Ger (2010) show how middle-class women in Turkey willingly resumed the stigmatized practice of veiling by embedding it into moralistic discourses condemning the indecency of modern society. But previous consumer research also produced more general accounts of the moral-ideological structure of consumption. For example, Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) show how Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) managed to establish a countervailing market system by building

social consensus through the mobilization of an ideological framework based on ideals of rooted community, morally and socially redemptive artisanship, and the refutation of commodity fetishism. Luedicke and colleagues' (2011) study foreground the mythic narrative of moral protagonism underpinning consumer brand-mediated moralistic identity work. While Saatcioglu and Ozanne (2013) draw on Bourdieusian theory to show how trailer-parks residents' moral habitus (i.e. their embodied moral-emotional dispositions) fundamentally shape their consumption preferences, activities, goals and aspirations. These studies are important as they highlight the discursive work through which different actors (re)interpret consumption practices and consumers as more or less legitimate, and more or less moral. However, they do not directly address the question of how moral discourses and ideologies translate into everyday (consumer) behavior. On the contrary, I show how consumers mobilize (disciplinary) self-techniques to shape their actions and ensure that these are aligned with a moral framework of individual responsibility.

Third, existing research points at the close relation between morality and religion. Both Karababa and Ger's (2011) and Sandikci and Ger's (2010) studies show indeed that Islamic

discourses and principles underlie consumers' remoralization of, respectively, coffeehouse consumption and veiling practices. Similarly, Izberk-Bilgin (2012) illustrates how low-income Turkish consumers construe global brands as immoral by drawing upon the Islamist discourses of modesty, halal-haram, and tyranny. Furthermore, In a Christian context, Kozinets and Handelman's (2004) findings show how members of consumer movements identify themselves as moral (and others as immoral) by drawing upon evangelical metaphors and narratives; and Saatcioglu and Ozanne (2013) highlight how the Protestant work ethic (partly) shape trailer-park residents' moral habitus. Despite the documented close interaction between morality and religion, prior research on responsibilization only latently acknowledged the religious, Protestant foundations of the neoliberal logic of 'shared responsibility' (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014; see also Coskuner-Balli, 2020 for a brief mention of the Protestant work ethic); yet it did not directly examine how religion participates in the formation of consumer responsibility. The present study explores then how religious ideologies (and practices) inform consumers' own responsibilization efforts, showing in particular the significance of the Lutheran (contra Calvinist) heritage of Northern social democracies.

Before exploring the study context, methods and findings, in the next section I outline Foucault's theory of ethics, which serves as theoretical framework for understanding the subjectivation process through which consumers constitute themselves as ethical subjects and, thereby, participate in the formation of individual responsibility.

Theoretical framework

To study the self-constitution of responsible consumer subjects, I turn to Foucault's work on ethics. This body of work is particularly relevant to the study of individual responsibility as it is dedicated to exploring the ways in which Greek and Roman (and later on, Christian) social elites attempted to constitute themselves as ethical subjects. It should be noted that, for Foucault, the ethical subject is not simply an individual who follows certain moral prescriptions and values; but rather, an individual who is actively and reflexively involved in governing its own conduct (i.e. i.e. the drivers and motives behind its actions) with the aim of limiting her power over others (Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1987). In other words, the ethical subject is someone who has a self-governing and self-limiting relation to herself.

This notion of the ethical subject draws a distinctive line between morality and ethics (two concepts that consumer research often uses interchangeably). Indeed, Foucault refers to morality as an ideological framework, that is, a prescriptive set of values and ideals of conduct (Foucault, 1984a), such as those mobilized by consumers to legitimate their (alternative) consumption practices (see for example consumer research on morality mentioned above). "Ethics", on the other hand, corresponds to 'the manner in which one must "conduct oneself" in reference to a certain moral framework (Foucault, 1984a) 41). As noticed by Davidson (2011), conduct means here both "behavior" and "government of behavior". In this sense, ethics does not describe a general attitude towards one's own, or others' behavior (Foucault, 1984b; Foucault, 2005) (that would be morality); but corresponds more specifically to the actions taken by individuals to attune their behavior to the principles prescribed by a certain moral framework.

These actions take the form of reflexive, *ethical work* of the self upon the self, performed as a set of 'conscious and intentional practices' through which individuals attempt to 'transform themselves' (Foucault 1984a, 16) while instituting some rules of conduct. Foucault's (1984a; 1984b; 2018) analyses

of Greek and Roman sexual ethics, and of Christian spirituality identify a number of ethical work practices, such as (letter) writing, examination of conscience (*exagoreusis*), confession (*exomologesis*), meditation, (physical and spiritual) retreat (*anachoresis*), sex and food abstention and dream interpretation. Individuals performed these practices, or *techniques of the self* not simply to acquire some skills, or competences (*aptitudes)*, such as those which consumers attempt to acquire by shaping their taste (Arsel and Bean, 2013; Maciel and Wallendorf, 2016); but also, to develop some *attitudes*, that is ways of thinking-feeling, the "moral habitus" (Saatcioglu and Ozanne, 2013) that shapes one's propensity to act in a certain manner in specific situations (Foucault, 1988). In this sense, individuals perform certain techniques of the self to attain a certain ethos, or subjectivity (Foucault 2019).

It should then be noted that ethical work practices are intentional (*volontaires)* because they imply an active involvement of the individual. Food abstention, for instance, can be considered a self-technique only when it is not coerced, nor circumstantial. Moreover, ethical practices are conscious *(réfléchies)* because they presuppose the institution of a reflexive relation to oneself, where the individual becomes both the subject

and object of her own intervention (as mentioned above ethical work is a work of the subject upon itself). 'Self-objectification' (Skinner, 2012) is especially important for individuals to determine the 'ethical substance' (Foucault 1984a), that is, the problem which must be treated through ethical work. For instance, consumers who wants to quit smoking may attempt to do so through the use of nicotine patches and gums; or by performing meditation excercises. While the former method identifies the body's biological composition as the ethical substance (the problem) to be worked upon, the latter problematizes the unconscious willpower of the individual. Yet both methods share the same goal of transforming the very individual who, in this way, also become the product (the object) of her own work.

In this sense, ethical work implies a process of *subjectivation* (Foucault, 2005; Hamann, 2009). Differently from subjectification, where the individual is a mere subject to (or product of) discursive forces, subjectivation implies, as just mentioned, an active involvement of the individual in its own formation (Skinner, 2012). The activity of individuals is testified by existing research investigating consumers' reappropriation of countervailing discourses to define their identity (e.g. Thompson

and Haytko, 1997; Thompson and Arsel, 2004) and/or justify alternative consumption practices (e.g. Karababa and Ger, 2011; Sandikci and Ger, 2010). In Foucauldian terminology, this work of discursive reappropriation is a manifestation of the *mode of subjectivation* through which individuals recognize themselves as committed to certain moral-ideological principles. But Foucault's theorization also emphasizes an aspect of subjectivation that previous literature has given no attention to: the practical, technical work of described here above. In this sense, subjectivation is the reflexive process through which individuals not only reappropriate discourse, but also interiorize and translate it into a specific conduct.

Finally, it is important to note that be *ethical*, subjectivation must be oriented towards the conversion to oneself (Foucault, 1984b). This conversion amounts to the development of mastery over one's conduct, that is, over the drives guiding one's actions (Foucault, 1984b; Foucault, 2005). This mastery is 'a proof of power and a guarantee of freedom' (Foucault 1984b, 99) because, once the individual is liberated from the enslavement to her drives (i.e. power, money, status, etc.), she is also able to exercise her power in a proper manner (Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1987), that is, in a manner which ensure the freedom of others.

Put another way, ethical subjectivation is the way in which the individual can both attain and ensure freedom by constituting herself as an autonomous – in the sense of self-governing and self-limiting – subject (see also Castoriadis, 1997). In short, ethical subjectivation is the process through which individuals develop responsibility for their own actions.

In sum, Foucault theorizes ethics as the reflexive work which individuals willingly subject themselves to in order develop an ethical, self-governing relation to themselves. As such, ethics implies a process of subjectivation through which individuals constitute themselves as both subjects and objects of their own constituting efforts. Drawing upon these insights, we posit ethical consumption to be the work performed by consumers to develop a self-governing relation to themselves and assume responsibility for their consuming conduct.

Before presenting the study findings, in the next section I introduce the empirical context of my research, highlighting how a Lutheran social imaginary undergird Danish consumers' efforts at self-limitation and self-responsibilization.

Context and methods

The Lutheran roots of individual responsibility

Denmark is part of the Nordic countries, together with Norway, Sweden, Finland and Island. While different from one another, these countries present some commonalities which distinguish them from other parts of Europe and the world (Nelson, 2017). In particular, these countries share a social democratic model of governance pairing the principles of democratic collective action with those of individual freedom and equality in matters of social and economic organization (Jackson, 2013). Nordic social democracies are thus characterized by high levels of taxation and social welfare expenditures, large public sectors and active labor market policies (Nelson, 2017). Interestingly, while in (neo)liberal economies (such as the US, the UK and the Netherlands) this model is considered a limitation to individual freedom, Nordic citizens largely regards it as fundamental to the development of individual freedom (Larsen, 2021). In other words, in Nordic social democracies, the individual and the State, or more in general the collectivity, are regarded as linked by a reciprocal constitutive relation, rather than a mutually exclusive one (Nelson, 2017).

Historical research suggests that the roots of this view on the individual-collectivity relation can be traced back to the spread of the Lutheran religion. Albeit a form of Protestantism, the

Lutheran confession presents some features that sharply distinguish it from Calvinism, which is usually regarded as the standard for the Protestant ethic (cf. (Weber, 2002). The following paragraphs highlight those Lutheran beliefs which lay the foundations for the modern social democratic understanding of the society-individual relation as this has, as our findings illustrate, important consequences for the formation of individual responsibility.

The abolition of spiritual authority was one of the prominent innovations introduced by Luther's reformation. For the German monk and theologian, all people are equal in the eyes of God and, thus, able to satisfy their religious obligations as members of the 'priesthood of all believers' of which they are part (Nelson, 2017, 83). Other than offering the foundation for the modern (social) democratic principle of equality between people (Nelson, 2017), this idea also emphasizes personal accountability, as the individual is made responsible for her own conduct and salvation. Indeed, for Lutherans (as well as other Protestants), individual salvation can be achieved through the pursuit of a calling, or vocation (Kahl, 2005; Nelson, 2017).

This calling must be realized through the performance of work, which is thereby reinterpreted by Luther as a God-pleasing

activity (in the Catholic tradition preceding the Luther's reformation, begging was regarded as the most honorable activity, as it followed the example of Christ – see Kahl, 2005). This message gave rise to the emergence of the well-known Protestant work ethic (Weber, 2002), yet an important difference exists between its Calvinist and Lutheran interpretations. While Calvin emphasized personal success and profit deriving from the pursuit of one's calling as signs of God's favor, for Luther the pursuit of a calling should be guided by the principle of serving others (Nelson, 2017). This means that in the Lutheran confession individual salvation is inextricably connected to the welfare of the community, which the individual should contribute to. This belief is nowadays expressed by the strong communal ethos characterizing the Nordic countries.

Finally, Luther regarded the religious and statal institutions as inseparable (to this day, Denmark's church is administered by the government's Church Ministry) and responsible for establishing a system of poor relief that would take care of those who were unable to work (Kahl, 2005). In contrast, Calvinists thought that such a system would discourage individuals from taking responsibility for their own condition and that poor people should therefore not be aided, but punished and corrected. This

distinguishing Lutheran Pietism is nowadays reflected in the Nordic welfare state (virtually absent in neoliberal democracies), whose function is to ensure each individual the possibility to pursue her vocation.

Denmark's waste management system

Denmark's current waste management system is one of the products of the country's social democratic governance model. The system was indeed established during the 1970s under initiative of the Danish government (Miljøstyrelsen, 1975), as the world's oil crisis caused an upsurge in the price of fossil fuels, which back then were the country's major source of heating energy (Hirsbak, 2020). As a response, the Danish government decided to institute a national district heating system, or *fjernvarme* in Danish, whose aim was to provide cheap energy that was produced through the incineration of waste. Today, *fjernvarme* burns around 25% of the country's overall waste (Miljøstyrelsen, 2020) and contributes to make Denmark one of the European countries that manages waste more efficiently (Statista, 2021).

While arguably a good example of the effectiveness of Nordic social democratic governance model, Denmark's

fjernvarme may also be one of the explanations for the country's large amounts of waste. Indeed, while efficient at handling waste, Denmark is also very effective at producing it: with 844 kilograms per inhabitant in 2019, Denmark is the country in Europe with the highest level of waste per capita (Statista, 2021). According to the latest *Sustainable Development Report* (2020), these huge amounts of waste even cause *'major challenges'* to the country's institution of sustainable consumption and production patterns (that is, Sustainable Development Goal 12) – and this despite the fact that Denmark usually scores high, and often ranks first, in many influential sustainability reports, such as the *Environmental Performance Index* and the very same *Sustainable Development Report*.

This situation is not surprising if we consider that, as explained, Denmark's waste system has been designed on principles of efficient waste handling, rather than on principles of effective waste prevention. In this sense, Denmark's waste system does not much to hinder the production of consumer waste, since this is repurposed (materially and ideologically) as energy resource. In this light, it is also telling Denmark's first and only non-profit waste reduction organization was shut down in 2019 for 'lack of interest and engagement' (as their Facebook page

reads) after mere four years of activity. These facts indicate that, until very recently[14], responsibility for preventing waste in Denmark (as in many other countries in the world) has been largely left to the individual.

In light of the country's waste system and its Lutheran imaginary of social order, Denmark offers a unique context to study how consumers constitute themselves as responsible subjects. Before introducing our findings on the matter, we explain the data collection and analytical procedures adopted by the study.

Data collection procedures

The research design is premised on the principles of a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), since the phenomenon under investigation (i.e. ethical work) is not defined by clear spatio-temporal, nor ontological boundaries, but unfolds as a seemingly disconnected set of activities which stretch through different times and spaces. As Marcus (1995) notices, in multi-sited ethnographies the object of study is constructed 'by tracing a

---

[14] It should be noted that the Danish government – in alignment with broader EU directives – has recently increased focus on waste reduction.
Accordingly, a national system of 10-fractions recycling is currently being ruled out.

cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity'
(96). Accordingly, we followed the ethical work performed by
Danish consumers across three different sites: the domestic, the
digital and the cultural site. Data in these sites were collected
through the following mix of methods (see Table 5).

Table 5 - Overview of data collection methods

Site	Dataset	Purpose
Domestic site	• 19 ethnographic interviews, range length 60-180 minutes (transcribed verbatim) • Fieldnotes (37 pages single-spaced) • Photographs of the informants' home and activities (120 pictures)	• Explore individual experiences of ethical work in connection with waste reduction practices • Supplement interview data with the researcher's reflections and observations • Capturing details that can't be fully explained by verbal descriptions
Digital site	• 101 posts and related comments (around	• Explore the performance of ethical work in public settings

	1000 entries) • 10 pages single-spaced notes	• Supplement archival data with the researcher's reflections and observations
Cultural site	• 3 books (*Zero Waste Home: The ultimate guide to simplify your life by reducing your waste* by Bea Johnson; *Bæredygtig livsstil: zero waste, vegans, minimalisme* by Calina Leonhardt; *Bæredygtig badass: En zero waste livsstilsguide* by Gittemarie Johansen)	• Explore the problematizations of ethical work in connection to waste reduction practices

The digital site corresponds to the Facebook group Zero Waste Danmark, which is what remains of the homonym nonprofit organization which was active in the country between 2015 and 2019. The group is not linked to the organization anymore, but it is now a forum for discussion for 'anyone who is interested in zero-waste, waste reduction and sustainable lifestyles more in general' (as the group description reads). We found the page to be the more active of its kind in Denmark, with over ten thousand members daily discussing their personal experiences and issues with waste reduction and sustainable consumption (75 posts written during the last month at the moment of writing). The author conducted an observational netnography (Kozinets et al., 2014) for about two years, visiting the group on a regular basis and taking notes on the conversations and behaviors held by its members. The passive form was preferred as the aim of the study was not to better comprehend the lived experience of group members, but to interpret their (online) interactions in light of issue of responsibility formation. The passive participation allowed me then to maintain a certain analytical distance. In total, 101 posts and related were selected for closer analysis because reflecting the theoretical interests of the paper. Posts were

collected until the point of thematic saturation (Saunders et al., 2018).

The digital site also proved relevant to gain access to the domestic site. This means that I used Facebook to recruit members interested in participating in an ethnographic home-interview. Informants were recruited through self-selection by posting on four different Facebook groups (Zero Waste Danmark and three local groups of the country's three biggest cities) and recruitment proceeded until interviewing reached the point of information redundancy (Saunders et al., 2018). I collected a total of 19 interviews lasting between 1 and 3 hours, beginning with general discussions about waste and overconsumption, followed by more detailed questions about informants' daily activities and efforts related to waste reduction. Interviews were collected in informants' homes, which constitute the natural setting for many waste reduction practices. As the study took place during the years of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was important to ensure the safety of our informants. These were given the choice to meet in an outside location or online, whether they felt more comfortable. Only two informants chose this option. When conducted at home, interview data were accompanied by fieldnotes capturing the researcher's reflections about the conversation and details about

the domestic site (for a total of 37 pages of fieldnotes) and pictures portraying objects and artefacts representing informants' waste reduction efforts (120 pictures). These observational and visual data enriched the basis for interpretation (Arnold and Fischer, 1994).

Finally, I investigated the cultural site by examining relevant cultural texts (Mikkonen et al., 2014). Specifically, I selected three zero-waste guides for their relevance to the Danish context. Two of these books are from Danish zero-waste advocates, whereas the third one is written by a US-based French author, whose work was considered relevant because of its popularity among our informants. Aware of the fact that nor US nor France are Lutheran social democracies, in the analysis I accounted for possible inconsistencies with the rest of the dataset emerging specifically from this third text. These books are 'practical texts… which provide individuals with the tools to question, examine and shape their [consumption] conduct, and form themselves as ethical subjects.' (Foucault, 1984a, 22) Therefore, the selected documents constitute important sources for exploring the subjectivation process investigated by the present study.

Data analysis

I analyzed the different sources through a hermeneutical approach (Thompson et al., 1994), going back and forth within and between the different texts, and relating and revising provisional codes and categories in light of emerging theoretical interpretations. In line with the principles of hermeneutical philosophy, I treated pictures as text (Arnold and Fischer, 1994), and coded them accordingly. I began with inductive open coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2014), letting codes emerge from the data. As the analysis proceeded, the initial codes were revised based on Foucault's theory of ethics. Inspired by the analytical procedures adopted by Moisio and Beruchashvili (2010), at this stage I recoded the dataset looking for self-techniques, discourses and linguistic metaphors. Then, I proceeded with axial coding, examining the codes transversally and merging them into broader categories and themes (Spiggle, 1994). Once thematical saturation was reached (Corbin and Strauss, 2014), I proceed with selective coding by going back and forth between data and theory to develop a consistent explanation of the subjectivation process represented by Figure 4 (see Discussion and conclusion section).

Table 6 - Interview participants

Pseudonym	Age	Profession
Freja	Mid 30s	Unemployed
Maria	Mid 20s	University student
Regitze	Early 50s	Public employee
Simone	Early 30s	Public employee
Kira	Early 20s	Student
Rita	Late 30s	PhD student
Frederikke	Early 20s	University student
Rie	Early 30s	Nonprofit employee
Cecilie	Late 40s	Self-employed
Katja	Mid 20s	University student
Fie	Early 30s	Entrepreneur
Helmi	Mid 30s	Commercial employee
Lene and Jon	Late 40s	Musicians
Katrine	Late 50s	University employee
Mette	Early 30s	Educator
Anne	Mid 20s	University student
Emilija and Victor	Early 30s	Unemployed and engineer
Yali	Early 50s	Volunteer
Jens	Late 50s	Entrepreneur

Findings

Our findings show that consumers actively participate in the formation of responsibility as they undergo a three-stage process of subjectivation comprising the phases of (1) problematization of consciousness, (2) moralization of conduct, and (3) intensification of subjectivity. Through this process, consumers understand and constitute themselves as ethical subjects by performing a host of diagnostic, disciplinary and presentational techniques aimed at reclaiming control over their consuming behavior. The following paragraphs offer a detailed explanation of this process.

Problematization

The process of transforming oneself into an ethical subject begins with the problematization phase, as individuals attempt to determine the ethical substance (i.e. the problem) that must be worked upon. Specifically, our analysis shows that, drawing upon the myth of a conscious subject, consumers identify their unconscious, that is, the unreflexive, habituated drivers of action, as the ethical substance and primal cause of unsustainable consumption habits. In order reclaim control over their conduct and, therewith, be able to effectively change their (unsustainable)

consumption practices, consumers subject themselves to a range of *diagnostic techniques* aimed at exposing and monitoring the "contents" of their minds, such as "personal" needs, thoughts and feelings). The problematization phase is characterized by a clinical vernacular, with words such as examination, treatment, experiment being often emerging in our analysis. In this light, in this first phase consumer institute a reflexive patient-doctor relation with themselves.

A fundamental premise to initiating this phase is that consumers actively recognize themselves not only as flawed individuals, but also and more fundamentally as willing to undergo some personal change:

> *Maria*: My family must think that I have talked quite a lot about [my attempts to reduce waste]. I've tried to explain to them that it is a genuine interest. I mean… I have told my mom how smart I think those eco laundry eggs are. 'You should get one for me' she says. It was six months ago, and she hasn't started using it yet, because she is like: 'Do clothes actually get clean?' 'Yes, they do. Our clothes are clean. We washed them with it for like a couple of years now. Do I wear dirty clothes?' But it takes people really a lot to change their habits. I think it's fairly easy to use a laundry egg. But

she thinks like she should have cleaned the washer before [using it]. And that she first needs to finish the washing powder that she already has. And so on. But then my dad buys some washing powder on sale – they will never use [the laundry egg]. After all, she was not really interested in getting a laundry egg. No. […] My sister is also very interested in [sustainable consumption], and I have some friends who think it is super exciting to talk about it. But it's not like they are determined to change their habits. You really have to want it. *(Personal interview)*

Maria reflects here upon the stickiness of consumption habits which, by being deeply engrained into networks of social practices, prove highly resistant to change (Gonzalez-Arcos et al., 2021). For this reason, 'it takes people really a lot to change their habits… You really have to want it'. Rather than an empowered subject willing and capable to engender social change (Bajde and Rojas, 2021; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014), Maria regards herself as a flawed subject which, aware of its flaws, is determined to change itself. In other words, drawing upon the self-help discourse characterizing the modern treatment of psychological disorders (Fisher, 2009; Vaz and Bruno, 2003), Maria constitutes herself as an active patient who is willing to take charge of her

own healing process. Maria's subjectivity position stands indeed in contrast with that of her mother, sister and friends who, although interested in sustainable consumption, 'are [not] determined to change their habits'. This opposition indicates that the existence of a 'moralized landscape of consumer choice' (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014, 843) is not enough for consumers to adopt the position of responsible subjects. In fact, consumers must also recognize themselves as part of the problem and, at the same time, as willing to take charge of their treatment.

Upon this recognition, consumers can turn themselves into 'objects of knowledge' (Foucault, 1984a). This procedure is fundamental for determining the ethical substance to be worked upon. In this respect, the data indicate the presence of an interiorizing discourse guiding consumers to focus their gaze inwardly onto the contents of their mind, their thoughts and feelings:

> *Freja:* I think I got scared about how much our society must consume, and how much we consume. And in all this consumption, there are tons of waste. That is why I think a lot about how I can conduct a lifestyle where we respect and care for the things we have; but we also care for them when we don't need them anymore. So,

> I think it's just as important [to reflect on], how do we
> get things? What are our thoughts when we buy and use
> [them]? And what are thoughts when we cannot use
> them anymore? *(Personal interview)*

Freja lives with her husband and two children in a 28m2 wooden house located in a community garden. While she owns a university degree in industrial design, she has decided not work as a designer because the fast-fashion principles and working culture of the industry clash with her own sustainability values. At the moment of the interview, Freja is studying to become an elementary school teacher (like her husband is) with the aim of having what she considers a fulfilling, part-time employment. As the quote reveals, her consumption is driven by a reflexive approach which pushes her to 'think a lot about how [she] can conduct a lifestyle' centered principles of care and respect for material possessions. Interestingly, the core of this reflexive approach are not things as such, but rather Freja's own thoughts about the purchase, use and disposal of things. In other words, in order to be(come) a responsible consumer, Freja must turn her scrutinizing gaze onto her mind.

Our analysis suggests that this is so because, in a very dualistic fashion, the mind is regarded as the locus of consumer

agency, the inner drive of individual consumer behavior. Problematizing one's (unconscious) mind help then individuals reclaim this agency. But as the mind is intangible, consumers must subject themselves to *diagnostic techniques* in order to be able to access it and monitor its contents. The following excerpt is taken from Bea Johnson's book "The Zero Waste Home" and offers an example of these diagnostic techniques and of the rationale behind them:

> 1. Evaluate past consumption: Assess the true use and need for everything in the home and let go of the unnecessary through the process of paring down. Challenge yourself to consider letting go of things you always thought you had to have. For example through this process, we found out that we did not need a salad spinner. Question everything in your home, and you'll make many discoveries." […]
>
> 2. Curb current and future consumption in amount and in size: Restraining shopping activity (new or used) clearly conserves valuable resources. It saves the resources needed to make new things and makes used items available to others. Areas to consider include: reducing packaging (Can I buy in bulk instead?); car usage (Can I bike more?); home size (Can I

downsize?); personal effects (Do I need it?); technology (Can I do without?); and paper load (Do I need to print it?). Can I buy a lesser amount (maybe in a concentrated form)? Is the amount or size fitted to my needs? Question potential purchases, consider their life cycle, and choose products you can at best reuse or at least recycle. (Bea Johnson, *The Zero Waste Home*)

The excerpt presents two "practices to actively" reduce consumption. While these practices are conceived for the purpose of changing consumer habits, their focus is upon consumers' inner subjectivity, in the form of needs, thoughts, and feelings. For instance, the first technique suggests readers to make an inventory of existing possessions in order to '*assess the true* use and *need* for everything in the home' (emphasis added). While the quote does not offer any guidance on what defines "true needs" (as opposed to false, or 'perceived needs'), other places in the text point at the fact that true needs correspond to those needs based on one's personal situation (as the book suggests somewhere else: 'For instance, eliminating car usage is not possible for most people living in rural or semirural areas, considering the unavailability of public transport'). Similarly, the second technique suggests readers to evaluate their needs for certain

objects and practices but in a more projective, future-oriented way. Diagnostic techniques are then used by consumers to monitor their minds with aim of shaping their consumption practices.

The findings also indicate that, in order to improve the accuracy of their diagnoses and prescribe the right treatments for their disorders, consumers may subject themselves to various self-development exercises involving marketplace interactions. Learning about a topic of interest in different media (i.e. Web platforms, or traditional printed media), or taking classes to improve one's creative consumption skills (e.g. soap-making, gardening, etc.) are examples of self-development exercises that were prominent in our data. For the sake of self-development, consumers may even constitute themselves as living experiments:

> *Kira:* It took me a lot time [chuckles]. I think I started back in 2016, when I was in high school… No, I actually started to experiment with it before that. It is something that requires some knowledge. For example, there is a lot of calcium in the water in Denmark. And you cannot find much information about it online, because in many other countries there is no calcium in the water. I actually stopped using shampoo in Norway

– their water is very soft. And when I came back home
to Denmark, my hair was so heavy. That's because the
calcium gets stuck in your hair – which a lot of people
wrongly think to be grease – and that hair becomes all
heavy and lumpy. And then you have to use vinegar to
get it off. You cannot just rinse it out with water. It took
me quite some time to learn that [chuckles]. I had to do
a bit of back and forth, and test different treatments,
before I found out about apple cider and vinegar.
(Personal interview)

Kira recounts the experimental process which she went through
in order to successfully phase out shampoo. After 'test[ting]
different treatments', she could finally find 'the best' solution.
Interestingly, Kira's account suggests that consumer
problematizations are ultimately aimed at changing one's
embodied disposition (Kira further recounts in the interview that
she now needs to rinse her hair with vinegar only once in a while,
as it got used to being washed only with water). In line with
Foucault's (Foucault, 1984b) observation, what is at stake in
consumers' ethical work is the transformation of one's *conduct*,
or of the way in which one steers oneself – and not only of one's
taste, or consumption practices (cf. Arsel and Bean, 2013; Maciel

and Wallendorf, 2016)). In this sense, Kira's experiment is aimed at freeing herself from the need of shampoo and reclaiming her embodied conduct from the effects of its use. Hence, while diagnostic techniques center on the individual's mind, as part of the overall subjectivation process they are ultimately aimed at shaping the embodied disposition guiding individual's consumption practices.

In sum, in the problematization phase, consumers institute a reflexive (patient-doctor) relation with themselves by performing diagnostic techniques aimed at exposing their unconscious and habituated consumption drives. Crucial to the initialization of this phase is that consumers recognize themselves not only as agents of change (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014), but also as objects of change. Diagnostic techniques are instrumental to modify those embodied dispositions which unreflexively regulate individual behaviour and, thereby, reclaim conduct over one's consumption practices. The next section further explains how consumers modify their conduct by subjecting themselves to moralizing, disciplinary techniques.

Moralization

In the moralization stage consumers define their mode of subjectivation (Foucault, 1984a) by establishing their relation to a set of ideological principles and their obligation to put these principles into practice. In other words, moralization is a reflexive attempt to embed the conduct of one's actions into a larger moral framework and, at the same time, ensure one's commitment to it. Specifically, we found that consumers in our study subject themselves to a host of *disciplinary techniques* aimed at aligning their conduct to the ideology of utilitarian conservationism. Furthermore, the analysis shows that, as part of their self-disciplinary efforts, consumers subject themselves to a self-punishment mechanism drawing upon the Christian techniques of confession and penance. The vernacular mobilized in the moralization phase is characterized by religious and spiritual metaphors.

Our analysis indicates that consumers justify their waste reduction efforts to themselves and others by drawing upon the ideology of utilitarian conservationism. This framework posits that current consumption levels must be reduced if we are to 'avoid a possible shortage of resources with harmful economic or social consequences' (Loreau, 2014, 28). As Regitze puts it:

> *Regitze*: I think that our consumption [levels] do not match the planet's resources at all. So [I do it] pretty much for environmental reasons. I don't think we can keep on living as we do now. I think that we have to go into the direction [of waste reduction]. I don't think we can hope that a new amazing technology will come with a solution. I believe we must also think about reducing, or making better products that last longer, and that people want to keep for a longer time; instead of this system where you must always have the latest clothes and look fancy all the time. (Personal interview)

In line with the ideology of utilitarian conservationism, Regitze believes that 'we can [not] keep on living as we do now' since 'our consumption [levels] do not match the planet's resources at all'. At the same time, she rejects a techtopian ideology (Kozinets, 2008) framing the invention of some 'new amazing technology' as the solution for solving the problem of resource overuse. For her, the solution must be found in a structural socio-economic change involving an extension of product lifecycles and a related transformation of the cycles of individual desire. In this sense, Regitze distances herself from the mythology of 'shared responsibility' framing the solution of environmental problems as

a matter individual market choice (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014). As she more strongly claims later in the interview, she actually thinks that change 'should be left up to the individual'. This pseudo-resistance to individual responsibilization was prominent in our data. Hence, contrary to what found by Giesler and Veresiu's (2014) analysis, within the Nordic context of our study structural, top-down interventions are not regarded as obsolete but, on the contrary, as necessary.

The question is how consumers reconcile the tension between individual responsibility and structural change. Our informants make sense of this tension by ascribing to a Lutheran imaginary of a social order in which '[e]veryone [is] responsible for contributing to a state within which all people, from king to beggar, are united by the "common good."' (Larsen, 2021, 3). Contrary to the Calvinist ideology shaping ideas of social order in liberal democracies (like the US, UK and the Netherlands), in the Lutheran social imaginary undergirding modern social democracies, there is no friction between individual and social responsibility, since the two are aligned in an intrinsic effort to strive for "common good":

> *Simone*: I am very structural, very "top-down" in how
> think about the solution to the problem. […] We need

to have things that don't go to waste. Some things become waste because they are made so badly that you cannot repair them. Nobody wants, or nobody can repair them. And I cannot do anything about that. We need companies, politicians, and regulations to do something about it. So, no, I don' think it is up to the individual. But I also think that we could be better at sacrifice more so that we can have a sustainable future. It is naive to think that we can live within the Earth's systems without radically change our lifestyles. […] Yet I don't think I am saving the world. I have no expectations that this is what I am doing. But at the same time, I don't think you can be engaged, if you don't do anything yourself. I know very well that [the problem] is systemic, and that I cannot change much about the system. But this doesn't mean that I should do nothing. It is small efforts which do not mean much [chuckles]. But in theory, if each did his part, then we would solve the problem. And if nobody does anything, we won't solve the problem. I just think you have to hope, yes, and also be willing those things you wish others would do. […] I think the issue is that we must really be willing to sacrifice something, [to do something] that is troublesome and doesn't suit us;

> [something] that takes time, resources, and even
> money. I have to personally be willing to do that.
> That's how I feel. *(Personal interview)*

Simone sees herself as 'very structural, very top-down like' in her way of thinking about social change. Accordingly, she claims that 'we need companies, politicians, and regulations' to make consumption patterns more sustainable. When asked about what then motivates her to personally engage in reducing the impact of her consumption, she justifies her actions by drawing on a Lutheran imaginary of social order. So, while Simone recognizes that her 'small efforts […] do not mean much', she does not feel entitled to 'do nothing', because '[i]n theory, if everyone did his part, we would solve the problem'. This Lutheran imaginary of social order motivates Simone to take responsibility to 'do those things [she] wishes others would do'. The quote further illustrates the centrality of individual sacrifice in the Lutheran imaginary, which is regarded as necessary to ensure the common good of environmental conservation. This interpretation of individual self-sacrifice as paramount to social transformation (Cawston and Archer, 2018) diverges from a neoliberal interpretation in which self-sacrifice is regarded as merely a means to empower oneself. Hence, the discursive framework mobilized by our informants to

justify their individual efforts does not build upon the neoliberal mythology of "shared responsibility" (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014), but rather on a Lutheran social imaginary coupled with the ideology of utilitarian conservationism.

Our analysis further shows that the discursive work is not enough to be(come) ethical consumers, as individuals must continuously renew their commitment to this moral framework by engaging in practical work:

> *Kira:* Yeah, sure. It's really troublesome, and that's why I've never had the determination to – I mean, when I lived in Aarhus, I had this idea that I would take to the farmers' market to buy veggies by the pound every, say, Wednesday and Saturday. But then there was always something else that I needed to do on those days. And I would never [go to the market]. That's why I think it's actually easier to have a vegetable garden [chuckles]. It's funny, but I think it's easier. […] It is something that needs attention – it's a bit more binding, in a sense. [With the market], it's easier to be like 'I'll just do it another day'. But a vegetable garden is binding because you walk past it every day and 'here comes the weeds.' *(Personal interview)*

The quote reveals that Kira (partial) turn to self-production should be seen in relation to a larger work of holding herself accountable for her own consumer conduct. As evinced from the quote, the socio-material organization of everyday life (Gonzalez-Arcos et al., 2021) made it difficult for our informant to stick to her commitment to reduce waste by shopping at package-free stores. In light of this failed attempt, Kira sees her vegetable garden as an easier way to remain committed to her pledge of being a more responsible consumers because the very materiality of the garden obligates her to take care of it. In this sense, self-production works literally as production of the self, since it is a practice that imposes discipline to Kira's conduct.

Our analysis indicates that self-production is indeed part of a larger set of *disciplinary techniques* aimed at regulating one's consuming behaviour. These techniques are usually formalized into hierarchical rules of conduct to adopt in different consumption situations. For instance, many of our informants mentioned a 'rule of thumb' guiding their purchase of fruits and vegetables at the supermarket (such as: local, organic, seasonal – in different orders). The famous inverted pyramid of disposal [see Figure 3] – a 'prioritized order' (Gittemarie Johansen, *Bæredygtig Badass*) of actions that individuals are supposed to follow when

deciding what to consume – offers a clear example of this formalization. We also found lists and plans to be very popular tools used to shape one's conduct and achieve consumer waste reduction goals. For instance, shopping lists and meal plans are used with the aim of reducing impulse and erroneous buying and, therewith, food waste (Calina Leonhardt, *Bæredygtig Livsstil*). Some consumers may even subject themselves to self-tracking techniques in an attempt to discipline their conduct:

> *Rita:* I keep a close eye on my energy consumption… There's a power meter out there, and once every fortnight, I write down its values on my phone. And I try to minimize [these values] as much as possible. Even though I am not sure what else I can do. Because I can unplug the wires, and switch off [unnecessary devices]. But other than that, I don't know what else to do. Besides not having the lights on when it is not necessary. *(Personal interview)*

The quote reveals that tracking helps Rita remind her to 'unplug the wires, and switch off [unnecessary devices]... [and] not having the lights on, when it is not necessary'. In this sense, Rita's tracking is a disciplinary technique which she employs to regulate her conduct in relation to energy consumption. However, a sense

of hopelessness also transpires from Rita's words, since the possibilities for reducing energy consumption are relatively limited and, therefore, she 'is not sure about what else she can do'.

Figure 3 - The inverted pyramid of disposal (Gittemarie Johansen, Bæredygtig badass: En zero waste livsstilsguide)

REFUSE
REDUCE
REUSE
RECYCLE
ROT
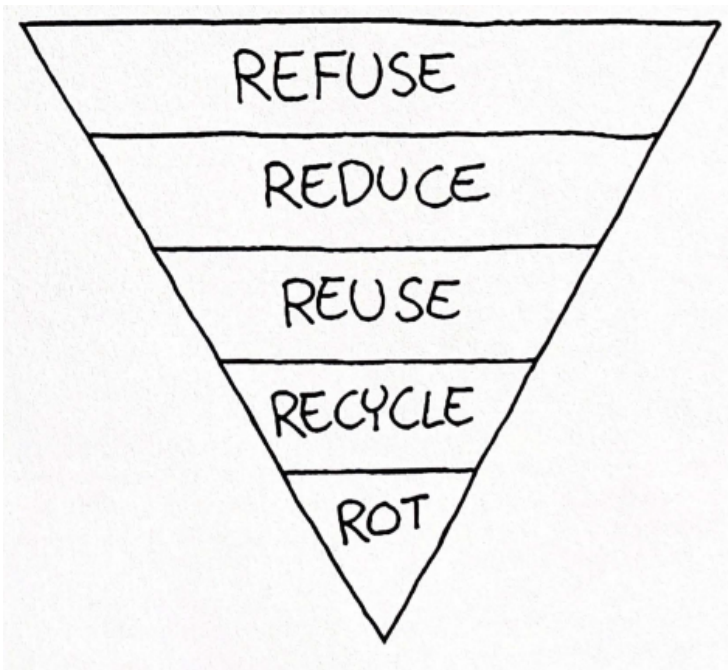
Our analysis shows that this sense of hopelessness can result in feelings of anxiety and guilt, as consumers realize that they are not able to conduct themselves in a conscious way.

Specifically, we found that the myth of a conscious, enlightened and self-regulating subject whose sustainable consumption efforts are motivated by conservationist principles often clashes with: (1) the constrains imposed by the socio-material organization of everyday life (Gonzalez-Arcos et al., 2021); (2) the actual limited rationality of individuals (Eckhardt et al., 2010); and especially (3) with the neoliberal myth of a *homo economicus* who is intrinsically motivated by the values of convenience, thrift and cost-efficiency (Hamann, 2009). This mythological dissonance generates a 'certain pressure' (Maria, personal interview) among consumers, which they attempt to relieve by subjecting themselves to a mechanism of (self-)punishment.

As part of the overall self-discipling effort, this mechanism draws upon the Christian sin-expiation techniques of confession and penance. The findings indicate that consumers in our study routinely confess themselves by admitting their unsustainable consumption "sins" in front of (real or virtual) others. Confession was particularly prominent in the analyzed Facebook page, where many posts are dedicated to sharing (Belk, 2013) users' unsustainable consumption habits, often while

asking for advice to the community on how to make these same habits more sustainable:

> I am often conflicted! I would really like to live more zero waste than I do… But!!! I would also like to SAVE money a lot of money. I WENT from giving 20-25kr for a toothpaste, to giving 3,50kr for this one! But it is not zero waste! Does anyone feel the same WAY, and about WHAT??? [attached toothpaste picture]
> *(User 1, Facebook post)*

In this post, the user publicly acknowledges her status as a sinner by declaring that her toothpaste 'is not zero waste' (other than being wrapped in a plastic tube, the toothpaste is produced by a low-budget brand whose participation in sustainability initiatives is rather dubious). At the same time, the user shows to be conflicted about her conduct because the thrift values guiding her (toothpaste) consumption are at odds with her pledge to 'live more zero waste'. To relieve this tension, the user confesses her guilt before the online community, thereby engaging in a therapeutic act which allows her to share her burden with others (Moisio and Beruchashvili, 2010). As the number of comments indicates, this individual confession is contagious, as it triggers other users to participate in the conversation and share their sins

218

in a sort of public catharsis. Yet contrary to what found by previous research (Moisio and Beruchashvili, 2010), our analysis also indicates that this catharsis is not a direct effect of sharing, but more profoundly an effect of placing one's conduct in relation to a higher power – be it the community (as in the example above) or the "common good", as implied here below:

> *Frederikke:* I didn't stop [eating take-away]. I mean, it depends on the situation. If I am alone, I might just avoid. But if I am out with friends or something, it is not like I hold myself back just to avoid [producing] waste. It happens so rarely. Usually when I eat out, I eat at a restaurant, and there you eat on normal plates. So about take-away, the only thing I have done is that I have my own coffee cup. And I also have a cup with the straw for cold brews. And I usually remember [to take it with me]. But it happens that I am out, and I didn't know I would have something to-go… But for me it is the bigger picture [that matters], [the fact that] I have some good habits; so, it doesn't really matter if sometimes I err. I mean, I am fine with it. *(Personal interview)*

As the quote indicates, the interview itself may become a confessional moment. Indeed, Frederikke acknowledges here her

sins and admits that 'sometimes [she] err[s]'. Furthermore, she claims that these mistakes are acceptable when related to the 'bigger picture' which generally guides her conduct. Then, confession emerges here as cathartic insofar as it offers Frederikke the opportunity to reaffirm the embeddedness of her conduct into the Lutheran imaginary of individual responsibility, so as she can picture herself as acting, despite her sins, towards a greater common good. In this sense, confession (and penance, as explained below) is a disciplinary technique because it helps individual consumers (re)embed their conduct it into the larger moral framework.

However, the findings also show that the catharsis reached through confession is not always enough to expiate one' sins. Sometimes consumers feel also obliged to engage in acts of penance:

> *Rie*: It doesn't make sense to, well, make my own toothpaste, or any of these [products]. I mean, those zero-wasters go and talk about 20 different zero-waste dental care products they have tried; and they couldn't use half of them, or they thought they weren't good enough. But then you think: 'They bought all those things!'. So, they have also damaged, they have also

used natural resources – or however you want to put it. So, if I have a toothpaste which I like, and I feel it gets my teeth cleaned, I just keep it. I'll have to buy indulgences on something else, and try to do something, that makes sense for me. *(Personal interview)*

Moved by a certain resistance towards ethical consumerism, Rita firmly establishes that 'it does not make sense to make [her] own toothpaste'. Yet her claim that she will 'have to buy indulgences on something else' also reveals that she feels mortified by her unwillingness to embrace an (allegedly) less wasteful teeth-cleaning practice. The purchase of indulgences mentioned by Rie was indeed the Christian practice through which sinners could reduce the time spent by their soul in the Purgatory after their death by making pecuniary donations to the Church. This practice was part of the larger exercise of penance through which Christian followers were called upon to show repentance for their sins in the hope of gaining access to Paradise. In a similar fashion, Rie's purchase of indulgences is also an exercise of penance which is aimed at expiating her sins and thus, (re)moralize her conduct. It should also be noted that, paradoxically, just like the old practice

of buying indulgences, Rie's penance also offers her an escape and justification to keep on consuming sinfully.

In sum, this section shows how consumers attempt to abide by their own problematizations by embedding their conduct into the moral principles of utilitarian conservationism. It also shows that consumers justify their own involvement in waste reduction efforts by drawing on a Lutheran social imaginary regarding individual action as central to the achievement of a common good which, in the specific case, corresponds to environmental conservation. Individual responsibility is therefore valorized not against institutional intervention (cf. Giesler and Veresiu, 2014), but as complementary to it. Furthermore, the section shows that in order commit themselves to this composite moral framework, consumers subject themselves to disciplinary techniques aimed at regulating their conduct in different consumption situation. In particular, we found that confession and penance are central to preserve the narrative of a responsible individual who can exert control and discipline over her consuming conduct.

Intensification

In the intensification phase, consumers turn the principles and rules of conduct laid down during the disciplinary phase into a manifest ethos, or character. Intensification corresponds in this sense to an amplification of the experience of subjectivity. Intensification is inevitably social (Foucault, 1988) because, as the section shows, it occurs within (and sometimes have effects on) the networks of intersubjective relations in which an individual is embedded (Burkitt, 2002). While in the problematization phase, individuals reflect on themselves, during intensification moments individuals reflect themselves on and through others. Subjectivity is thereby intensified as it spreads through existing social networks. The data indicates that consumers intensify their subjectivity through the application of *presentational techniques* aimed at curating its manifestation through the social space. The analysis also reveals that intensification is characterized by an artistic vernacular, where inspiration is the leading metaphor.

Intensification was especially noticeable in the investigated online site. Indeed, many of the analyzed posts are sharing users' experiences and opinions of waste reduction and

sustainable consumption. Consider, for example, the following post, where a user shares the outcome of her upcycling activities:

> For me, zero waste is also about creative thinking. This old glass table had a broken leg when I got it. I had it welded. I've covered it with bathroom tiles. The typewriter and the old safety boxes under the table are also second-hand. I painted the old grey filing cabinet with a color that better suited our home, and now it stands in our living room all confident and proud. I sew pot holders out of old jeans and leather from old jackets. One of the things I love about recycling is that it triggers my imagination. [attached pictures of the work] *(User 2, Facebook post)*

This post offers a good of example of a presentational technique that aestheticizes the user's lifestyle and turn it into a work of art. The post is indeed a curated presentation of the outcome of the user's upcycling activities which, as they are posted, become an object of public exhibition, available to the scrutiny of the digital gaze. Regardless of the individual's intrinsic motivations for doing it, the act of posting creates reverberations of the user's self-experience through the social space: the post has indeed more than a hundred likes and several comments showing support and appreciation. The user also responds with comments or reactions

to other users' comments to her post. Hence, as the user's ethos becomes reflected on the online community, her subjectivity is intensified.

While the intensification of subjectivity may be especially prominent in online environments (Floridi, 2011), our data indicates that consumers subject themselves to similar presentational techniques also offline. The account here below offers an instance of offline presentation. The informant, Cecilie, lives in a rural area of Denmark with her husband and four children, where they moved from the city in order to embrace a slower-paced lifestyle that better reflected their values. From there Cecilie runs a small online shop selling a variety of sustainable household products, which she makes herself (mainly reusable pads of different kinds and children clothes made of sustainably sourced materials) or imports from different ethical producers. Several times during the interview, Cecilie contrasts herself to her neighbors – like 'the guy who lives at the end of the street' mentioned here below – who according to her are not very mindful of sustainability issues. In the following excerpt, Cecilie recounts a particular attempt to present her ethos to this neighborhood community:

Cecilie: I hit him hard – the guy who lives at the end of the street. Like: [an. talking about meat] it is not necessary; I had it much better; it felt good to my body. [For him] That wasn't possible. He had to have his meat. Why? *[laughs]* We had a block party here some time ago, where he also attended. We were in charge of the food. I looked at my husband and said *"Now we're going to have fun with him"*. So, we prepare vegetarian starters, and we don't say anything until we're done eating. There was not a single one of them who missed meat! What's the problem, then? He had to have it. It is that "have-to" mentality. We have to, we are used to. Try to think beyond that sometimes. That's a tough one! *(Personal interview)*

In this excerpt, Cecilie reports the performance that she (and her husband) arranged in occasion of a neighborhood party. She and her family were in charge of preparing the food for the party, and thus she decided to 'have fun' and prepare some vegetarian starters without revealing to the attendees until the end of the meal that these were indeed vegetarians. The performance was, according to Cecilie, a success, as none of their (omnivore) neighbors 'missed meat' at the dinner. Similar to what seen above for the online posting, Cecilie's performance allows her to

intensify her ethos in front of the real (as opposed to virtual) neighborhood community. By offering vegetarian starters to an omnivore (and conservative) crowd, Cecilie not only spread her ethos (e.g. her sustainability values) through her social network, but also reinforced her subjectivity by experiencing it through the feedback of this network. Indeed, as the end of the quote suggests, Cecilie's performance is reflexively internalized as a moment of self-definition in opposition to an immoral adversary (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004).

The two examples presented here above also point to the fact that intensification is dependent on the existing networks of exchanges and obligations (Foucault, 1988) in which consumers are embedded. Moreover, our analysis suggests that intensification efforts are partially intended towards this network, and not only towards one's subjectivity:

> *Freja*: I think it makes sense to inspire others, and I think we already do that. We don't have a car, and we ride our cargo-bikes. We show to people that we can easily take the train. It may well be that our friends have to pick us up at the train station. I actually think that we represent our values quite well. But I really don't feel like lecturing people, because I don't think

that's the right way to do it. Yet at the same time, if
happens that we're talking about – what's your energy
provider? I mean, if we're having a conversation, I'd
like to tell you what we do. But I think it is much more
a matter of showing to people what we do, instead of
just talking about it. That's how I feel about it.
(Personal interview)

Freja's remark that their 'friends have to pick them up at the train
station' clearly indicates that intensification is dependent on the
networks of exchanges and obligations in which the subject is
embedded. But the quote also illustrates Freja's certain awareness
of the effects of her intensification on her social network. She
thinks indeed that by manifesting their ethos (or representing their
values, as she puts it), she and her family can "inspire" others (to
consume more sustainably). The theme of "inspiration" was
frequent in our analysis, where it emerged as a mechanism of
intersubjective interaction allowing consumers to (re)present
their ethos (for instance, through exhibition and discussion, as
seen above) while attempting to trigger change in the Other by
leveraging on the social bond that connects them to him/her. In
this sense, inspiration does not present the evangelical quality of
New Social Movements' interactions with the immoral Other

(Kozinets and Handelman, 2004), but is nonetheless (at least, partially) intended to amplify one's ethical subjectivity by spreading its ethos to others.

Our analysis further indicates that intensification contributes to a diffusion of responsibilization in a more horizontal and decentralized way than suggested by previous studies (cf. Bajde and Rojas, 2021; Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014):

> *Katja:* My father is very inspired by and supportive of all this sustainability thing… He realized that this is important for me. And so, he made a zero-waste wish list. So that we were able to communication. He knew that it was important for me to make a gift that didn't generate a lot of waste. That's why he wished for things that didn't generate a lot of waste. So, he could get something he wanted. And I could also be satisfied with making the gift. […] And he got it packed in a velour bag. He was very satisfied wih it. And I think it was a great alternative. It's nice to be met from the other side. And [it's nice] that he says: 'I can see that this is important for you. Then I am going to do something for you, and I am going to wish for things that you would like to give'. *(Personal interview)*

This account shows how intensification can affect individuals' social relations and contribute to a diffusion of responsibility among consumers. During the interview, Katja recounts that, in an effort to intensify her subjectivity, she started to green her gift-giving practices by wishing for as well as giving second-hand and home-made objects and wrappings. As the quote indicates, these actions had an effect on Katja's father, who adjusted his gift practices to the daughter's requests (as Katja further recounts during the interview, her father even seconded her Christmas wish for home-made dishcloths, although he did not consider it a "real gift"). In this sense, Katja's intensification affected the familial bond of obligation which connects her to her father. Accordingly, although in a small and possibly insignificant way (if compared to the systemic sustainability issues present in modern society), Katja's father modified his conduct to steer it in the direction of a more sustainable consumption. Therefore, although part of a work upon the self, intensification may contribute to a diffusion of responsibility through the network in which the subject is embedded.

To summarize, in the intensification phase, consumers strengthen their subjectivity by rendering it manifest to the (virtual or real) communities in which they are embedded. To do

so, they subject themselves to *presentational techniques* aimed at curating the dissemination of their thoughts and actions so that these are aligned with the principles of conduct established during the problematization and moralization phases. The section further showed that while intensification is a work of the subject on the itself, it is inherently a social practice (Foucault, 1988), since it unfolds within existing networks of exchange and obligation. Because of its social character, the effects of intensification are not only limited to the conduct of an individual, but can spread to the conduct of others. In this sense, intensification emerges as a mechanism of responsibilization which, in contrast to top-down approaches highlighted by subjectification studies, infuses a sense of responsibility by leveraging on the social bond linking the subject to the Other.

## Discussion and conclusion

This research examined how consumer responsibility is formed at the individual level. Building on Foucauldian ethics, I theorized individual responsibilization as a tripartite and recursive subjectivation process which consumers reflexively subject themselves to in order to reclaim control over their consuming conduct (see Figure 4). The analysis identified the phases and

related self-techniques comprised by this process. Specifically, in the (1) problematization phase, consumers subject themselves to diagnostic techniques aimed at exposing unreflexive and habituated consumption drivers, which are regarded as the cause of unsustainable consumer behavior. Then, in the (2) moralization phase, consumers subject themselves to disciplinary techniques aimed at correcting their unsustainable and – in light of the conservationist ideology drawn upon – immoral consumption practices. Finally, in the (3) intensification phase, consumers turn the principles and rules of conduct laid down during the previous phases into a manifest ethos, or character, by curating social interactions through presentational techniques. The implications of these findings for past and future research are discussed in the following paragraphs.

My work complements research on (neoliberal) subjectivity formation. This body of research provided compelling accounts of the *subjectification* processes (Hamann, 2009) through which institutional forces produce and govern different types of subjectivity positions, such as the responsible consumer (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014; Bajde and Rojas, 2021), the ethnic consumer (Veresiu and Giesler, 2018) and the moral consumer-citizen (Coskuner-Balli, 2020). However, these studies

do not explicate *how* consumers adopt (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014) or embody (Veresiu and Giesler, 2018) these institutionally prescribed positions. The present article contributes then to these studies by theorizing the process of subjectivation through which consumers interiorize the discourses, ideologies and mythologies that construe these subjectivity positions. In particular, the analysis identifies a host of diagnostic, disciplinary and presentational self-techniques through which discursive constructions are reflexively translated into individual conduct. The present study advances then existing understandings of how individual (trans)formation occurs at the intersection between techniques of domination (deployed in subjectification processes) and techniques of the self, and offers a starting point for future investigations of the reflexive constitution of other (and not only ethical) subjectivities.

Figure 4 - The ethical subjectivation process
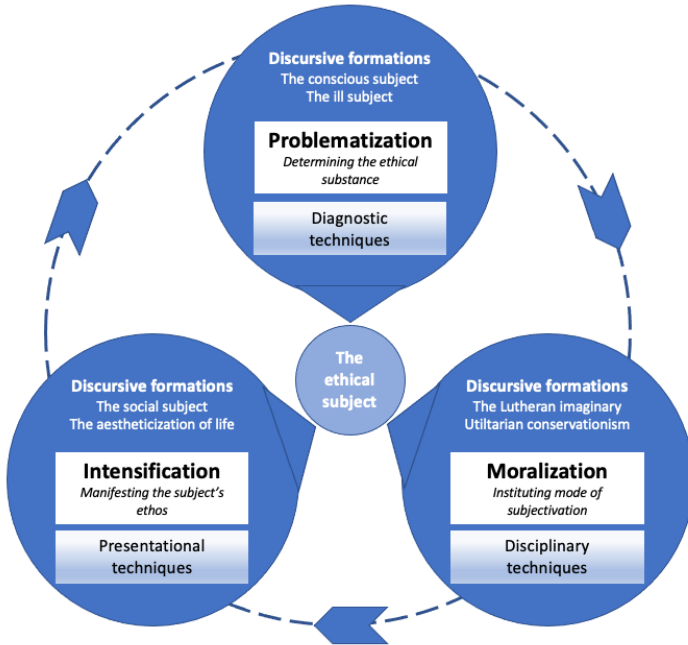
In this connection, the present article also sheds new light on the active role taken by consumers in fashioning their own subjectivity. Existing studies demonstrate that consumers participate in the definition of their own institutionalized subjectivities through ideological resistance. For instance, Karababa and Ger (2011) illustrate how Ottoman coffeehouse goers combined well-established Islamic principles with

234

countervailing discourses to create an alternative moral framework (or "self-ethics" as the authors call it) to justify their coffeehouse consumption, thereby constituting themselves as modern consumer subjects. Similarly, Sandikci and Ger (2010) show how middle-class women in Turkey willingly resumed the stigmatized practice of veiling by embedding into moralistic discourses condemning the indecency of modern society, thereby constituting themselves as self-limiting and self-discipling subjects. My research provides similar insights as it identifies the discursive work through which Danish consumers actively combine the ideology of utilitarian conservationism with a Lutheran social imaginary to constitute themselves as ethical subjects. At the same time, my research also contributes to these studies by identifying not only the discursive work, but also the practical work (i.e. self-techniques) through which individuals 'reflexively and willingly' (Foucault, 1988) shape their own subjectivity. In this regard, the present study shows that consumers are "active" not only when they resist and reappropriate mainstream (responsibilization) discourses (e.g. Gollnhofer and Kuruoglu, 2018; Gollnhofer et al., 2019; Karababa and Ger, 2011; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Sandikci and Ger, 2010; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007a),

but also when they interiorize, reproduce and even intensify these discourses through their own subjectivation.

Moreover, the present article offers specific insights into the formation of *responsible* subjects. First, it identifies a discourse which has been overlooked by previous research and yet is fundamental to individual responsibilization: the discourse of the active patient. While previous consumer research emphasized the spillover of neoliberal market logics onto the healthcare system, which have given rise to the figure of the choice-empowered patient-consumer that can and should take care of her own health (Schneider-Kamp and Askegaard, 2020), my findings suggest a corresponding spillover from neoliberal healthcare logics to the consumer market. The analysis conducted above shows indeed that in order to initiate the ethical subjectivation process that allows them to be(come) responsible subjects, consumers must not only recognize themselves as agents of change (Bajde and Rojas, 2021), but also as objects of change. In this sense, consumers must recognize not only that they are essentially sick, but also that their healing is premised upon an active and willing involvement in their treatment (see also Foucualt, 1984a). In other words, to be(come) responsible subjects, consumers must constitute themselves as active, self-

surveilling patients (Vaz and Bruno, 2003). Hence, our article indicates that construing consumption as a pathological condition and consumers as essentially sick is a fundamental mechanism of consumer responsibilization, which deserves further exploration.

Furthermore, in line with Thompson and Kumar's (2021) observation, the findings presented above challenge the assumption that individual responsibility is 'a direct reproduction of neoliberal mandates' (332). Despite their outstanding contribution, responsibilization studies tend indeed to assume that individual responsibility is largely (if not exclusively) the product of neoliberal ideology (cf. Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014). My analysis shows instead that in a Nordic cultural context, consumers justify their own efforts at curbing individual consumption levels by drawing upon a Lutheran social imaginary that represents the individual and the community as bounded by a mutually constitutive relation aimed at the realization a the common good (Larsen, 2021; Nelson, 2017). Within this interpretive framework, consumers regard individual responsibility as an integrative function of the larger and efficient organization of society (Taylor, 2004) and, thereby, do not reject top-down, institutional interventions as 'obsolete' (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014) but, on the contrary, regard them as necessary to

the formation of individual responsibility. Other than contributing to a better understanding of responsibilization by attending to the specific socio-historical context in which it is embedded (see Thompson and Kumar, 2021), this insight also encourages future research to reconsider the opposition between collective action and individual responsibility, which is most often framed 'simplistically as an opposition between the good and the bad' (Barnett, 2005, 11). As my study illustrates, individual responsibility has indeed roots which largely predates the advent of neoliberalism. Drawing on the insights offered by the current study, future research could generate more nuanced understandings of individual responsibility by attending to its mythological and imaginary foundations beyond the context of political economy initiatives.

As the findings clearly illustrate, questions of responsibility are also moral questions. The present article provides indeed new insights for research at the intersection of morality and consumption. Existing studies considered mainly the moral-ideological frameworks which consumers draw upon in order to negotiate, justify and legitimate their consumption practices (Karababa and Ger, 2011; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Luedicke et al., 2010; Saatcioglu and Ozanne, 2013;

Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007a). My study contributes to this body of work by showing how moral ideologies are translated into a specific conduct through the performance of (self-)disciplinary techniques. Similar to the Muslim women in Sandikci and Ger's (2010) study, my informants willfully chose to 'discipline themselves in their consumption practices' (30). Yet while in Sandikci and Ger's article self-discipline is articulated as a consumption practice in itself (i.e. veiling), our analysis exposes the "meta" practices (i.e. self-techniques) which individuals perform in order to discipline their conduct in different consumption practices. In this sense, my study contributes to research on morality by illustrating how consumers actively attempt to modify the 'moral habitus' shaping their preferences, aspirations and evaluations of themselves and others (Saatcioglu and Ozanne, 2013).

My work also complements Coskuner-Balli's (2020) findings on disciplinary dispositives. While her study offers a brilliant account of how the US government mobilized disciplinary dispositives to constitute the American citizen-consumer subject, it does not explain how the political ideology and national mythology articulated by these dispositives resulted into specific consumer behaviour. However, as Agamben (2009)

noticed, the dispositive deals with 'practical activity' (9) since it guides not only opinions and discourses, but also 'gestures' and 'behaviours' (14). My theorization of disciplinary self-techniques offers then a complementary explanation for how the moralizing narratives of disciplinary dispositives are translated into the micropolitics of everyday life as gestures and behaviours. For instance, it is worth noting that the waste pyramid used by consumers to govern their consuming conduct is also part of the EU directives for waste reduction strategies. In this light, the waste pyramid is a disciplinary dispositive of government which is translated at the individual level into a reflexive disciplinary self-technique. Basing on these insights, future research will be able to provide more compelling accounts of how moral ideologies translate into specific (consumer) behaviours by attending to dispositives (such as the waste pyramid) that sit at the intersection between the institution and the individual.

Furthermore, this study sheds light on the socio-historical foundations of consumer guilt. Extant consumer research has mainly theorized guilt as a psychological phenomenon (cf. (Antonetti and Maklan, 2014; Gregory-Smith et al., 2013; Shaw et al., 2015; Theotokis and Manganari, 2015). My findings highlight instead that feelings of guilt emerge from a

mythological dissonance between competing models of consumer subjectivity: the dominant model of a neoliberal *homo economicus* governed by an entrepreneurial ethos of self-empowerment; and the nascent model of an ethical subject governed by a conservationist ethos of self-limitation. The present study contributes to existing psychoanalytical understanding of guilt as a universal, human condition (Chatzidakis, 2014) by foregrounding its socio-historical embeddedness, thereby emphasizing the seamless continuity existing between psychical and social structures (see Castoriadis, 2007). In this regard, the analysis presented above also reveals that guilt is central to the formation of individual responsibility. It is indeed in an attempt to soothe the guilt engendered by their consumption "sins" that consumers moralize their conduct by subjecting themselves to confession and penance techniques. Hence, my study also extends previous research on the affective formation of subjectivity (Bajde and Rojas, 2021) by pointing at the central role played by guilt in the constitution of ethical consumer subjects.

Third, this article provides new insights into how religion shapes consumption. It does so by foregrounding the centrality of religion in the formation of consumer responsibility. Existing

studies mainly regard individual responsibility as the expression of (neoliberal) political ideology (Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014; Henry, 2010), yet they do not directly acknowledge the religious underpinnings of this ideology. Contrary to these studies, my research highlights the religious ideas undergirding consumers' formation and interpretation of individual responsibility. In particular, the findings show that in the specific socio-historical context of the study (i.e. modern day Denmark), consumers draw upon a Lutheran imaginary of social order to justify their own sustainable consumption efforts. Within the frame of this Lutheran imaginary, the individual and the collectivity are seen as mutually constitutive in their pursuit of the common good – and not as mutually exclusive, as implied by a Calvinist, neoliberal ethic. In other words, my work indicates that, at least in Northern social democracies, the logic of 'shared responsibility' (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014) is not a translation of neoliberal political ideology, but rather the cultural heritage of Lutheran religion. For this reason, new interesting insights into the socio-historical structuring of responsibilization (Thompson and Kumar, 2021) are likely to originate from empirical investigations situated in contexts which are not characterized by a Protestant, or even Christian creed.

Finally, the present study offers another contribution to research on religion. Prior research emphasized the ideological influences of religion on consumption. For instance, Izberk-Bilgin (2012) illustrates how Islamist ideology informs low-income Turkish consumers' resistance to global brands, while fuelling their consumption of Islamic products. Always in Turkey, female consumers drew on a reinterpretation of Islamic principles to destigmatize and (re)embrace the practice of veiling (Sandikci and Ger, 2010). In a different cultural context, North American and Christian, Saatcioglu and Ozanne (2013) found that the Protestant work ethic partake of the constitution of trailer-park residents' moral habitus which, in turn, shape their consumption preferences and evaluations. Other studies show how Christian religious metaphors and narratives inform the discursive interaction of consumer movements (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004) and communities (Muñiz and Schau, 2005). The theoretical addendum that I offer to these studies is to show how religion permeates modern consumption not only in ideological, but also in practical terms. In particular, my findings demonstrate that the Christian practices of confession and penance are widespread among consumers involved in sustainable consumption efforts. In this sense, the present article

confirms Moisio and Beruchashvili's (2010) insight that confession is central to consumers' treatment of overconsumption issues; yet it also extends their findings by showing that confession is not limited to support groups, but on the contrary, it is a phenomenon which occurs in different (online and offline) spaces and at different interaction levels (i.e. not only at a group level, but also at a more personal level). Furthermore, my study also shows that confession is often accompanied by penance, as consumers attempt to make up for their "sins" by balancing unsustainable practices in one area with (allegedly) more sustainable practices in another area. Unfortunately, the findings also reveal that, although well-intended, this system may end up reinforcing unsustainable consumption patterns. Future research should therefore explore further how this disciplinary system of confession and penance encourage the performance of unsustainable consumption at the institutional level.

References

Agamben G (2009) " What is an apparatus?" and other essays. *" What is an apparatus?" and other essays*. Stanford University Press.

Antonetti P and Maklan S (2014) Exploring postconsumption guilt and pride in the context of sustainability. *Psychology & Marketing* 31(9): 717-735.

Arnold SJ and Fischer E (1994) Hermeneutics and consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research* 21(1): 55-70.

Arsel Z and Bean J (2013) Taste regimes and market-mediated practice. *Journal of Consumer Research* 39(5): 899-917.

Bajde D and Rojas P (2021) Creating Responsible Subjects: The Role of Mediated Affective Encounters. *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Barnett C (2005) The consolations of 'neoliberalism'. *Geoforum* 36(1): 7-12.

Belk RW (2013) Extended Self in a Digital World: Table 1. *Journal of Consumer Research* 40(3): 477-500.

Burkitt I (2002) Technologies of the Self: Habitus and Capacities.

Carrigan M and Attalla A (2001) The myth of the ethical consumer – do ethics matter in purchase behaviour? *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 18(7): 560-578.

Castoriadis C (1997) *World in fragments: Writings on politics, society, psychoanalysis, and the imagination.* Stanford University Press.

Castoriadis C (2007) *Figures of the Thinkable.* Stanford University Press.

Cawston A and Archer A (2018) Rehabilitating Self-Sacrifice: Care Ethics and the Politics of Resistance. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 26(3): 456-477.

Chatzidakis A (2014) Guilt and ethical choice in consumption. *Marketing Theory* 15(1): 79-93.

Chatzidakis A, Maclaran P and Bradshaw A (2012) Heterotopian space and the utopics of ethical and green consumption. *Journal of Marketing Management* 28(3-4): 494-515.

Cherrier H (2009) Anti-consumption discourses and consumer-resistant identities. *Journal of Business Research* 62(2): 181-190.

Corbin J and Strauss A (2014) *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory.* Sage publications.

Coskuner-Balli G (2020) Citizen-consumers wanted: Revitalizing the American dream in the face of economic recessions, 1981–2012. *Journal of Consumer Research* 47(3): 327-349.

Davidson AI (2011) In praise of counter-conduct. *Hist Human Sci* 24(4): 25-41.

Eckhardt GM, Belk R and Devinney TM (2010) Why don't consumers consume ethically? *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 9(6): 426-436.

Eckhardt GM and Dobscha S (2018) The Consumer Experience of Responsibilization: The Case of Panera Cares. *Journal of Business Ethics* 159(3): 651-663.

Fisher M (2009) *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?* : John Hunt Publishing.

Floridi L (2011) The Informational Nature of Personal Identity. *Minds and Machines* 21(4): 549-566.

Fornet-Betancourt R, Becker H, Gomez-Müller A, et al. (1987) The ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom: An interview with Michel Foucault on January 20, 1984. *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 12(2-3): 112-131.

Foucault M (1984a) *Histoire de la sexualité II: L'usage des plaisirs.* Éditions Gallimard.

Foucault M (1984b) *Histoire de la sexualité III: Le souci de soi.* Éditions Gallimard.

Foucault M (1988) Les techniques de soi. *Dits et écrits* 4: 783-813.

Foucault M (2005) *The hermeneutics of the subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981--1982.* Macmillan.

Foucault M (2018) *Histoire de la sexualité IV: Les aveux de la chair.* Éditions Gallimard.

Foucault M, Davidson AI and Burchell G (2010) *The government of self and others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982–1983.* Springer.

Giesler M and Veresiu E (2014) Creating the Responsible Consumer: Moralistic Governance Regimes and Consumer Subjectivity. *Journal of Consumer Research* 41(3): 840-857.

Gollnhofer JF and Kuruoglu AP (2018) Makeshift markets and grassroots reponsibilization. *Consumption Markets & Culture* 21(4): 301-322.

Gollnhofer JF, Weijo HA and Schouten JW (2019) Consumer Movements and Value Regimes: Fighting Food Waste in Germany by Building Alternative Object Pathways. *Journal of Consumer Research* 46(3): 460-482.

Gonzalez-Arcos C, Joubert AM, Scaraboto D, et al. (2021) "How Do I Carry All This Now?" Understanding Consumer Resistance to Sustainability Interventions. *Journal of Marketing* 85(3): 44-61.

Gregory-Smith D, Smith A and Winklhofer H (2013) Emotions and dissonance in 'ethical' consumption choices. *Journal of Marketing Management* 29(11-12): 1201-1223.

Hamann TH (2009) Neoliberalism, governmentality, and ethics. *Foucault studies*. 37-59.

Hawkins G (2006) *The ethics of waste: How we relate to rubbish.* Rowman & Littlefield.

Henry PC (2010) How mainstream consumers think about consumer rights and responsibilities. *Journal of Consumer Research* 37(4): 670-687.

Hirsbak S (2020) *Affald - udvikling i Danmark*. Available at: https://denstoredanske.lex.dk/affald_-_udvikling_i_Danmark.

Holt DB (2012) Constructing Sustainable Consumption. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 644(1): 236-255.

Izberk-Bilgin E (2012) Infidel brands: Unveiling alternative meanings of global brands at the nexus of globalization, consumer culture, and Islamism. *Journal of Consumer Research* 39(4): 663-687.

Jackson B (2013) Social democracy. *The Oxford handbook of political ideologies*. 348-363.

Kahl S (2005) The religious roots of modern poverty policy: Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed Protestant traditions compared. *Archives Européennes de Sociologie/European Journal of Sociology/Europäisches Archiv für Soziologie*. 91-126.

Karababa E and Ger G (2011) Early Modern Ottoman Coffeehouse Culture and the Formation of the Consumer Subject. *Journal of Consumer Research* 37(5): 737-760.

Kozinets RV (2008) Technology/ideology: How ideological fields influence consumers' technology narratives. *Journal of Consumer Research* 34(6): 865-881.

Kozinets RV, Dolbec P-Y and Earley A (2014) Netnographic analysis: Understanding culture through social media data. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis*. 262-276.

Kozinets RV and Handelman JM (2004) Adversaries of consumption: Consumer movements, activism, and ideology. *Journal of Consumer Research* 31(3): 691-704.

Larsen M (2021) The Lutheran Imaginary That Underpins Social Democracy. *Front Psychol* 12: 746406.

Loreau M (2014) Reconciling utilitarian and non-utilitarian approaches to biodiversity conservation. *Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics* 14(1): 27-32.

Luedicke MK, Thompson CJ and Giesler M (2010) Consumer Identity Work as Moral Protagonism: How Myth and Ideology Animate a Brand-Mediated Moral Conflict. *Journal of Consumer Research* 36(6): 1016-1032.

Maciel AF and Wallendorf M (2016) Taste Engineering: An Extended Consumer Model of Cultural Competence Constitution. *Journal of Consumer Research*. DOI: 10.1093/jcr/ucw054.

Marcus GE (1995) Ethnography in/of the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24(1): 95-117.

Mikkonen I, Vicdan H and Markkula A (2014) What not to wear? Oppositional ideology, fashion, and governmentality in wardrobe self-help. *Consumption Markets & Culture* 17(3): 254-273.

Miljøstyrelsen (1975) Miljøplanforudsætninger. København.

Miljøstyrelsen (2020) Affaldsstatistik 2019.

Moisio R and Beruchashvili M (2010) Questing for Well-Being at Weight Watchers: The Role of the Spiritual-Therapeutic Model in a Support Group. *Journal of Consumer Research* 36(5): 857-875.

Muñiz AM, Jr. and Schau HJ (2005) Religiosity in the Abandoned Apple Newton Brand Community. *Journal of Consumer Research* 31(4): 737-747.

Nelson RH (2017) *Lutheranism and the Nordic spirit of social democracy: A different Protestant ethic.* Aarhus Universitetsforlag.

Saatcioglu B and Ozanne JL (2013) Moral habitus and status negotiation in a marginalized working-class neighborhood. *Journal of Consumer Research* 40(4): 692-710.

Sandikci Ö and Ger G (2010) Veiling in Style: How Does a Stigmatized Practice Become Fashionable? *Journal of Consumer Research* 37(1): 15-36.

Saunders B, Sim J, Kingstone T, et al. (2018) Saturation in qualitative research: exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Quality & quantity* 52(4): 1893-1907.

Schneider-Kamp A and Askegaard S (2020) Do you care or do I have a choice? Expert authority and consumer autonomy in medicine consumption. *Consumption Markets & Culture*. DOI: 10.1080/10253866.2020.1814260. 1-20.

Shaw D, McMaster R and Newholm T (2015) Care and Commitment in Ethical Consumption: An Exploration of the 'Attitude–Behaviour Gap'. *Journal of Business Ethics* 136(2): 251-265.

Skinner D (2012) Foucault, subjectivity and ethics: towards a self-forming subject. *Organization* 20(6): 904-923.

Spiggle S (1994) Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research* 21(3): 491-503.

Statista (2021) *Municipal waste statistics*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Municipal_waste_statistics.

Taylor C (2004) *Modern social imaginaries.* Duke University Press.

Theotokis A and Manganari E (2015) The impact of choice architecture on sustainable consumer behavior: The role of guilt. *Journal of Business Ethics* 131(2): 423-437.

Thompson CJ and Arsel Z (2004) The Starbucks Brandscape and Consumers' (Anticorporate) Experiences of Glocalization. *Journal of Consumer Research* 31(3): 631-642.

Thompson CJ and Coskuner-Balli G (2007a) Countervailing Market Responses to Corporate Co-optation and the Ideological Recruitment of Consumption Communities. *Journal of Consumer Research* 34(2): 135-152.

Thompson CJ and Coskuner-Balli G (2007b) Enchanting Ethical Consumerism. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 7(3): 275-303.

Thompson CJ and Haytko DL (1997) Speaking of fashion: consumers' uses of fashion discourses and the appropriation of countervailing cultural meanings. *Journal of Consumer Research* 24(1): 15-42.

Thompson CJ and Kumar A (2021) Beyond consumer responsibilization: Slow Food's actually existing neoliberalism. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 21(2): 317-336.

Thompson CJ, Pollio HR and Locander WB (1994) The spoken and the unspoken: a hermeneutic approach to understanding the cultural viewpoints that underlie consumers' expressed meanings. *Journal of Consumer Research* 21(3): 432-452.

Vaz P and Bruno F (2003) Types of Self-Surveillance: from abnormality to individuals 'at risk'. *Surveillance & Society* 1(3): 272-291.

Veresiu E and Giesler M (2018) Beyond acculturation: Multiculturalism and the institutional shaping of an ethnic consumer subject. *Journal of Consumer Research* 45(3): 553-570.

Weber M (2002) *The Protestant ethic and the" spirit" of capitalism and other writings.* Penguin.

Wiedmann T, Lenzen M, Keyßer LT, et al. (2020) Scientists' warning on affluence. *Nature communications* 11(1): 1-10.

7
The imaginary (re)institution of marketing theory[15]

Cristiano Smaniotto

Abstract

This article makes the case for reclaiming human autonomy in critical marketing theory. While the post-structuralist critique to mainstream marketing has introduced noteworthy conceptual innovations, its emphasis on the limitation of human action (which emerges as ultimately determined by discursive and/or material structures) perpetuates a sense of inevitability of the present and future social order. From a post-structuralist perspective, then, the reason and responsibility for (a much needed) social change always lies somewhere and somewhen beyond our control. To be able to imagine an alternative order, marketing theory must then develop a new theoretical and

---

[15] This is a working paper at its first iteration.

political consciousness that recognizes the autonomy of human action from existing (discursive and material) structures. Accordingly, this article lays the theoretical foundations for developing this new consciousness. It does so by considering the paradigmatic implications of Castoriadis' interpretation of the social imaginary for marketing theory. As the innate human capacity to create undetermined representations, the social imaginary sanctions indeed the autonomy of the human mode of being from preexisting structures. After introducing Castoriadis' theorization of the social imaginary, the paper considers specifically how engaging more closely with the subject imagination, the politics of epistemology and our own responsibility as humans and scholars can help marketing theory generate radical change in the present social order.

Introduction, or why we need to reclaim human autonomy in marketing theory

Critical scholars have been 'letting out the scream' (Ahlberg et al., 2022): marketing theory (and not only practice) is not just obsolete, but even harmful, as it contributes to reproducing the

logics of capital accumulation which are the primal drivers of contemporary social and environmental problems (Ahlberg et al., 2022; Arnould, 2021; Cova et al., 2013). The critique encompasses traditional as well as interpretive approaches – among which Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) which, preoccupied with gaining inclusion, visibility and acceptance in mainstream scholarship (Fitchett et al., 2014) has moved slowly but steadily from the (critical) fringes to the center. This move has come with an increased emphasis on (sanitized) incremental contributions (Ahlberg et al., 2022) and a concomitant disappearance of political engagement (Cova et al., 2013) and profound self-reflexive critique (Ahlberg et al., 2022) from marketing studies. Ultimately, the problem is that these tendencies are numbing the imaginative drive necessary for marketing theory to inspire a radical change to the existing (capitalist) order which, at this point in history, is not just auspicable, but indispensable to ensure the survival of the planet. In a very concise and provocative way, we can say that contemporary marketing theory is characterized by a lack of imagination which is contributing not merely to the extinction of marketing (on the contrary, marketing is arguably more thriving than ever), but more seriously to that of planet.

To be sure, this does not mean that marketing scholars have just been sitting in their chairs waiting for the doomsday. Over the years, there have been noteworthy attempts to challenge the ontological and epistemological foundations on which contemporary marketing theory is based (Arnould, 2021; Askegaard, 2021; Askegaard and Linnet, 2011; Bajde, 2013; Earley, 2013; Hill et al., 2014; Smaniotto et al., 2021). These attempts bear the clear marks of the interpretive turn that started in consumer research almost 40 years ago and generated an epistemic break with the belief that consumers are isolated individuals who act freely and naturally in accordance with economic principles and laws. Indeed, all these attempts draw on some version of (post)structuralism to emphasize how human action is always inevitably shaped by the socio-historical (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011; Earley, 2013) and material-embodied (Bajde, 2013; Hill et al., 2014; Smaniotto et al., 2021) context in which it unfolds.

And yet despite their theoretical import, it is worth questioning whether the existing (post)structuralist critique to marketing, and especially its emphasis on the determination of human action, isn't contributing to a reification of the present capitalist order, rather than helping us conceive its radical change.

The argument is that if we assume, in a (post)structuralist fashion, that human action is always governed by something else, something more than human (i.e. objects, discourses, or affects), the reason and responsibility for change will also always irredeemably lie somewhere and somewhen beyond our control. This is a dangerous thought that subtly perpetuates a sense of inevitability of the present (and future) social order. However, as this article will show, social order is not inevitable, for the simple reason that it is something that *we do*. And for this reason, *'the only way to change the world is to do it ourselves and to do it here and now'* (Holloway, 2010, 36).

This recognition requires not only an act of faith on the human capacity (and will) to change the world. As long as (marketing) theory is performative (Mason et al., 2015), that is, as long as (the activity of producing) theory is an enactment, and not a mere description, of reality (Law, 2004) – this recognition also requires a theoretical acknowledgment of this capacity. In other words, to be able to 'imagine an alternative order' (Cova et al., 2013, 222) we must also be able to recognize, at the theoretical level, a certain degree of freedom, or autonomy of human action from existing (discursive and material) structures.

Accordingly, this article lays the theoretical foundations for reclaiming the autonomy of human action in marketing theory. It does so by drawing on the philosophy of Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997). Castoriadis' philosophical project revolved around reclaiming the indeterminateness of (human) Being within Western thought, which he regarded as characterized by an 'ensidic' (ensemblimistic-identitary) logic-ontology (IIS). Within the frame of the ensidic logic, any being can exist only as part of the immanent and eternal totality of Being (Castoriadis, 1987; Castoriadis, 1992) and is, therefore, determined. The most rational version of this ensidic logic is expressed by the materialist/physicalist stance that everything that exists is (part of) Nature and, thus, ultimately governed by its laws. For Castoriadis, the ensidic logic constitutes not just a theoretical issue, but also a political one (for the French-Greek philosopher, theory and doing are profoundly intertwined, (Castoriadis, 1987; Castoriadis, 1984), because it prevents us from conceiving the possibility of radical, undetermined creation (if everything is a mixture of primordial molecules, everything has always been and will always be there) and, thereby, to advance the development of an *autonomous society*, that is, a society which deliberately and explicitly makes its own laws (it is self-instituting) and puts them

into question (it is self-governing) without reference to any extra-social source (be it the State, God, Reason, or Nature). Ultimately, Castoriadis' philosophy and, in particular, his theorization of the *social imaginary* aims at reclaiming the ontological possibility of creating an autonomous society as an alternative to the capitalist and Soviet-communist social order.

The article is structure as follows: the first part offers a synthesis of Castoriadis' theorization of the social imaginary. While this synthesis is by no means claimed to be better than those present in existing marketing publications (notably, Bouchet 2018 in (Askegaard and Heilbrunn, 2018); but see also (Askegaard and Östberg, 2019; Bouchet, 1994; Cherrier et al., 2012) for a mobilization of Castoriadis' concepts in marketing studies), it is perhaps more comprehensive. The second part of the article builds on the first while going back to marketing theory to discuss the ontological, epistemological and ethical challenges posed by Castoriadis' philosophy to interpretive marketing research. In particular, this section argues that closer attention to the subject imagination, the politics of epistemology and our own responsibility as humans and scholars can help marketing theory reclaim that creative force (the autonomy) which is necessary,

now more than ever, to generate a radical change in the present social order.

Theory

As mentioned above, Castoriadis argues that Western thought is characterized by an ensidic logic-ontology according to which any being can exist only as part of the immanent and eternal totality of Being (Castoriadis, 1987; Castoriadis, 1992). This logic finds its highest expression in logical and mathematical thought, which is emblematically illustrated by Cantor's definition of a set (the 'basis of modern mathematics' (Castoriadis, 1997, 256) as '*a collection into a whole of definite and distinct objects of our intuition or of our thought*' (Castoriadis, 1987, 223). For Castoriadis, this definition perfectly captures the ontological determinacy implicit in the ensidic logic, which construes the world as a collection of '*definite and distinct objects*' that are always already organized (and organizable) into a whole.

As such, ensidic logic denies the possibility of radical creation, as one cannot add (nor deduct) anything from something which is (and always will be) everything (i.e. Being) (Klooger, 2015). Castoriadis regarded this theoretical impasse as

problematic for the political aim of autonomy which, within the ensidic frame, becomes inconceivable. Autonomy implies namely that (human) Being is fundamentally *un*determined and capable of radical (self-)creation: an autonomous society is indeed a society that institutes and governs itself without reference to any extra-social source (be it the State, God, Reason, or Nature).

Castoriadis' theorization of the social imaginary is thus an attempt to redress the onto-logical impasse generated by the ensidic logic and, therewith, introduce the possibility of radical creation into the schema of Western thought. Castoriadis' imaginary is essentially pure ontological genesis (i.e. radical creation), which presents itself both at the psychical level (expressed as radical imagination) and at the social-historical level (expressed as social imaginary). As the French-Greek philosopher puts it:

> The imaginary […] is not an image *of*. It is the unceasing and essentially *undetermined* (social-historical and psychical) creation of figures/forms/images, on the basis of which alone there can ever be a question of 'something'. What we call

‘reality’ and ‘rationality’ are its works. (Castoriadis, 1987, 3; emphasis in original)

The following pages explore the depths of this definition while unfolding Castoriadis’ theorization of the imaginary. In doing so, the section follows the fundamental tension colouring the philosopher’s work: that occurring between the psyche and society – the two co-constitutive and irreducible forces of radical creation.

Radical imagination as the mode of being of the psyche

For Castoriadis, there is no opposition between the individual and society. Instead, *‘[t]he true polarity is between society and the psyche’* (Castoriadis, 2016), 148). More specifically, the individual is the result of a constantly undergoing process of socialization through which society imposes on the representations unceasingly created by the psyche. In this sense, the psyche and society are inseparable and yet irreducible to one another (Castoriadis, 1987, 320).

Building on Freud’s work on the unconscious, Castoriadis theorizes the psyche as an originary emergence of representations. Freud (1996) noticed that the unconscious has the peculiar capacity of creating *phantasms*, that is, representations whose meaning structure differs from that drawn upon by the

individual during conscious states. Castoriadis extends this insight by positing that the creation of *phantasms* is the core of all psychical activity, both unconscious and conscious (Castoriadis, 1987). Furthermore, against Freud, he argues that psychical representations are not merely a translation of somatic drives into 'the psychical plane' (Castoriadis, 2007, 354), since there is nothing in somatic drives 'that could account for the form or the content of a representation' (Castoriadis, 1987, 282). No physical law, for instance, can explain why electromagnetic wavelengths take the form of specific colors in vision (Castoriadis, 1997). For these reasons, we must postulate that there is an originary and undetermined emergence of representations, a 'surging forth of a representative flux, of images and figures of all kinds' (Castoriadis, 1987, 323). This 'surging forth' *is* the psyche:

> The psyche is a forming, which exists in and through what it forms and how it forms; it is *Bildung* and *Einbildung* – formation and imagination – it is the radical imagination that makes a 'first' representation arise out of a nothingness of representation, that is to say, out of nothing (Castoriadis, 1987, 283)

In this light, the psyche does not correspond to the mind, nor its content; but it is 'radical imagination', the immanent potential of

forming representations that are not determined by an "external reality" but emerge 'out of nothing' (e.g. colours). Radical imagination (the psyche) is pure ontological genesis, or *poiesis* (IIS).

The psyche/imagination characterizes all biological life, or the 'living Being' (Castoriadis, 1997) (while the imaginary pertains uniquely to humans, as explained below). The living Being – in all its forms, from bacteria to humans – has indeed imagination, because it is capable of giving form to a 'world of its own', or 'proper world' (Castoriadis, 2007; Castoriadis, 1997) through the origination and organization of representations into meaningful ensembles – what biologists refer to as "information". Importantly, for Castoriadis this information does not exist out there 'waiting to be gathered' (145), but must be created by the living Being in order for it to exist (Castoriadis, 1997). And it is the perpetual (re)presenting activity of the imagination that in-forms the proper world of the living Being and thus allows it to exist.

Furthermore, although the psyche/imagination is not determined by somatic stimuli, *'[t]here is a permanent and essential interdependence between the psychical and the somatical spheres'* (Castoriadis, 1997, 177). In this sense, the

imagination exists not as something other than the body; nor as its "product". Rather, the imagination transverses the body of living Being, where it manifests itself as psyche/soma (Castoriadis, 1997). In this light, bodily sensations are not a mere translation of somatic stimuli (if they were, the imagination would be determined by material relations), but creations of the radical imagination which transform the 'external shocks' through which the body encounter the world into something (Castoriadis, 1997, 179). The sensing body of the living Being is a body that imagines.

Castoriadis further posits that the representations created by the imagination are always accompanied by some intentions (or finalities) and affects. Since the creation of a proper world is a necessary condition for the existence of the living Being, the psyche emerges with a 'minimal intention' (Castoriadis, 257) – not in the sense of a consciously determined aim, but of an orientation, a tending towards – which is self-finality. Put differently, existence itself and of itself is the primordial intention of the representative flux of the psyche. What guides the psyche towards this self-preserving finality is *affect* which, at the most fundamental level, is expressed as pleasure towards what favours self-preservation and displeasure towards what disfavours it

(Castoriadis, 1997, 146). Hence, imagination exists not as mere representative flux, but as a representative/affective/intentional flux (Castoriadis, 1987).

Conceiving the imagination as representative/affective/intentional flux is central for understanding the fundamental difference existing between human and non-human psychism. Human psychism is namely characterized by the autonomy, or afunctionality of the imagination which, contrary to the non-human one, is not bound to the finality of biological conservation (Castoriadis, 1997, 263). The defunctionalisation of human affect – notably manifested as a disconnection of sexual pleasure from the finality of reproduction – is one of the clearest consequences of this autonomy[16]. For example, while status markers give pleasure to modern individuals, this pleasure is disconnected from their biological survival. In short, human psychism is peculiarly characterized by an autonomy of the imagination in relation to finality of biological conservation.

---

[16] More specifically, Castoriadis talks in this connection of domination of representational pleasure over organ pleasure. This means that the human psyche is able to feel pleasure (which is positive affect) by drawing on its own representations, that is, representations which have no connection with the biological finality of conservation.

This autonomy is important because it is at the basis of the human capacity for symbolism (Castoriadis, 2007, 356), or *quid pro quo*, that is, the capacity to represent something in place of something else (Castoriadis, 1987). While non-humans communicate through signs that are fixed upon an object (e.g. the odour of a predator), symbols are not. This is the reason why humans can '"see" a monkey in the five phonemes and six letters of this word' (Castoriadis, 1997, 151). Thus, while physical representations in the non-human are aimed, at all times, at biological conservation, and thus 'given once and for all' (Castoriadis, 1997), the human imagination is autonomous because it can create representations which have no correlate (nor function) in the natural world (we can indeed imagine a monkey, even though there is no monkey around). And this autonomy of the human imagination is what makes possible (and necessary) the institution of society, as explained in the next section.

To summarize, Castoriadis provides an anti-essentialist and nondeterministic theory of the psyche. Building on Freud's interpretation of the unconscious, he defines the psyche as radical imagination, the innate and embodied capacity of the living Being (i.e. biological life) to create a flux of representations-intentions-affects that in-forms its proper world. Castoriadis also argues that

the human imagination is peculiar because autonomous – that is, detached from the constraints of biological functionality – and that this autonomy is at the basis of symbolism (and thus, language). The next section further explains how the autonomy of the human imagination makes the imaginary institution of society both possible and necessary.

The social imaginary as the mode of being of society

While the autonomous imagination grants humans the capacity of symbolism, it also turns man into 'a mad animal' which is 'unfit for life' (Castoriadis, 2007, 164). The human psyche is originally oriented towards solipsistic representational pleasure, that is the pleasure of relating everything (which is every *representation*, since for the psyche nothing exists outside representation) to itself (Castoriadis 2007, Castoriadis, 1997). Under these conditions, the psyche can survive only if it is brought back to "reality" through socialization, as proto-individuals (e.g. infants) gradually incorporate socially instituted 'ways of acting and thinking' (Castoriadis, 2010, 65) and become therewith "social individuals" – not in the sense of "parts of" society, but in the deeper sense of 'total fragments' (Castoriadis, 2016) of society (something akin to mathematical fractals, endless repetitions of self-similar

patterns). Hence, 'man exists only in and through society' (WIF 5, 46) in the most profound sense of the expression, meaning that society is not simply a creation of man, but basic condition for its own existence.

In this light, society is not merely a 'system of interdependent functions' (Castoriadis, 1987, 179) that ensure the fulfilment of some end which is imposed on it from the outside. This view implies that the organization of society is determined by 'a norm, end, or telos grounded in something else' (Castoriadis, 1987, 167) – be it history, the means of production, God, or nature. In its most "rational" version – that is, physicalism/materialism – this view regards society as determined by the "end" of biological conservation (Castoriadis, 1987). Yet every society presents a host of activities which have no function whatsoever in the grand scheme of biological conservation – such as music-making, gambling, coffee-drinking, or acquisition rituals.[17] This means that society 'has no end other than its own existence as society positing these ends' (Castoriadis, 1997, 315). In other words, society is essentially 'self-creation'

---

[17] The explanation that society exists for, or in continuation of, biological conservation is also hardly refuted by our own self-destruction.

deployed not as psychical representations, but 'as history' (Castoriadis, 1997, 13). Society is history (and history is society) and, thus, for Castoriadis it should be more properly referred to as the social-historical (Castoriadis, 1987).

In this sense, the mode of being of society reflects that of psyche. Both are indeed a perpetual and unmotivated 'positing, creating, bringing-into-being' (Castoriadis 1987, 369) of forms that are dependent yet not determined by the environment in which they emerge. Yet while the psyche gives form to a flux of representations-finalities-affects, society (the social-historical) 'exists in and through the positing-creating of *social imaginary significations* and the *institution*' (Castoriadis, 1987, 369; emphasis added). These two elements refer *grosso modo* to the "products" (i.e. social imaginary significations) and the "means" (i.e. institution as instituting activity) of social creation[18]. So, while the psyche exists as radical imagination, society exists as the 'social imaginary in the primary sense of the term'

---

[18] In truth, this is a fictional distinction (for the sake of explanation) since, as it will become clear in a moment, social imaginary significations (that which is institut*ed*) and institution(s) (that which is institut*ing*) always presuppose each other in a circular relation

(Castoriadis, 1987, 369), or the (social) instituting imaginary (Castoriadis, 2016; Castoriadis, 1997).

More specifically, society exists as social imaginary in and through the institution (or 'instituting society'). This is not just a system of shared norms, but more broadly the creative capacity which is "available" each time to 'the anonymous collectivity' (Castoriadis, 1997, 131). The institution is in this sense 'everything that, with or without formal sanction, imposes ways of acting and thinking' (Castoriadis, 2010, 125). Language is an illustrative example of institution/instituting. Language is not a thing, but rather a set of operative logics that inform our thought (making in fact thinking possible), while allowing us to create (new) thoughts. Furthermore, language is not really present anywhere: not in the individual's genes, nor in a society's objects, such as its texts (a 1-year-old child could not read this article, because language is not "contained" within it); yet it presents itself through its creations – any poem, bok, article, or uttered statement. Similar to the manner in which the radical imagination transverses the body, the institution transverses society.

As creative capacity, the social imaginary institute the proper world of society. This is the world of *social imaginary significations* (SSIs) (Castoriadis, 1987, 359) (or 'instituted

society'). Contrary to symbolic significations, SSIs have no external referent, but are self-referential (Castoriadis, 1987, 365). For instance, while the symbol "tree" signifies a concrete external referent, significations like "God", "economy", or "sustainability" have no referent other than themselves. These significations are imaginary because 'they are neither rational (they cannot be "logically constructed") nor real (they cannot be derived from things)' (Castoriadis, 2010, 67); and they are *social* because they exist only if 'shared by an impersonal, anonymous collective' (Castoriadis, 1997, 8). Moreover, SSIs exist as 'indefinitely related to one another' (Castoriadis, 1997, 11) in and through an indeterminate network of referral. So, "economy" signifies something only in reference to capital, credit, investment, finance, enterprise, and so forth. Society exists as instituted (that is, as this specific society) through its whole complex of SSIs 'that posits and defines, each time, what is for society under consideration information, what is mere noise, and what is nothing all' (Castoriadis, 2010, 69) or that, in other words, in-forms what for each society is its proper world, thereby

conferring 'meaning on everything that might present itself, "in" society as well as "outside"'[19] (Castoriadis, 1997, 313).

As SSIs networks are indeterminate, society exists at the same time through closure and openness. Closure because the world instituted by SSI must enclose everything that representable (Castoriadis, 1987). Similar to what discussed for the psyche, nothing can actually exist outside (the institution of) society[20]. Yet a society's world is also open because new social imaginary significations can and do emerge all the time. The unceasing transformation of language and the emergence of new meanings and concepts is a clear example of that. So, because of the indeterminacy of its constitutive SSIs, the mode of being of society (the social imaginary) is fluid and unstable. It is like a *magma* (Castoriadis, 1987): an uninformed mass from which one can extract an indefinite number of different forms that 'cannot be organized into a logically structured whole' (Thompson, 1982, 665).

---

[19] "Outside" only in a formal sense. See note below.
[20] To ask what there is outside society is like asking what there is outside the universe. As the famous physicist Steven Hawking used to say, such a question makes no sense, because the universe is by definition everything there is.

In sum, the autonomy of the human imagination from the finality of biological conservation turns man into a 'mad animal' which is 'unfit for life'. Society ensures the basic survival of man by furnishing the psyche with a source of meaning which is outside itself. It does so by creating an indeterminate network of SSIs which define everything that is (representable) within society, its proper world, or instituted society. Society creates its proper world (and thus, itself) through the basic mode of operation of the institution, the capacity of positing-creating ontological forms which have a mere arbitrary relation with what already exists. This instituting capacity is 'the social imaginary in the primary sense of the term', or the mode of being of social-historical (self-)creation. Finally, we noted that the social imaginary works at the same time following the principles of closure and openness. Closure because it must define everything there is; openness because the arbitrariness of its constitutive SSI ensures the unceasing emergence of new meanings and representations. In this sense, the social imaginary is like a magma, an undefined and logically unorganizable mass that can give form to an indeterminate number of forms.

Back to "reality": implications of the social imaginary for marketing theory

The previous section explained that, according to Castoriadis, the human being is characterized by the social imaginary, that is the capacity for radical ontological creation manifested as the institution of a world of SSIs that is fundamentally undetermined by anything "outside" of it (such as the natural world). In essence, Castoriadis' thesis is a reaction to (post-)structuralist thinking that rejects the possibility of human autonomy, or self-determination (see Tovar-Restrepo, 2012). This rejection is problematic because it fundamentally denies the possibility of creating a social order which radically differs from the existing (capitalist) one in the form of an autonomous society (self-instituting and self-governing) society.

In this light, Castoriadis' theorization is an attempt to awake a new political consciousness based on the recognition that as society, *'we make our own laws'* (Castoriadis ,1997, 86). This recognition aims at shedding light on the fact that the present social order is neither determined, nor inevitable; but it is something that *we* (humans) instituted (and keep on instituting through our social activity –Holloway and Sergi, 2010). And for

this reason, we also have the opportunity (and responsibility!) to change it.

This insight bears important ontological, epistemological and ethical implications for marketing theory. In the following, I discuss these implications, showing how marketing scholars can participate in the imaginary re-institution of society by reclaiming the fundamental human capacity for self-determination in their studies.

The subject is dead, long live the subject! Agency, imagination and social change

The first implication of Castoriadis' thesis concerns the state of the subject in marketing theory. With the decline of post-modernism (Cova et al., 2013) and ensuing critiques to the overemphasis on individual consumer agency (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011; Moisander et al., 2009), interpretive marketing studies have increasingly embraced poststructuralist perspectives which de facto assert the death of subject or, at best, flatten its composite ontology until it becomes an assemblage that is indiscernible from the (once missing) masses that co-constitute it. To be sure, these approaches proved to be of great significance, as they shed light on the embeddedness of human activity in a

material, social and historical context, thereby helping expose the (neoliberal) fiction of a liberated (white, male, educated and wealthy) subject that freely express itself through its consumption. The recent stream of consumer responsibilization (e.g. Bajde and Rojas, 2021; Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014), which draws heavily from Foucault's studies on governmentality, epitomizes this tendency to attend to the social processes through which different subjectivity positions are created, instead of focusing on individuals' lived experiences, as CCT research has predominantly done in the past (see Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). And yet despite their noteworthy contribution to the field, from a Castoridian perspective the spectre of determinism still haunts these poststructuralist accounts, where the subject ceases to be a locus of agency to become an object of structural forces.

The question is whether poststructuralist perspectives on subjectivity really only substitute the functional determinism of behaviourist perspectives (which the CCT field was born in reaction to) with a certain *cultural determinism* which takes the subject to be at the mercy of the discourses, ideologies, norms and practices (i.e. the culture) that produce it. To be sure, this is not an endorsement of the neoliberal fiction of a free individual acting

according to its own self-interest in an economically rational manner. As seen above, for Castoriadis the alleged "rationality" of the human subject is deeply rooted in an imagination which is autonomous, that is independent from the functional logic governing the natural environment. In this light, animals can be said to be rational because they do not do anything afunctional (their existence is directed towards the conservation of biological life); but the human subject is deeply and irredeemably irrational – a 'mad animal'. By evoking the notion of cultural determinism, I am then trying to expose the perils that marketing theory may face if it reduces the subject to a product of contingent cultural formations.

In particular, poststructuralist notions of the subject face fundamental issues in the conceptualization of *radical* social change. CCT studies convincingly showed that (consumer) subjects engage in acts of resistance which sometimes succeed in altering the ideological and material structures underlying the existing social order (Gollnhofer et al., 2019; Karababa and Ger, 2011; Sandikci and Ger, 2010; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007). Yet if we assume that change is only possible through the resistance of a subject (or a group of subjects) which is itself determined by existing

discourses, ideologies and practices, a radical rupture with the existing capitalist order is de facto impossible. In this sense, the very idea of a culturally-determined subject limits our ability to break with the capitalist realist ideology (Fisher, 2009) (or the modern social imaginary, in Castoridian terms) that engulfs modern "reality" and makes it 'easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism' (Ahlberg et al., 2022, 14). Hence, if we (*subjects*) are to reclaim the capacity (and responsibility) to imagine an alternative order (Cova et al., 2013), we must grant the subject a certain autonomy from the social, cultural and material structures which nonetheless participate in its constitution.

Castoriadis' recognition of the psychical makeup of the subject offers marketing scholars a way out of this (post)structuralist theoretical impasse. For Castoriadis, despite proclamations about its death, the subject 'never left', for it is, as seen, the instantiation 'of the psyche as such and of the socialized psyche' (Castoriadis, 1997, 137). In other words, the subject is the instantiation of an innate creative force (a *vis formandi*) that transverses the embodied individual as imagination and that, despite existing in a relation of co-dependence with society (and more specifically, the social imaginary) it is not determined by it.

In its psychical form, then, the subject is not a position, but nor is it an 'epiphenomenon' (Ahlberg et al., 2022, as this notion implies an ontological pre-determination of the subject); more properly, it is a becoming of spontaneous and undetermined representations which is never completely sublimated (socialized) into, and thus can never be reduced to, existing social, cultural and material structures. Put differently, the subject is a locus of overflowing creative agency which is "hers/his" (contrary to relationalist account of agency in vogue nowadays, according to which agency – and responsibility – is dispersed through the network) and yet s/he does not possess. In a profound sense, Castoriadis's thesis help us recentre the subject without recentring it, and make its constitutive imagination a fundamental element of radical social change.

In this light, it is in the indeterminacy (or autonomy) and irreducibility of the subject's imagination that we can and must find the possibility for radical change. Accordingly, researchers should focus more keenly on studying the imagination which in marketing research remains regrettably undertheorized (Jenkins and Molesworth, 2018). Moreover, when considered, the imagination is predominantly studied in the context of escapist, liminal, extraordinary, or virtual experiences (e.g. Derbaix and

Gombault, 2016; Heath and Nixon, 2021; Maclaran and Brown, 2001; Martin, 2004) and regarded (from a Kantian perspective) as a mental reproduction of reality. This type of imagination corresponds essentially to an individual's (imaginal) interpretation of her lived experiences and, therefore, remains bounded to her 'mental context' (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). Castoriadis suggests instead that the imagination is a force which transverses the embodied subject as a continuous flux of representations-intentions-affects, which creates, and not simply reproduces, reality. This means that the imagination is not simply an individual translation of experience, but the primal driver of consumption practices and, importantly, the primal driver of *change* in these practices (as argued, imagination is fundamentally radical creation).

Marketing research (and society) would the largely benefit from more thorough investigations of how the imagination (as representations-intentions-affects) guides consumption practices and their change – and not only of how consumers experience consumption in the imagination. It is indeed in the cracks opened by the social-historical, yet never completely sublimated, imagination of the subject (or subjects) that we can find not only more comprehensive explanations of market

change, but also possibilities for emancipation from the present capitalist order.

All this also implies that marketing theory is more attentive to the political implications of its epistemology, as discussed next.

The impossibility of objective knowing and the politics of epistemology

Similar to poststructuralist approaches, Castoriadis' philosophy asserts that knowledge is always inevitably mediated. Not however only by the 'heterogenous assemblages of humans and non-humans' (Bajde 2013, 230) or the power relations (Earley, 2013) mobilized in the process of its production; but more profoundly, by the radical imagination that in-form the proper world of each living being, and the social imaginary that institutes the proper world of each society. Here is also where Castoriadis' philosophy departs from a social constructivist stance asserting that there is no reality out there, which is independent from our construction of it. In fact, for Castoriadis *there is* an independent reality out there, which corresponds to the natural stratum. Yet crucially, this reality remains to us inaccessible. Together with (Graeber, 2013), we can say that, from the perspective of the

social imaginary, reality is 'that which lies beyond our imaginative constructs' (233). This epistemological stance rejects *in toto* the possibility of an objective, and thereby ahistorical, pursuit of knowledge.

Above all, this impossibility invites marketing studies to abandon any echoing logical empiricist (Thompson et al., 2013) presumption that knowledge (like information) lies "out there" (e.g. in our data) awaiting to be processed; and instead actively recognize that the 'making/doing of theory' (Castoriadis, 1984, 16) is a radically creative activity. Indeed, the (re)presentations created by social individuals through their theorizing activity are not simply descriptions, or explanations, of some phenomena; they are more profoundly enactments (Law, 2004) of a specific social-historical reality, or materializations of the social imaginary. And yet marketing studies remain largely (yet not only) driven by logical empiricist principles that compel researchers to discover the immanent and ahistorical "truth" about consumption and market phenomena. These principles are clearly manifested in the tendency (especially widespread among certain top-tier journals) to regard findings (that is, knowledge) as emerging from (the mechanic activity of going back and forth) some data, and accordingly, to prefer increasingly larger sets of

data. Yet if we accept that knowledge is a radical creation which emerges 'out of nothing', we shall also realize that knowledge cannot emerge "from the data", as much as a poem cannot emerge from a piece of paper. Both knowledge and the poem emerge in fact from the social individual's *(re)presentation* of (some kind of) data.

In this light, it would be more proper to regard knowledge as an artistic creation, whose purpose is not to describe, or represent (in the inherited sense of the term) reality, but to *present* a specific (critique of) reality. Similar to making/doing of art, the making/doing of theory should focus its efforts not on cumulative contributions, but on creating a rupture with previous (re)presentations of the world with the aim of eliciting an affective-discursive disposition towards critical interrogation (Ahlberg et al., 2022). After all, new knowledge does not simply add to existing (re)presentations, but institute every time a new world. For instance, harbingers of CCT research radically departed from the idea that consumers are rational individuals whose behaviour is guided by economic choices. By doing so, they instituted a world which is radically different from that existing before the Consumer Odyssey (Belk, 1987) and which we could not simply "go back to", even if we wanted to.

Therefore, instead of debating about the subjective-objective character of knowledge (cf. Askegaard and Linnet, 2011; Earley, 2013), marketing theory would benefit from a greater (rather than lesser, cf. Woermann, 2016) reflection on the political consequences of its epistemological choices and an active engagements in attempts to present (institute, create) alternative worlds.

Practically, at the analytical level, this calls for those leaps of interpretation advocated by Askegaard and Linnet (2011), that is, for great flexibility in the application of 'etic constructs that are not readily traceable in the emic context' (399) under investigation. Castoriadis' concept of SSI offers a valuable epistemic tool to realize these interpretive leaps. Contrary to the concept of discourse, which defines the conditions of possibility of knowing within a society (that is, its epistemic closure) (Markham, 2021), SSI emphasizes the irreducible openness of social (re)presentations and meanings. As explained above, SSIs are significations without referent which exist in and through an indeterminate network of other significations. "Sustainability", for instance, signifies something only in connection with environment, resource, ecology, business, future, etc. To investigate sustainability as an SSI would then mean to "tease

out" and "map" (at least partly) the indeterminate network of significations which forms the collective unconscious governing a society's understanding of and relation to sustainability. In this sense, employing SSIs as analytical tool inevitably involves making interpretive leaps and, therewith, participating in the institution of alternative worlds.

A related epistemological implication regards the types of data collection methods employed in marketing theory. In light of existing debates on the proclivity of CCT studies to adopt a phenomenological approach in the analysis of consumer interviews, it should be noted that, from a Castoridian perspective, there is no opposition between individual and society, meaning that there is no opposition between the subject and discourse: it is always the discourse that speaks through the subject, *and* the subject that speaks through discourse. Hence, consumer interviews (statements, utterances, words) are never truly expressions of *individual* experiences, but rather materializations of 'a network of culturally shared knowledge, beliefs, ideals, and taken- for-granted assumptions' (Thompson et al., 1994),433) – that is the social imaginary, which enables the subject's discourse. This means that personal interviews are always a form of 'cultural talk' (Moisander et al., 2009) and, thus,

as good as any other text, or re-presentation in investigations of consumer culture. However, as Moisander and colleagues also suggest, projective techniques could be a great addition to stimulate the emergence of (re)presentations which otherwise would remain unspoken during the interview.

Similarly, focus groups also present a great untapped potential for marketing studies. Because of their interactive nature and the mix of public and private discourse, focus groups allow researchers to capture meanings which emerge in the interstitial space of the imaginary, that which lies in the interaction between *'lived experience'' of individuals and the larger discursive formations shaping this experience* (Tadajewski, 2015).

Finally, different sorts of cultural texts – such as movies, books, documentaries, songs, magazines, newspapers, corporate documents and digital documents of any kind – surely deserve more space and considerations in marketing analyses, as persistent and easily accessible materializations of the social imaginary.

Concluding (ethical) remarks

This article argued that to be able to 'imagine an alternative order' (Cova et al., 2013), we must reclaim the possibility of human self-

determination (or autonomy) in marketing theory – possibility which has been rejected by the rise and spread of (post)structuralist thinking. Accordingly, the article offered the theoretical fundaments to talk about human self-determination by introducing Castoriadis' theorization of the social imaginary. As explained, the social imaginary corresponds to the fundamental capacity of radical ontological creation which characterizes the human (mode of) being. The article further considered the ontological and epistemological implications of the social imaginary for marketing theory, highlighting in particular the need for resurrecting the (imagination of the) subject and engaging more actively with the political consequences of the theorizing activity. In these final pages, I would like to consider the ethical implications of reclaiming human autonomy.

In an important way, accepting the social imaginary as humans' primary mode of being 'makes us accountable' (Bouchet, 2018 in Askegaard and Heilbrunn, 2018) *as humans*. The recognition that the human being is fundamentally driven by an affective unconscious (the imagination) does not deprive her of her agency (cf. Ahlberg et al., 2022). In fact, I argued above that the imagination is agency that transverses the living body. In the human being, this imagination is radical, that is, detached

from the imperatives of biological functionality. While this radicality certainly endows us with exceptional creative capacities (such as language), it also entrusts us with great responsibility. As the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami (2006) beautifully puts it:

> 'It's all a question of imagination. Our responsibility begins with the power to imagine. It's just like Yeats said: In dreams begin responsibilities. Flip this around and you could say that where there's no power to imagine, no responsibility can arise.' (122)

In this light, one of the most important ethical implications of the social imaginary is that humans have responsibility *because of* – and not despite – their irrationality. It is indeed in the indeterminateness of the radical imaginary that we can and must find the potential for a radical change that can redress the (dis)order that *we* created.

This recognition makes us accountable also *as scholars*. As suggested above, our studies are materializations of the social imaginary – not mere descriptions, but rather presentations of the world. This fact endows us with the tremendous power and responsibility to indicate how an alternative world might look like. This is why I suggested above that marketing theory should

be more (and not less – cf. Woermann, 2016) politically engaged. This means that besides producing meticulous descriptions of how various material and discursive structures constrain human agency (and with it, responsibility), our analyses should 'seek out and cultivate moments of resistance and rupture' (Cova et al. 2013, 221) (see also Holloway, 2010) – mindful of the fact that these moments are not out there, but it is indeed *our* responsibility to *cultivate* them. In essence, a serious recognition of our scholarly responsibility invites us to a re-orientation of marketing research in general towards the Deleuzian question of *'how might one live?'* (May, 2005).

As argued above, this requires that we get over our 'physics envy' (Tapp, 2007) and recognize that 'marketing is an Art' (Brown, 2001). As artistic creations (that is, not a product of the numbed and numbing modern creative industry, but as expressions of irreducible imagination), our studies should 'communicate affectively' (Ahlberg et al., 2022) in order to mobilize criticism towards the current status quo and inspire the imagination of potential alternatives. Be it by evoking communist (Cova et al., 2013), neo-animist (Arnould, 2021), or eco-feminist horizons (Halsaa, 1988), marketing research should strive to unleash the *creative potential* of the human imagination. One of

the major insights of Castoriadis' philosophy is that the magmatic mode of the social imaginary is radical alterity. This implies that, contrary to what proposers of the "terminal marketing" (Ahlberg et al., 2022) claim, the future is not 'cancelled'; but neither is the future guaranteed. Assuming one of the two propositions would mean falling back into the trap of determinism that Castoriadis warns us about. In fact, the future is by definition imaginary (Beckert, 2016), as it is essentially open-ended and indeterminate, a creation of the social institution. Hence, our *responsibility* as artists is to give form to the future.

To conclude, it should be emphasized that reclaiming human self-determination also encourages marketing scholar to go beyond critique. With this I do not mean that we should stop being critical. On the contrary, the present article argued exactly the opposite – that it is our responsibility to be more critical. Deep self-reflexive critique is indeed foundational to the establishment of an autonomous society. Yet if we think about critique as the movement of going against-and beyond the present status quo (Holloway, 2010), Castoriadis' thesis of the social imaginary encourages us to go not only against, but also and crucially *beyond*. Extant critical approaches offer us valid reasons and even means to go against; yet they admittedly offer little help to go

beyond the theoretical and existential impasse that we find ourselves in. Perhaps because they still see society (and social individuals) as determined by something which is "outside" of it. I hope that it is now clear that the question of what is outside society does not make sense, because society, as social imaginary, defines everything there is. And crucially, this self-instituting capacity gives us the opportunity to go beyond what there is and give form to what there might be.

References

Ahlberg O, Coffin J and Hietanen J (2022) Bleak signs of our times: Descent into 'Terminal Marketing'. *Marketing Theory*. DOI: 10.1177/14705931221095604.

Arnould EJ (2021) Ontology and circulation: towards an eco-economy of persons. *Journal of Marketing Management* 38(1-2): 71-97.

Arnould EJ and Thompson CJ (2005) Consumer culture theory (CCT): Twenty years of research. *Journal of Consumer Research* 31(4): 868-882.

Askegaard S (2021) Putting the anthropos back in consumer research: Beyond reductionisms. *Recherche et Applications en Marketing (English Edition)* 36(1): 90-102.

Askegaard S and Heilbrunn B (2018) *Canonical authors in consumption theory.* Routledge London.

Askegaard S and Linnet JT (2011) Towards an epistemology of consumer culture theory: Phenomenology and the context of context. *Marketing Theory* 11(4): 381-404.

Askegaard S and Östberg J (2019) *Nordic consumer culture: State, market and consumers.* Springer.

Bajde D (2013) Consumer culture theory (re)visits actor–network theory. *Marketing Theory* 13(2): 227-242.

Bajde D and Rojas P (2021) Creating Responsible Subjects: The Role of Mediated Affective Encounters. *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Beckert J (2016) *Imagined futures: Fictional expectations and capitalist dynamics.* Harvard University Press.

Belk RW (1987) The role of the Odyssey in consumer behavior and in consumer research. *ACR North American Advances*.

Bouchet D (1994) Rails without ties. The social imaginary and postmodern culture. Can postmodern consumption replace modern questioning? *International Journal of Research in Marketing* 11(4): 405-422.

Brown S (2001) Art or science? Fifty years of marketing debate. *The Marketing Review* 2(1): 89-119.

Castoriadis C (1984) Crossroads in the Labyrinth.

Castoriadis C (1987) *The imaginary institution of society.* Mit Press.

Castoriadis C (1992) Logic, Imagination, Reflection. *American Imago* 49(1): 3-33.

Castoriadis C (1997) *World in fragments: Writings on politics, society, psychoanalysis, and the imagination.* Stanford University Press.

Castoriadis C (2007) *Figures of the Thinkable.* Stanford University Press.

Castoriadis C (2010) A society Adrift. *Interviews & Debates (1974-1997)*. 3.

Castoriadis C (2016) Radical imagination and the social instituting imaginary. *Rethinking imagination*. Routledge, pp.136-154.

Cherrier H, Szuba M and Özçağlar-Toulouse N (2012) Barriers to downward carbon emission: Exploring sustainable consumption in the face of the glass floor. *Journal of Marketing Management* 28(3-4): 397-419.

Coskuner-Balli G (2020) Citizen-consumers wanted: Revitalizing the American dream in the face of economic recessions, 1981–2012. *Journal of Consumer Research* 47(3): 327-349.

Cova B, Maclaran P and Bradshaw A (2013) Rethinking consumer culture theory from the postmodern to the communist horizon. *Marketing Theory* 13(2): 213-225.

Derbaix M and Gombault A (2016) Selling the invisible to create an authentic experience: imagination at work at Cézanne's studio. *Journal of Marketing Management* 32(15-16): 1458-1477.

Earley A (2013) Connecting contexts. *Marketing Theory* 14(1): 73-96.

Fisher M (2009) *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?* : John Hunt Publishing.

Fitchett JA, Patsiaouras G and Davies A (2014) Myth and ideology in consumer culture theory. *Marketing Theory* 14(4): 495-506.

Freud S and Strachey J (1996) *The interpretation of dreams.* Gramercy Books New York.

Giesler M and Veresiu E (2014) Creating the Responsible Consumer: Moralistic Governance Regimes and Consumer Subjectivity. *Journal of Consumer Research* 41(3): 840-857.

Gollnhofer JF, Weijo HA and Schouten JW (2019) Consumer Movements and Value Regimes: Fighting Food Waste in Germany by Building Alternative Object Pathways. *Journal of Consumer Research* 46(3): 460-482.

Graeber D (2013) It is value that brings universes into being. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3(2): 219-243.

Halsaa B (1988) A Feminist Utopia. *Scandinavian Political Studies* 11(4): 323-336.

Heath T and Nixon E (2021) Immersive imaginative hedonism: Daydreaming as experiential 'consumption'. *Marketing Theory* 21(3): 351-370.

Hill T, Canniford R and Mol J (2014) Non-representational marketing theory. *Marketing Theory* 14(4): 377-394.

Holloway J (2010) *Crack capitalism.* Pluto Press London.

Jenkins R and Molesworth M (2018) Conceptualizing consumption in the imagination: Relationships and movements between imaginative forms and the marketplace. *Marketing Theory* 18(3): 327-347.

Karababa E and Ger G (2011) Early Modern Ottoman Coffeehouse Culture and the Formation of the Consumer Subject. *Journal of Consumer Research* 37(5): 737-760.

Klooger J (2015) From Nothing: Castoriadis and the Concept of Creation. *Critical Horizons* 12(1): 29-47.

Law J (2004) *After method: Mess in social science research.* Routledge.

Maclaran P and Brown S (2001) The future perfect declined: utopian studies and consumer research. *Journal of Marketing Management* 17(3-4): 367-390.

Markham A (2021) The limits of the imaginary: Challenges to intervening in future speculations of memory, data, and algorithms. *New media & society* 23(2): 382-405.

Martin BA (2004) Using the imagination: Consumer evoking and thematizing of the fantastic imaginary. *Journal of Consumer Research* 31(1): 136-149.

Mason K, Kjellberg H and Hagberg J (2015) Exploring the performativity of marketing: theories, practices and devices. Taylor & Francis, 1-15.

May T (2005) *Gilles Deleuze: an introduction.* Cambridge University Press.

Moisander J, Valtonen A and Hirsto H (2009) Personal interviews in cultural consumer research – post-structuralist challenges. *Consumption Markets & Culture* 12(4): 329-348.

Murakami H (2006) *Kafka on the Shore.* Vintage.

Sandikci Ö and Ger G (2010) Veiling in Style: How Does a Stigmatized Practice Become Fashionable? *Journal of Consumer Research* 37(1): 15-36.

Scaraboto D and Fischer E (2013) Frustrated Fatshionistas: An Institutional Theory Perspective on Consumer Quests for Greater Choice in Mainstream Markets. *Journal of Consumer Research* 39(6): 1234-1257.

Smaniotto C, Emontspool J and Askegaard S (2021) Consumption logistics and the ordering of market systems. *Marketing Theory* 21(1): 93-112.

Tadajewski M (2015) Focus groups: history, epistemology and non-individualistic consumer research. *Consumption Markets & Culture* 19(4): 319-345.

Tapp A (2007) Physics envy. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*.

Thompson CJ, Arnould E and Giesler M (2013) Discursivity, difference, and disruption. *Marketing Theory* 13(2): 149-174.

Thompson CJ and Coskuner-Balli G (2007) Countervailing Market Responses to Corporate Co-optation and the Ideological

Recruitment of Consumption Communities. *Journal of Consumer Research* 34(2): 135-152.

Thompson CJ, Pollio HR and Locander WB (1994) The spoken and the unspoken: a hermeneutic approach to understanding the cultural viewpoints that underlie consumers' expressed meanings. *Journal of Consumer Research* 21(3): 432-452.

Thompson JB (1982) Ideology and the social imaginary. *Theory and Society* 11(5): 659-681.

Tovar-Restrepo M (2012) *Castoriadis, Foucault, and autonomy: New approaches to subjectivity, society, and social change.* Bloomsbury Publishing.

Woermann N (2016) Back to the roots! Methodological situationalism and the postmodern lesson for studying tribes, practices, and assemblages. *Marketing Theory* 17(2): 149-163.

8
Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter provides a summary of the PhD main findings and discusses their theoretical implications for extant CCT research. It should be noted that, while the discussion section of individual articles is more specific (as it addresses the conversations occurring in the targeted journals), the following paragraphs emphasize the general implications of the findings for CCT theory, while offering directions for future research. In particular, I discuss how the future orientation of modern disposal and the emergence of an ecological imaginary identified by the findings invite CCT researchers to reconsider existing interpretations of value and (consumer) autonomy. The chapter concludes then by considering the limitations and practical implications of the present PhD research.

Summary of the findings

The aim of this dissertation was to advance CCT knowledge of the social logics underpinning consumer disposition in modern

consumer society. As argued in the introductory chapter, while prior research produced valuable insights into the identity and exchange logics guiding consumer disposal, explorations of its socio-historical structuring remain scarce. In particular I noticed that, to the best of my knowledge, only Bajde's (2012) study considered the influence of the social imaginary on object circulation (specifically, through charitable donation), without though addressing the issue of disposition per se. As discussed, however, advancing knowledge of the social imaginary of modern disposition can help us understand why we dispose of things, since waste is in effect an imaginary creation and, consequently, disposal activities are rooted on imaginations, fantasies, and beliefs. Accordingly, the present dissertation explored the question of how the social imaginary inform disposition in modern consumer society.

Drawing on a philosophical interpretation of the social imaginary as the capacity to create (undetermined) representations manifested by both the individual and collective imagination (Castoriadis, 1987), the empirical articles of this dissertation employed a mix of qualitative research methods – including personal interviews, focus groups, netnographic observations and document analyses – to explore different

manifestations of the social imaginary undergirding consumer disposal activities in Denmark. The theoretical article (which by obvious reasons has no empirical findings) discussed instead more broadly how the social imaginary of (post-structuralist) marketing theory contributes to the performative reproduction of a socio-economic order based on waste generation.

Overall, the empirical findings of this PhD study indicate that the social imaginary generates a tension between the present and a potential future which enables modern consumer disposition. Thus, the first two articles show how consumers' *radical imagination* – expressed as the capacity to experience a future that has not yet happened (and may never happen) – promotes the (non-)circulation of things through various disposal conduits. Specifically, Article 1 found that unused (and most of time, functionally useless) technological objects remain stuck in drawers, cupboards, attics and basements because of the potential – practical, existential, environmental and moral risks associated by consumers to their disposal. As the paper discusses, the practice of storage provides security value by allowing consumers to guard themselves from these potential risks. Then, Article 2 extends these findings by showing that consumer future imaginations trigger not only the storage of (technological)

objects, but also their disposal in a more proper sense, that is their transfer. The second study identifies indeed a set of 'fictional expectations' (Beckert, 2016) – of oneself, the recipient, the disposition outcome, and the planet – which consumers attempt to fulfill as they dispose of things. As discussed in the paper, these fictional expectations guide consumers' valuation and related disposition of objects retrospectively, meaning that consumers largely select disposal conduits based on the imagined future lives of their objects. It should then be noted that, although Article 1 and 2 do not directly address the socio-historical context in which these future representations emerge[21], they do acknowledge – in line with the theoretical foundations underpinning this dissertation – the co-constitutive relation existing between the radical imagination and those collective representations which define the social imaginary 'in the primary sense of the term' (Castoriadis, 1987). Indeed, findings from both Article 1 and 2 highlight shared dystopian images of environmental destruction as part of the future imaginations through which consumers make sense of their disposal activities. Furthermore, both articles point

---

[21] See also the section 'Concluding remarks' below for an account of the study limitations.

to the fact that shared conceptions of a desirable social order (i.e. social imaginaries à la Taylor [2004]) may enable (or hinder) object circulation.

In this sense, while Article 1 and Article 2 explore more specifically the present-future tension generated by the individual's radical imagination, they also point to the fact this tension is qualitatively characterized by the *social imaginary*, that is, by those collective, socio-historical representations that make certain futures – and thereby certain disposal activities more or less likely, and more or less desirable. This point is more clearly illustrated by Article 3 which, while theorizing the subjectivation process through which consumers develop individual responsibility for their own waste, emphasizes the collective representations providing consumers with a basis for understanding why they should (not) dispose of things. The findings highlight in particular the conscious subject, the Lutheran imaginary of social order, and the dystopian futures articulated by a conservationist ideology as central to the formation of consumer responsibility.

In sum, the empirical findings of this PhD study indicate that the social imaginary creates a tension between the present and a potential future which enables consumer disposal activities.

Specifically, the findings show that consumers dispose of their everyday objects in order to guard themselves from potential risks or, on the contrary, to fulfill some fictional expectations of themselves and others. Moreover, they illustrate how these future imaginations are qualitatively informed by collective representations of subjectivity, social order and ecological dystopias that define the peculiar socio-historical character (the zeitgeist) of modern disposition. The following pages discuss the implications of these findings for CCT research.

Moving (from space) to the futures of disposal (and beyond)

As explained in Chapter 1, existing CCT research argues that disposal is an important exchange activity through which consumers attain and transfer some form of value (e.g. economic, moral, symbolic). Based on this recognition, studies of the exchange logics of disposition in particular considered how disposal practices partake in the creation and circulation of the values attached to disposed objects. The findings from my PhD study – and especially from Article 1 and 2 – contribute to this body of research by highlighting how future imaginations inform consumer valuation and disposition of objects. In line with prior

literature, the present PhD study shows indeed that future plans (Cappellini, 2009) and hopes (Hirschman et al., 2012), as well as prospective recipients (Türe, 2014) influence consumers' selection of the disposal conduits (Hetherington, 2004) through which they attempt to transfer their unwanted objects. Furthermore, my findings also extend previous research insights into both the exchange and social logics of disposition by demonstrating that consumers' basic ideas of social order (i.e. Taylor's [2004] social imaginaries) not only underpin givers' interpretation of charitable exchanges (Bajde, 2012), but also and more generally create a tension between an actual present and a desirable future which informs consumers' considerations of how they ought to dispose of their everyday items, and therewith of the value(s) attached to these items. Finally, the present dissertation also contributes to extant CCT research on the social logics of disposition by illustrating how a forming ecological imaginary – experienced by consumers as representations of environmental risks (Article 1), utopic/dystopic expectations of the planet's survival (Article 2), or the notion of limited planetary resources (Article 3) – guide consumers' disposition as well as waste prevention efforts. It is important to note that, as highlighted by Article 1 and 2, these representations underlie not

simply a general (and rational) discourse of waste avoidance (Cherrier and Ponnor, 2010; Cherrier and Türe, 2020), but more profound emotional reactions to images of environmental destruction.

Overall, these insights are important because they contribute to a better understanding of *why* modern consumers dispose of things by foregrounding the temporal structure of disposition. Likely influenced by Douglas' (2003) intellectual legacy and her famous remark that dirt, and metonymically waste is 'matter out of place', CCT research has been (and arguably still is) dominated by spatial perspectives on disposition. While scavenging in dumpsters (Gollnhofer et al., 2019), sidewalks (Guillard and Roux, 2014; Roux et al., 2018), kitchens (Cappellini, 2009), garages (Hirschman et al., 2012), wardrobes (Mellander and Petersson McIntyre, 2021) and drawers (Article 1 of this dissertation), CCT studies produced indeed valuable insights into the *circulation* of disposed objects (Guillard and Roux, 2014; Roux et al., 2018), on how these objects may (not) change *pathway* or *trajectory* (Eden, 2017; Gollnhofer et al., 2019), and on how they may (re)produce social *boundaries* (Cappellini and Parsons, 2012; Türe, 2014). In this light, disposal

emerges mainly as an issue of spatial (re)organization and waste, as a result of this organization, as a spatial category.

Yet as waste keeps accumulating – so much that it is literally coming back to haunt us ('Indonesia send "contaminated" waste back to the West' [Karmini and Ibrahim, 2019] as an Independent article headline read few years ago) – the limitation of this spatial perspective start to emerge. The issue is that the (in line with their structuralist foundations), spatial perspectives emphasize *how* disposed things circulate or, to put it differently, *how* consumers deal with their waste; yet it does not address the more profound problem of *why* consumers dispose of things in the first place (or why waste is produced). The temporal perspective put forward by this dissertation partly redresses this issue by illustrating that consumer future imaginations– specifically in the form of perceived risks and expectations – is the primary driver of everyday object disposal in modern society. This means that the reason why consumers (do not) dispose of things is to realize a desirable future or, on the contrary, to prevent an undesirable one.

This insight has further implications for existing accounts of (disposed) objects value. Drawing on anthropological insights (and especially, Appadurai, 1988), extant CCT research argued

indeed that disposal activities are largely driven by the value(s), that is the social and cultural meanings (Richins, 1994) acquired by objects during their historical circulation (Curasi et al., 2004; Lastovicka and Fernandez, 2005; Price et al., 2000; Türe, 2014). My findings complement this interpretation by showing that consumer disposition is also based on the value(s) derived from the future circulation of things. Article 2 illustrates this point well by showing that consumers evaluate and dispose of objects on the basis of fictional expectations of their future lives. Similarly, Article 1 demonstrate that objects kept in storage acquire value for what they may (not) do or signify in a potential future. In this sense, the findings of this PhD study indicate that disposed objects possess some kind of *imagined value* which, contrary to what is normally referred to as symbolic value (which arguably also resides in the imagination), is based on their future, and not past, narrative.

This notion of imagined value challenges in particular praxeological approaches regarding value as the 'outcome of practices' (Arnould, 2014). The findings highlighted here above clearly indicates that value is not the outcome but, on the contrary, the driver of (disposition) practices. More specifically, based on these findings I suggest that value is the imagined future which

triggers the performance of a practice – like the environmental dystopias that motivate consumers to recycle, or to store their (useless) objects. It is indeed in light of these imagined futures that these practices (and objects) gain value. But take the future out of these practices, and they will lose their value too. As the anthropologist David Graeber (2001) put it, 'value is the way which actions become meaningful'(xii) to the actors of a society. What I suggest is that value, as the meanings of social actions, resides in the imagined futures that tacitly orient and enable the practices of a society. These imagined futures are then also what qualifies practices as socio-historically situated phenomena. For instance, my findings show that the value assigned to recycling practices by consumers in modern day Denmark reflects dystopic representations of environmental collapse. Yet these representations were absent at the dawn of industrial society, although recycling was even more widespread than it is today (see Strasser, 1999).

These insights open new avenues for CCT research on disposition. The findings and discussion presented above indicate that there are interesting insights to be gained from further investigations of how the future influences disposal. In particular, inquiries into the affective, future-oriented forces driving

consumer disposal activities deserve more attention. As the findings indicate that consumers turn to disposal to realize a desirable future, studies could for instance explore how desire underlie a future orientation that fuels not only consumption (Belk et al., 2003), but also and more specifically disposition. While this link has been theoretically acknowledged (see Packard, 1961), there are no empirical investigations of how desire is translated into the ethos of disposability characterizing modern consumer society. Moreover, research is needed on the influence of affective mechanisms beyond desire. My findings suggest indeed that disposal activities are permeated not only with positive, but also with negative emotions – and especially a sense of anxiety about the future. Article 1 shows this well by identifying the potential risks that motivate consumer storage. In light of the current zeitgeist of cancelled futures (Ahlberg et al., 2022; Fisher, 2009), research is then likely to gain interesting insights by further exploring how anxiety underlie modern disposition practices.

Furthermore, the insights put forth by this PhD provide some indications for research on object valuation. Building on praxeological perspectives on value (Arnould, 2014), this body of research produced interesting insights into the interactive

processes through which different market actors (re)ascribe value to objects (including waste) (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2009; Figueiredo and Scaraboto, 2016; Gollnhofer et al., 2019; Parsons, 2007). However, these studies do not directly address the question of how future imaginations inform these processes. Yet as argued above, this question is important because value resides in the imagined futures that orient and enable the practices of society. CCT research is therefore likely to gain interesting insights by exploring how these futures emerge, gain relevance, and are eventually materialized as valuable objects and practices. In doing so, researchers should also remember that establishing what has value is 'the ultimate stakes of politics' (Graeber, 2011, 88). Hence, in line with the call for more attention to the politics of theorizing advanced by Article 4, future research on valuation should put special emphasis not only on how futures emerge, but also what futures emerge, what values these futures re-present, and whose interests they reproduce.

The ecological imaginary, self-limitation and autonomy: Towards a new social order?

This PhD study further contributes to CCT research on the social logics of consumption more in general (and not only disposition)

by shedding light on the socialization process through which social imaginary representations are imposed upon the individual imagination as 'language, behaviours, and realizable aims' (Castoriadis, 1997, 354). Article 3 theorizes indeed the subjectivation process through which consumers "translate" collective representations of subjectivity and society (i.e. the conscious subject, the Lutheran imaginary of social imaginary, and the dystopian futures articulated by a conservationist ideology) into an ethical, responsible conduct by subjecting themselves to a host of diagnostic, disciplinary and presentational self-techniques. These findings contribute to three different CCT research streams. First, they complement existing accounts of subjectivity formation (Bajde and Rojas, 2021; Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014; Karababa and Ger, 2011; Veresiu and Giesler, 2018) by shedding light on how consumers 'reflexively and willingly' (Foucault, 1984a) interiorize the discourses, ideologies and mythologies that construe responsible subjectivity positions. In this connection, the study also challenges the assumption that individual consumer responsibility is largely (if not exclusively) the product of neoliberal ideology (Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014) by illustrating the centrality of the Lutheran imaginary of

social order (according to which every individual is responsible for contributing to the common good – (Larsen, 2021) in the formation of individual responsibility among (Nordic) consumers. Second, the findings extend prior research on morality by illustrating how consumers attempt to actively modify the 'moral habitus' (i.e. the embodied moral-emotional dispositions) (Saatcioglu and Ozanne, 2013) guiding their consumption preferences and practices by embodying a self-assembled ideology of individual responsibility through the performance of disciplinary techniques. Third, the theorization of the subjectivation process put forth by Article 3 also contribute to existing CCT research by showing how religion structures (ethical) consumption not only as a set of values and ideologies (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; McAlexander et al., 2014; Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Sandikci and Ger, 2010), but also as a set of practices (in particular, confession and penance).

Overall, these findings are important because they shed light on the social logics defining modern waste reduction and, more generally, sustainable consumption practices. In particular, they point at the emergence of a new collective consciousness guiding these practices – what I referred above as the ecological

imaginary. In contrast to the more strictly *social* imaginary which characterizes modernity and which defines a sense of co-existence among humans (Taylor, 2004), the ecological imaginary convey a sense of co-existence between humans and non-humans, thereby emphasizing the embeddedness of human activity (including consumption) into larger biological ecosystems. This new consciousness manifests itself as those haunting representations presented above evoking the detrimental consequences of disposal and consumption practices on the environment. And as the findings testify, these representations underlie the basic intentional structure of sustainable consumption practices, which are indeed aimed at avoiding environmental destruction.

The findings of this PhD study further indicate that this ecological imaginary also underlies the emergence of a new social logic, a new principle of social organization, which challenges the logic of unlimited expansion that characterizes modern capitalist society (Castoriadis, 1981): the logic of self-limitation. This countervailing logic comes especially to the fore in Article 3 (but Article 1 and 2 show traces of it) as the guiding principle underlying consumer ethical subjectivation work. As discussed in the paper, the ultimate aim of this work is indeed not to empower

the self through consumption (as it would be under the tenets of the capitalist expansion logic); but to limit one's consumer power not simply over a (generic) Other (cf. Foucault, 1984b), but over the entire Earth ecosystem. In this sense, the self-limitation logic underlies the ethics of individual responsibility identified by Article 3; but at the same time, it builds upon a new awareness of a more general human responsibility towards the planet, which is evoked by this new collective consciousness which is the ecological imaginary.

These insights open new paths for CCT research. In particular, the ecological imaginary and related self-limitation logic invite CCT and, more in general, social sciences scholars to reconsider the question of (consumer) autonomy that (post)structuralist approaches have regrettably put aside as an Enlightenment fantasy. As argued by Article 4, the development and further spread of a self-limitation logic is indeed based upon the recognition not only of human responsibility, but also of its autonomy. In this case, "autonomy" defines not the capacity to act freely from external influences (Wertenbroch et al., 2020), but rather the capacity to explicitly and deliberately institute, question and modify one's laws of government (Castoriadis, 1997). In this light, the ethical subjectivation work performed by consumers in

Article 3 can be seen as an attempt to develop individual autonomy by reclaiming control over the drives governing their consumption practices. While this attempt to autonomy (as many others) may be partial and incomplete, this is because individuals are 'total fragments' (Castoriadis, 2016) of society and, as such, they cannot exist outside the social imaginaries and logics that define it. This is why we need (consumer culture) researchers to investigate the question of we might develop individual and collective autonomy at a more systemic level. And suggested by Article 4, researchers may do that by helping unleash the creative potential of the human imagination and enlarge those 'cracks' (Holloway, 2010) in the capitalist social imaginary that point at alternative logics of social order.

Concluding remarks

The findings discussed above comes with limitations and contextual restrictions. First, it should be noted that although I have spoken throughout the dissertation of the social imaginary of disposition in *modern consumer society*, the empirical studies of this PhD were conducted in Denmark. While the peculiarity of Denmark as a socio-historical, and thereby political context remains regrettably unacknowledged in Article 1 and 2, it

emerges clearly in Article 3. For this reason, similar studies conducted in other capitalist economies are likely to highlight slightly different, context-specific results. Second, I would like to point out a methodological consideration that remains regrettably unacknowledged in Article 3, where an overwhelming majority of the study participants were women. Although addressing the influence of gender dynamics on disposal and ethical consumption practices was not the aim of the article, gender is one of the most fundamental socio-historical structures of civilization. As such, it is likely that the informants' gender influences the ideological foundations of the self-limitation process and logic identified by the study. Third, there is a limitation concerning the diversity of theoretical discussions addressed by the individual papers. While this is not a limitation per se, it did inhibit a sharper theoretical and analytical account of the social imaginary structures informing disposal. In particular, I take notice of the fact that Article 1 and Article 2 are focused more on individual experiences and less on the broader social structuring of disposition. However, as argued in the previous pages, their findings do point at the influence of some collective representations on these experiences, thereby

illustrating the mutually constitutive relation existing between psychical and social structures (Castoriadis, 2007)

Finally, the findings of this PhD study also point to some practical implications that can help policy makers and organizations facilitate the spread of waste prevention principles[22]. A first set of practical implications stems from the observation that consumer disposal of everyday objects is essentially triggered by the future. Hence, to encourage consumers to dispose of their things through disposal channels that promote object recycling and recirculation, public policies, second-hand stores, and charity organizations could focus on raising awareness of the value that consumers discarded objects may have for someone or something else in the future. As the findings above demonstrate, indeed, objects remain sometimes stuck in closets or get dumped because consumers are not able to imagine a desirable future for them. Institutional and market actors could then stimulate consumer imagination by suggesting some future narratives to guide consumer disposal of objects.

---

[22] In all honesty, I feel this dissertation did not live up to the (quasi) promise of fundamentally solving the problem of waste made in the introductory chapter. The (socially-constructed) truth is that waste is a very wicked issue that cannot be solved by employing a single (theoretical) perspective.

Advertisement and information campaigns (possibly enhanced by the use of application technologies) could be used to this end. But in capitalist societies, the best way to communicate value and, thereby, a potential future[23] remains (alas!) money. Setting a price on discarded objects would then help consumers recognize the possibility of a future for these objects. Furthermore, to the end of enhancing consumer imagination, policy interventions should focus on cultivating consumers' creative consumption skills, such as the making and repairing of objects. The findings of this PhD indicate indeed that these skills foster individuals' ability to visualize alternative valuable futures for their objects. In this regard, public institutions could offer courses aimed at teaching specific crafts (e.g. cooking, woodworking, sewing, etc.), while at the same time facilitate the creation of (online and offline) community spaces that stimulate peer-to-peer learning. As the findings indicate (see especially Article 3), these spaces support the circulation of (practical as well as abstract) ideas, fostering reflexivity and imagination.

---

[23] See section 'Moving (from space) to the futures of disposal (and beyond)' above.

A second set of practical implications concerns the ecological imaginary and related self-limitation logic identified by the present research. The findings above suggest namely that a consistent reduction of global waste levels only can occur if we embrace a self-limitation logic as *basic principle of social organization.* This is because – in contrast to the dominant logic of unlimited (economic) expansion, which is irredeemably related to waste generation (Packard, 1961) – self-limitation aims at restraining the impact (and therewith waste) of our consumption practices on the environment. Yet until it remains only the fancy of few privileged individuals, who moreover exist in a world dominated by the unlimited expansion logic, self-limitation will have little to no effect on global waste levels. Therefore, decision-makers should enable structural changes that facilitate the establishment of self-limitation as the dominant principle of social organization. And since as discussed above self-limitation depends on the development of individual and collective autonomy, these structural changes should aim at creating a more autonomous society. While offering specific suggestions on how to do this is an enormously complex undertaking (which elude the scope and insights of this dissertation), I shall here try to provide a picture of what an autonomous society could look like:

- Prosperity and richness of the natural ecosystem will be the goal of society, instead of economic growth. Accordingly, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) will not be the benchmark for a nation's success; its Grand Natural Product (or something along those lines) will.

- In a society where economic growth is not the goal, global production systems are unnecessary. Networks of small businesses and communities will gather to local needs through the employment of local resources. The limited size and scope of businesses will also decrease the need for labor. Unproductive free time (where people are able to pursue their passion) will be a key feature of a self-limiting society.

- The local focus means also that communities should will able to decide for themselves what problems must be solved and how they should be solved. Accordingly, governments will be decentralized, democracy will be direct (instead of representative), and community members will participate more actively in the administration of local affairs.

These are just general directions towards an alternative, less wasteful social order. Within the modern capitalist realist (Fisher, 2009) social imaginary, they may seem nothing more than an unrealizable utopia (or dystopia, depending on the reader's point of view). However, I think it is important to remember that there is nothing given, nor determinate about the current social order because we, as society, make our own laws (Castoriadis, 1997). As the American sci-fi author Ursula Le Guin (2014) once said:

> 'We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art, the art of words'.

It is my hope, then, that the words of this dissertation have sowed some seeds of change.

References

Ahlberg O, Coffin J and Hietanen J (2022) Bleak signs of our times: Descent into 'Terminal Marketing'. *Marketing Theory*. DOI: 10.1177/14705931221095604.

Appadurai A (1988) *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective.* Cambridge University Press.

Arnould EJ (2014) Rudiments of a value praxeology. *Marketing Theory* 14(1): 129-133.

Bajde D (2012) Mapping the imaginary of charitable giving. *Consumption Markets & Culture* 15(4): 358-373.

Bajde D and Rojas P (2021) Creating Responsible Subjects: The Role of Mediated Affective Encounters. *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Beckert J (2016) *Imagined futures: Fictional expectations and capitalist dynamics.* Harvard University Press.

Belk RW, Ger G and Askegaard S (2003) The fire of desire: A multisited inquiry into consumer passion. *Journal of Consumer Research* 30(3): 326-351.

Cappellini B (2009) The sacrifice of re-use: the travels of leftovers and family relations. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 8(6): 365-375.

Cappellini B and Parsons E (2012) Practising Thrift at Dinnertime: Mealtime Leftovers, Sacrifice and Family Membership. *The Sociological Review* 60(2_suppl): 121-134.

Castoriadis C (1981) From ecology to autonomy. *Thesis eleven* 3(1): 8-22.

Castoriadis C (1987) *The imaginary institution of society.* Mit Press.

Castoriadis C (1997) *World in fragments: Writings on politics, society, psychoanalysis, and the imagination.* Stanford University Press.

Castoriadis C (2007) *Figures of the Thinkable.* Stanford University Press.

Castoriadis C (2016) Radical imagination and the social instituting imaginary. *Rethinking imagination*. Routledge, pp.136-154.

Cherrier H and Ponnor T (2010) A study of hoarding behavior and attachment to material possessions. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* 13(1): 8-23.

Cherrier H and Türe M (2020) Value dynamics in ordinary object disposal. *Journal of Business Research* 116: 221-228.

Coskuner-Balli G (2020) Citizen-consumers wanted: Revitalizing the American dream in the face of economic recessions, 1981–2012. *Journal of Consumer Research* 47(3): 327-349.

Curasi CF, Price LL and Arnould EJ (2004) How individuals' cherished possessions become families' inalienable wealth. *Journal of Consumer Research* 31(3): 609-622.

Denegri-Knott J and Molesworth M (2009) "I'll sell this and I'll buy them that" : eBay and the management of possessions as stock. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 8(6): 305-315.

Eden S (2017) Blurring the boundaries: Prosumption, circularity and online sustainable consumption through Freecycle. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 17(2): 265-285.

Figueiredo B and Scaraboto D (2016) The systemic creation of value through circulation in collaborative consumer networks. *Journal of Consumer Research* 43(4): 509-533.

Fisher M (2009) *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?* : John Hunt Publishing.

Foucault M (1984a) *Histoire de la sexualité II: L'usage des plaisirs.* Éditions Gallimard.

Foucault M (1984b) *Histoire de la sexualité III: Le souci de soi.* Éditions Gallimard.

Giesler M and Veresiu E (2014) Creating the Responsible Consumer: Moralistic Governance Regimes and Consumer Subjectivity. *Journal of Consumer Research* 41(3): 840-857.

Gollnhofer JF, Weijo HA and Schouten JW (2019) Consumer Movements and Value Regimes: Fighting Food Waste in Germany by Building Alternative Object Pathways. *Journal of Consumer Research* 46(3): 460-482.

Graeber D (2001) *Toward an anthropological theory of value: The false coin of our own dreams.* Springer.

Guillard V and Roux D (2014) Macromarketing Issues on the Sidewalk: How "Gleaners" and "Disposers" (Re)Create a Sustainable Economy. *Journal of Macromarketing* 34(3): 291-312.

Hetherington K (2004) Secondhandedness: Consumption, Disposal, and Absent Presence. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 22(1): 157-173.

Hirschman EC, Ruvio A and Belk RW (2012) Exploring space and place in marketing research. *Marketing Theory* 12(4): 369-389.

Holloway J (2010) *Crack capitalism.* Pluto Press London.

Izberk-Bilgin E (2012) Infidel brands: Unveiling alternative meanings of global brands at the nexus of globalization, consumer culture, and Islamism. *Journal of Consumer Research* 39(4): 663-687.

Karababa E and Ger G (2011) Early Modern Ottoman Coffeehouse Culture and the Formation of the Consumer Subject. *Journal of Consumer Research* 37(5): 737-760.

Karmini N and Ibrahim A (2019) Indonesia to send 'contaminated' waste back to West. *Independent*, 18 September 2019.

Kozinets RV and Handelman JM (2004) Adversaries of consumption: Consumer movements, activism, and ideology. *Journal of Consumer Research* 31(3): 691-704.

Larsen M (2021) The Lutheran Imaginary That Underpins Social Democracy. *Front Psychol* 12: 746406.

Lastovicka JL and Fernandez KV (2005) Three paths to disposition: The movement of meaningful possessions to strangers. *Journal of Consumer Research* 31(4): 813-823.

Le Guin UK (2014) Speech in Acceptance of the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.

McAlexander JH, Dufault BL, Martin DM, et al. (2014) The
        marketization of religion: Field, Capital, and consumer
        identity. *Journal of Consumer Research* 41(3): 858-875.

Mellander E and Petersson McIntyre M (2021) Fashionable
        detachments: wardrobes, bodies and the desire to let go.
        Consumption Markets and Culture 24(4): 343-356.

Muñiz AM, Jr. and Schau HJ (2005) Religiosity in the Abandoned
        Apple Newton Brand Community. *Journal of Consumer
        Research* 31(4): 737-747.

Packard V (1961) *The waste makers.* London: Longmans.

Parsons L (2007) Thompson's rubbish theory: exploring the practices
        of value creation. *ACR European Advances*.

Price LL, Arnould EJ and Curasi CF (2000) Older consumers'
        disposition of special possessions. *Journal of Consumer
        Research* 27(2): 179-201.

Richins ML (1994) Valuing things: The public and private meanings
        of possessions. *Journal of Consumer Research* 21(3): 504-
        521.

Roux D, Guillard V and Blanchet V (2018) Of counter spaces of
        provisioning: Reframing the sidewalk as a parasite
        heterotopia. *Marketing Theory* 18(2): 218-233.

Saatcioglu B and Ozanne JL (2013) Moral habitus and status
        negotiation in a marginalized working-class neighborhood.
        Journal of Consumer Research 40(4): 692-710.

Sandikci Ö and Ger G (2010) Veiling in Style: How Does a Stigmatized Practice Become Fashionable? *Journal of Consumer Research* 37(1): 15-36.

Taylor C (2004) *Modern social imaginaries.* Duke University Press.

Türe M (2014) Value-in-disposition Exploring how consumers derive value from disposition of possessions. *Marketing Theory* 14(1): 53-72.

Veresiu E and Giesler M (2018) Beyond acculturation: Multiculturalism and the institutional shaping of an ethnic consumer subject. *Journal of Consumer Research* 45(3): 553-570.

Wertenbroch K, Schrift RY, Alba JW, et al. (2020) Autonomy in consumer choice. *Mark Lett*. Epub ahead of print 2020/08/25. DOI: 10.1007/s11002-020-09521-z. 1-11.

Co-author statements

Please find attached in the following pages the co-author statements for Article 1 (Chapter 4) and Article 2 (Chapter 5).

Declaration of co-authorship*

Full name of the PhD student: Cristiano Smaniotto

This declaration concerns the following article/manuscript:

Title:	How the dead storage of consumer electronics creates consumer value
Authors:	Mikkel Nøjgaard, Cristiano Smaniotto, Søren Askegaard, Ciprian Cimpan, Dmitry Zhilyaev, Henrik Wenzel

The article/manuscript is: Published X Accepted ☒ Submitted ☐ In preparation ☐

If published, state full reference: Nøjgaard, M., Smaniotto, C., Askegaard, S., Cimpan, C., Zhilyaev, D., & Wenzel, H. (2020). How the Dead Storage of Consumer Electronics Creates Consumer Value. *Sustainability*, *12*(14), 5552

If accepted or submitted, state journal: Sustainability

Has the article/manuscript previously been used in other PhD or doctoral dissertations?

No X Yes ☐ If yes, give details:

The PhD student has contributed to the elements of this article/manuscript as follows:
- A.   Has essentially done all the work
- B.   Major contribution
- C.   Equal contribution
- D.   Minor contribution
- E.   Not relevant

Element	Extent (A-E)
1. Formulation/identification of the scientific problem	D
2. Planning of the experiments/methodology design and development	C
3. Involvement in the experimental work/clinical studies/data collection	B
4. Interpretation of the results	B
5. Writing of the first draft of the manuscript	B
6. Finalization of the manuscript and submission	D

Signatures of the co-authors

Date	Name	Signature
15-08-2022	Mikkel Nøjgaard	*Mikkel Nøjgaard*

In case of further co-authors please attach appendix

Date: 29/08/2022

_____

*As per policy the co-author statement will be published with the dissertation.

AARHUS BSS | **SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**
AARHUS UNIVERSITY

Declaration of co-authorship[*]

Full name of the PhD student: Cristiano Smaniotto

This declaration concerns the following article/manuscript:

Title:	How the dead storage of consumer electronics creates consumer value
Authors:	Mikkel Nøjgaard, Cristiano Smaniotto, Søren Askegaard, Ciprian Cimpan, Dmitry Zhilyaev, Henrik Wenzel

The article/manuscript is: Published ☒ Accepted ☐ Submitted ☐ In preparation ☐

If published, state full reference: Nøjgaard, M., Smaniotto, C., Askegaard, S., Cimpan, C., Zhilyaev, D., & Wenzel, H. (2020). How the Dead Storage of Consumer Electronics Creates Consumer Value. *Sustainability*, *12*(14), 5552

If accepted or submitted, state journal:

Has the article/manuscript previously been used in other PhD or doctoral dissertations?

No ☒ Yes ☐ If yes, give details:

The PhD student has contributed to the elements of this article/manuscript as follows:
- A. Has essentially done all the work
- B. Major contribution
- C. Equal contribution
- D. Minor contribution
- E. Not relevant

Element	Extent (A-E)
1. Formulation/identification of the scientific problem	D
2. Planning of the experiments/methodology design and development	C
3. Involvement in the experimental work/clinical studies/data collection	B
4. Interpretation of the results	B
5. Writing of the first draft of the manuscript	B
6. Finalization of the manuscript and submission	D

Signatures of the co-authors

Date	Name	Signature
16.08.22	Søren Askegaard	

In case of further co-authors please attach appendix

Date: 29/08/2022

*As per policy the co-author statement will be published with the dissertation.

Declaration of co-authorship[*]

Full name of the PhD student: Cristiano Smaniotto

This declaration concerns the following article/manuscript:

Title:	How the dead storage of consumer electronics creates consumer value
Authors:	Mikkel Nøjgaard, Cristiano Smaniotto, Søren Askegaard, Ciprian Cimpan, Dmitry Zhilyaev, Henrik Wenzel

The article/manuscript is: Published X Accepted ☐ Submitted ☐ In preparation ☐

If published, state full reference: Nøjgaard, M., Smaniotto, C., Askegaard, S., Cimpan, C., Zhilyaev, D., & Wenzel, H. (2020). How the Dead Storage of Consumer Electronics Creates Consumer Value. *Sustainability*, *12*(14), 5552

If accepted or submitted, state journal:

Has the article/manuscript previously been used in other PhD or doctoral dissertations?
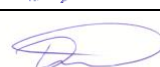
No X Yes ☐ If yes, give details:

The PhD student has contributed to the elements of this article/manuscript as follows:
- A.   Has essentially done all the work
- B.   Major contribution
- C.   Equal contribution
- D.   Minor contribution
- E.   Not relevant

Element	Extent (A-E)
1. Formulation/identification of the scientific problem	D
2. Planning of the experiments/methodology design and development	C
3. Involvement in the experimental work/clinical studies/data collection	B
4. Interpretation of the results	B
5. Writing of the first draft of the manuscript	B
6. Finalization of the manuscript and submission	D

Signatures of the co-authors

Date	Name	Signature
15-08-22	Henrik Wenzel	
15-08-22	Ciprian Cimpan	
16-08-22	Dmitry Zhilyaev	

In case of further co-authors please attach appendix

Date: 29/08/2022

_____

*As per policy the co-author statement will be published with the dissertation.

Declaration of co-authorship*

Full name of the PhD student: Cristiano Smaniotto

This declaration concerns the following article/manuscript:

Title:	Back from the future: How fictional expectations affect consumer valuation and disposition of objects
Authors:	Cristiano Smaniotto, Jean-Paul Peronard, Anne Gammelgaard Ballantyne

The article/manuscript is: Published ☐ Accepted ☐ Submitted ☐ In preparation X

If published, state full reference: -

If accepted or submitted, state journal: -

Has the article/manuscript previously been used in other PhD or doctoral dissertations?

No X Yes ☐ If yes, give details: -

The PhD student has contributed to the elements of this article/manuscript as follows:
A. Has essentially done all the work
B. Major contribution
C. Equal contribution
D. Minor contribution
E. Not relevant

Element	Extent (A-E)
1. Formulation/identification of the scientific problem	B
2. Planning of the experiments/methodology design and development	C
3. Involvement in the experimental work/clinical studies/data collection	C
4. Interpretation of the results	A
5. Writing of the first draft of the manuscript	A
6. Finalization of the manuscript and submission	B

Signatures of the co-authors

Date	Name	Signature
24/8-2022	Anne Gammelgaard Ballantyne	*Anne Gammelgaard Ballantyne*
24/8-'22	JEAN-PAUL PERONARD	*[signature]*

In case of further co-authors please attach appendix

Date: 29/08/2022

_____
Signature of the PhD student

*As per policy the co-author statement will be published with the dissertation.