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CONVERSATION

# Future directions for sustainable consumption research and action

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This article identifies ten priorities for future sustainable consumption research and action, prioritising questions of (in)justice. It emerged from a series of interdisciplinary exchanges between sustainable consumption scholars from across Europe, reflecting their expert perspectives and research practices.

**Keywords** sustainable consumption • future directions • research • action

**Key messages**

- This article identifies ten priorities for future sustainable consumption research and action.
- Future sustainable consumption research and action must prioritise questions of (in)justice.
- Promising efforts exist to dispel myths about sustainable consumption.
- Sustainable consumption scholarship helps to advance sustainability debates, policies and practice.

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## Introduction: Reorienting sustainable consumption research and action

The journal *Consumption and Society* launched its inaugural year with a special issue on sustainable consumption (SC) as a contested, compelling and critical field of research and action, in which consumption is both an opportunity and a threat for addressing key societal challenges of the 21st century (Sahakian et al, 2022). In this Conversation, we draw from a collaborative process that included conversations and debates in the Sustainable Consumption and Action Initiative (SCORAI) Europe network, with a first workshop in 2024 (Brussels) and discussions continuing at the SCORAI Europe Conference (Lund) in 2025. Building on the expertise of SCORAI Europe members, we identify ten promising themes for future research and action from the perspective of scholars and practitioners based in Europe (Figure 1). This list of themes would not have emerged without the engagement of colleagues from various disciplines and interdisciplinary profiles.



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**Figure 1:** Future directions for SC research and action

| A. Improving knowledge: Understanding SC in all its complexity | B. Setting priorities: SC amid dynamics of constant change | C. Fostering change: Overcoming polarisation |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Making the invisible visible<br>2. Studying the understudied<br>3. Situations and relations<br>4. Going beyond GHG emissions | 5. Sufficiency: limits and wellbeing<br>6. Adaptation, not just mitigation<br>7. Digitalisation | 8. Challenging norms, centring justice<br>9. Disruption through experimentation<br>10. Novel forms of governance |

The main aim of this Conversation is to synthesise promising trends that offer credible alternatives to entrenched pathways for thinking about, and studying, consumption, building on recent efforts to dispel myths about SC (Mont, 2026), and to communicate the distinctive contributions of SC scholarship to broader sustainability and public debates. To do so, consumption must be treated as a collective phenomenon, which is always relational and subject to social norms and prescriptions. SC, therefore, cannot just be seen as the sole responsibility of individuals nor merely about correcting market prices (Evans, 2022; Maniates, 2025). Similarly, SC must not be reduced to technological silver-bullet solutions that ignore broader societal and political dynamics (Rau, 2018).

In a world of heightened populism, anti-green pushback and accelerating human-induced changes in Earth system dynamics, understanding consumption dynamics requires asking the right questions, drawing on the right knowledge and engaging with diverse actors to support positive change. We organise our reflections by focusing on three key issues, then prioritising ten future directions for research and action.

## Future directions: three areas – ten priorities

Our reflections are organised into three overall areas: improving and building upon existing knowledge (future direction points 1–4); identifying key priority areas (5–7); and fostering social change (8–10).

### *Improving knowledge: understanding sustainable consumption in all its complexity*

Much SC research to date has dealt with specific domains (for example, energy, mobility, food, housing), reflecting both scholars' own priorities and funding opportunities, as well as how the public and private sectors tend to be organised.



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This has produced a vast array of studies that excel at advancing SC knowledge on specific topics, without always addressing big-picture, systemic issues that span multiple sectors and scales (for a notable exception, see Freudendal-Pedersen et al, 2026). For example, much SC research on housing/dwelling has tended to disregard mobility, and vice versa, with notable exceptions. This is problematic, given that residential (re)location and mobility practices are inextricably intertwined.

A strong focus on (over)consumption in highly developed countries in the so-called Global North has eclipsed consumption-related problems elsewhere in the world. A recent research article in *Consumption and Society* acknowledges the variety and richness of approaches across the so-called Global South and presents promising new topics throughout the region (Ariztia et al, 2026). Even within the Global North, gaps exist regarding the SC research landscape. For example, past, current and future consumption in former Eastern Bloc countries remains under-researched (Smith and Jehlička, 2013). Further knowledge is necessary in the following three areas:

*Making the invisible visible*

Manifestations of 'silent' or 'quiet' sustainability, that is, barely visible, non-performative or invisible SC practices that people routinely engage in, have yet to receive adequate attention (Lavelle et al, 2015). Examples include largely taken-for-granted, gendered care and repair work and deliberate acts of non-consumption, making 'silent' sustainability both a question of performativity and of values that are not necessarily 'green', but contribute to more sustainable outcomes. In fact, non-performative variants of SC can be rendered invisible by dominant perceptions of SC, posing the question, what or who gets to be seen and studied as 'green' (Anantharaman, 2022)? Consequently, more research is needed on inconspicuous and invisible SC practices that may or may not be motivated by individual and shared values and concerns. Invisible acts of SC may also be practised by those who distance themselves from the SC agenda and the associated political views, but who still find them worthy for different reasons (Smith and Jehlička, 2013). A better understanding of the forms of SC that emerge out of necessity is also needed to avoid promoting further precariousness, social exclusion or geo-spatial marginalisation. Future social scientific and interdisciplinary research needs to make invisible SC practices more visible, offering insights into how they can be adequately recognised, enhanced, enabled, or at least upheld and protected by adequate policies.

A methodological preference for inquiries into daily practices that can be easily measured and described by those who engage in them has also contributed to the marginalisation of silent/quiet SC practices and those who engage in them. This has often coincided with an overemphasis on conceptual and methodological individualism, to the detriment of concepts and methods that focus on relational aspects of consumption and collective action. Measuring what is not visible thus requires methodological innovation, including group-based methods and observational, unobtrusive and 'big data' approaches, all of which can contribute to insightful mixed-methods SC research. High transformation potential exists when 'silent' SC practices are made visible, with the view to increasing their uptake.

*Studying the understudied*

Research on (un)sustainable consumption in non-Western, Global South contexts is rising (Ariztia et al, 2026), drawing attention to the socio-cultural and



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political embeddedness of consumption, and demonstrating the need for context-sensitive theorising and empirical work. Still, certain regions of the world remain underrepresented, such as the African continent. It is of key importance to understand the contemporary dynamics of consumption in countries with different political, economic, social, structural and environmental settings – notably in places where incomes are low or volatile, or political tensions arise – to capture and comprehend global trends. Studying the understudied can help avoid the pitfall of unreflexively applying coloniser-centred knowledge to former (or even current) neo-colonial contexts. This builds on calls to engage with a 'pluriverse' ontology, one of multiple, coexisting ways of being, knowing and organising human–nature relations, rather than a single universal model of reality or development (Demaria et al, 2023). Studying how consumption plays out in locally variegated ways also requires understanding interdependencies that span the globe: what also remains understudied are the often-globalised systems of provision that make some forms of consumption more sustainable than others, and in which some forms of labour and resource use are more visible or invisible than others – notably care work and informal work. A growing body of research is interested in the dynamics of the super-rich; such a line of inquiry merits being expanded, recognising the key role of elites in (un)sustainable consumption in both Global North and 'majority South' settings. In addition to revenue, an intersectional lens implies considering the role of gender and age in any sustainable consumption effort, along with other dimensions such as rural/urban divides, tenant/landowner differences, among others.

*Situations and relations*

SC research should be relational, in that it serves to uncover interdependencies and human and more-than-human interactions that unfold at different geographical scales and levels of social organisation. It should also remain situated, with multi-scalar investigations of power dynamics and lock-in effects, using the 'local' as a starting point for inquiries into points of intervention. At the same time, future SC politics also need to better understand and target interactions between different levels of decision-making, from the city-region and rural regions to spaces that are decentred from the Global North to the United Nations, other supra-national organisations as well as non-governmental actors that operate at different scales.

Studies of collective SC efforts 'from below' are thriving, covering the creation of local energy communities and the revival of the cooperative movement across different sectors, among many other topics. Such research aptly demonstrates how knowledge can be both scientifically valuable and relevant to practitioners, particularly in transdisciplinary settings where researchers co-design projects and co-generate knowledge with non-scientific experts. Many areas of SC, such as food, mobility and housing, could also be served by highlighting bottom-up SC initiatives that have delivered real benefits to citizens and communities, even when they are not framed as 'sustainability' initiatives. Further, research might focus less on 'end of pipe' consumption – focused solely on the usage phase – and give more attention to systems of provision (Fine and Bayliss, 2022) that would render 'sustainable consumption' a default position for many, rather than a choice for a fortunate few.

Rendering promising initiatives more visible, regardless of their political leanings, will help research act as a bridge in polarised debates. Admittedly, this will not be



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a smooth process: all social relations imply some form of tension, which can be an opportunity for deliberation and change. Accompanying any form of change with support from the social sciences and the humanities is necessary: technological change cannot be understood without a relational and situated approach.

*Going beyond greenhouse gas emissions*

In Europe, much of the funding for research on sustainable consumption has focused on the energy transition and the need to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, eclipsing social, ecological and economic dilemmas that require attention. Other planetary boundaries have already been crossed, such as biosphere integrity and biogeochemical flows. Understanding how these dilemmas interrelate is paramount: biodiversity loss and greenhouse gas emissions must be understood together; migration must be linked to climate change and colonialist resource extraction. Further 'impacts' are also central, including growing inequalities. The socially exclusionary nature of much of the elite-driven 'performative environmentalism' (Anantharaman, 2022) that prioritises and rewards costly and resource-intensive technological changes to lower GHG emissions exemplifies this problem. It is as important as ever to understand the complexity of unintended rebound and backfire effects (Greene et al, 2025). Moving beyond GHG emissions to capture other social, ecological and material aspects of (over)consumption thus seems vitally important. The mounting problem of microplastics, driven by rampant global consumption of single-use plastics, among others, underscores the urgent need to avoid or at least reduce certain forms of pollution, preferably upstream. Other social and material consequences of overconsumption – including labour rights, care burdens, toxic exposure, resource extraction and waste colonialism – should also be treated as central rather than secondary. Circularity strategies to eliminate or reduce waste are only as effective as the societal and institutional settings in which they are embedded, again reinforcing the role of social science and humanities (Moreau et al, 2017; Greene and Hobson, 2025).

## *Setting priorities: sustainable consumption amid dynamics of constant change*

Consumption scholars must always grapple with defining research foci and setting the boundaries of their inquiry; seeing consumption as 'a societal phenomenon begets social rather than economistic or individualistic explanations', as Evans' (2022: 238) commentary in the inaugural issue of *Consumption and Society* suggests. This presents new opportunities and challenges at a time when taken-for-granted assumptions about societal dynamics are being fundamentally contested, from the borders of nation-states, power concentration with big tech companies, and the effectiveness of existing systems of democratic governance, to more reflexive questions such as how knowledge is generated and how access to knowledge is controlled. What deserves to be questioned is a vision of prosperity that equates material consumption with 'proper' societal development, as popularised by the United States in the postwar era (that is, Rostow's highly critiqued stages of growth). Contesting the notion that societal progress is only made possible through an excessive use of energy, materials and land remains a work in progress in SC scholarship and practice. Today, consumption studies must grapple in earnest with the following priority themes for future research:



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*Sufficiency: limits and wellbeing*

Sufficiency is an emerging field of research and action, often defined as prioritising the absolute reduction and avoidance of resource-intensive consumption and production, while achieving equal or increased wellbeing for people. Sufficiency serves as an organising principle for a society in which limits and wellbeing feature prominently. A research agenda is emerging around sufficiency in the Global South, recognising the ways in which excessive consumption among elites also relies on insufficiency elsewhere (Zhan et al, in press).

One way of operationalising sufficiency has been through the concept of Consumption Corridors (CCs; Fuchs et al, 2021), whereby upper and lower limits to consumption are set through societal agreement, and within which human needs are satisfied. This research agenda has led to a growing literature around CCs, as well as more practitioner-oriented discussions. There are clear win-wins: for example, human needs for more people can be satisfied by making cities more liveable, and reductions in meat consumption also result in better health outcomes. But there are also tensions, whereby satisfying needs must be negotiated; those who satisfy their needs by overconsuming will not easily be compelled to reduce their consumption, and these same social groups often have the power to maintain the status quo. How can the 'avoid', or the reduction of unnecessary demand, in the 'avoid-shift-improve' framework come to be understood not as a restriction, but as a fundamental aspect of a just society, and a source of individual and collective gains (that is, in meeting human needs for all people, now and in the future)?

While CCs take consumption as the starting point, the intention is to consider systems of provisions that shape consumption. Sufficiency, and the cognate concept of CCs, are ultimately oriented towards justice: how to achieve human wellbeing for all people, living now and in the future, within limits, while considering who is included or excluded from such corridors, but also who is represented or not, or who participated or not, in defining them. What is missing from sufficiency and work on CCs is an explicit recognition that human needs cannot be dissociated from the needs of *all* living beings, thus necessitating a de-centring of wellbeing to consider nature not only as a 'satisfier of needs' but as the object of any strategy devised to ensure wellbeing for all.

*Adaptation, not just mitigation*

Societies might set goals, such as reducing biodiversity loss or carbon emissions, but all people are currently living in increasingly resource-constrained societies, beyond ecosystem stability and micro-climate predictability. In addition to mitigation measures, better understanding and supporting adaptation is increasingly necessary, through research and action agendas. As climate and ecological disruptions become a defining condition rather than a future risk, understanding how societies can adapt justly, collectively and within planetary boundaries will be as important as reducing environmental impacts in the first place. Learnings can be gleaned from prior research in SC: regions of the world that have no prior experience with sustained periods of extreme heat will need to find ways to cope, but solutions cannot be left to individuals. (Infra)structural and institutional changes are required, including heat-proof housing, universally accessible green and blue spaces, and flexible work and school hours, among other socio-technical changes. More SC research and action are needed to better prepare people and societies for disruptions to supply chains and



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systems of provision, including extreme weather events such as floods, storms and heat waves; lack of access to water; rising fuel prices; pandemics; conflicts; and other challenges. The capacity to adapt raises questions about vulnerability, resilience and about how some populations are better equipped than others to cope with change. Further work is also needed on how procedural and distributive justice concerns intersect with recognition justice in relation to adaptation policies and associated changes in consumption (for example, water rationing, dietary shifts, relocation, among others). This calls for research-led reflections on what novel measurements and indicators are required to capture just forms of adaptive consumption, incorporating equity and resilience as key considerations.

*Digitalisation*

The role of digitalisation in promoting SC remains ambiguous. While sharing and second-hand trading have been greatly aided by online marketplaces and platforms, consumption of first-hand products has also rapidly grown, drastically reducing any circularity gains from second-hand purchases. Efficiency gains from dematerialised consumption and digitalised processes are also undermined by the rebound effect, which increases aggregate consumption. Importantly, the provision of digital infrastructure for AI or cryptocurrencies (for example, data centres) has driven up demand for energy, water and land while also bringing forward significant shifts in the labour market, particularly threatening the creative industries and other areas where 'efficiency' leads to higher layoff rates. The need to reclaim digital tools and infrastructure to serve sustainability purposes thus seems to be urgent. Complementing debates on the environmental impacts of digitalisation, a consumption-oriented research agenda could initiate and support deliberations around what digital technologies are being used for, why they are useful or not, and who stands to gain or lose from their use. The arrival of AI is already causing divergent reactions, from rapid uptake to outright resistance, with potentially wide-ranging impacts on consumption mainly due to data harvesting, targeted advertising, inadequate regulations and, from the consumer side, very little digital literacy. A situated approach is necessary to uncover questions at the intersection of moral (dis)engagement, consumption dynamics, consumer agency, collective action and market mechanisms, with an urgent need to engage in 'digital sufficiency'.

### *Fostering change: overcoming polarisation*

Sustainable consumption research has grown steadily in the past decades, drawing together a community of scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. While the A for 'action' has always been a part of the SCORAI acronym, concrete ideas to support change initiatives are not always readily available. If our community agrees that assumptions around individual behaviour change are flawed, and more information will not automatically close the knowledge–action gap, then what more should be done to bring about societal change – beyond publishing scientific articles, or issuing press releases or policy briefs? Three ways forward are discussed further next: promoting new norms and aspirations, using experimentation to demonstrate alternative consumption futures, and forging what Eckhardt von Hirschhausen (2025) called 'weird alliances', moving beyond the 'usual suspects' when it comes to forging partnerships and collaborations around the remit of 'sustainable consumption'. The last



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point seems particularly pertinent, given that populist forces have already succeeded in reframing sustainability as an agenda of left-liberal elites that disadvantages the less privileged, leading to an anti-green rollback of SC gains made in recent decades. In particular, efforts to change the energy system, from fossil fuel dependence to renewables, are increasingly undermined by fossil fuel lobbyism in politics and society. This section focuses on what needs to be accounted for in supporting change for a social-ecological transformation:

*Challenging norms, centring justice*

Changing infrastructure, shaping policies, or introducing new products and services are common ways to support SC. However, more attention needs to be paid to the underlying aspirations and normative assumptions that accompany any proposed change: for example, social norms may not be as visible as a bike lane or a highway, but they are equally important to how mobility practices unfold. The norms of affluent consumption are sustained by power devices, including public policy instruments, business models and marketing technologies (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2022). Deeply rooted views of the good life that promote (over)consumption or foster expectations of material and energy abundance as the end goal need to be challenged. One promising way forward is to prioritise questions of (in)justice. Making more explicit who stands to gain or to lose from any change initiative, and what is implicitly understood as 'good' or 'bad' when it comes to proposing such changes, can help draw explicit attention to issues of fairness and justice (for example, European schemes that reward those who are already better off for environmental 'grand gestures' such as investments in solar panels for their private property). Recognition, a key principle of justice, draws attention to the ways in which SC either marginalises or prioritises certain individuals over others.

Challenging established norms and aspirations is not enough. Credible and widely acceptable alternatives are needed. Placing health and wellbeing at the centre of any vision of the good life is a clear win-win, but other changes can have disruptive effects. For example, as taxes are collected based on labour productivity in many countries, calls for working time reductions to curb overconsumption and increase opportunities for community and care work challenge the redistribution system on which the welfare state is based. Centring justice also means recognising rebound effects that are not only tied to material and energy usage.

*Disruption through experimentation*

While academics may not be as comfortable designing for change as they are publishing research results, engaging in change initiatives can be a fruitful experience when they involve collaboration with other actors to address issues arising from community needs. The university is a starting point for implementing changes, with living labs as a promising method for such forms of experimentation. Working with diverse actors need not be solely focused on testing new products and services; such experiments can also challenge normative assumptions about the right way to consume, provide opportunities for non-consumption, or create spaces where new ideas and opportunities can emerge. Experiments may remain local in scale, but they can be amplified – for example, through media attention. Thus, the challenge is not societal 'acceptance' but engaging societal actors at the start of any process to co-create new knowledge and actions. Such spaces of experimentation must



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account for power dynamics and allow all people a voice, while recognising that any intervention can create power imbalances.

*Novel forms of governance*

Successful SC initiatives are contingent upon effective cooperation among different societal actors across politics, business and civil society, at least in liberal democracies, while recognising that conflict with incumbents who are not on board is inevitable (for example, the role of fossil fuel interests in the Global Plastics Treaty negotiations). Future SC governance efforts require new and perhaps 'weird alliances' (von Hirschhausen, 2025) to break deadlocks across all settings. Promising trends move beyond traditional political fault lines to bundle and amplify the efforts of diverse actors interested in sustainability, broadly understood to encompass health, wellbeing, social inclusion, inequality and environmental concerns. At the same time, new digital tools can be fruitfully deployed to open up conventional decision-making spaces to new actors, including non-governmental organizations and individual citizens. Citizen assemblies that issue binding recommendations on pressing SC topics, participatory budgeting initiatives to advance urban and rural sustainability measures, or the promotion of cooperatives in key sectors such as housing and mobility can offer innovative SC governance. The involvement of long-established, powerful actors such as trade unions, business associations and farmers' groups must remain a priority. Policy makers at different levels, from the local to the supranational, play a particularly important role in areas where systemic or infrastructural solutions need to be prioritised (for example, the EU-wide rail network or energy market). However, it is important to recognise the many non-democratic spaces where SC action is required and to reflect on how key actors in those spaces can be supported.

## Closing discussion

Advancing SC research requires new strategies to foster conceptual and methodological innovation and ensure continued relevance, particularly in times of political backlash and funding shortages. Producing research that is relevant and matters to those who care about SC (whether academics, activists or practitioners) requires a renewed interest in productive and practicable forms of inter- and transdisciplinarity, an openness to new topics and challenges (for example, AI, digitalisation) but, perhaps most importantly, a commitment towards confronting uncomfortable truths, including unkept promises of societal benefits from pro-environmental measures or past experiences of SC policies that served to reinforce rather than resolve patterns of marginalisation and injustice. Recent conceptual and empirical advancements in critical sustainability research (for example, degrowth/postgrowth; sufficiency; working-class environmentalism; circular society; eco-social welfare) could serve as catalysts for the creation of new strands of SC research in Europe and beyond.

Environmental transformation at a planetary scale is happening with or without our engagement, as academics and practitioners. A cross-cutting theme in this Conversation has been that of justice: transitions will be more just, depending on whether, and in what way, they are planned for and designed. While science is needed to understand what change is underway, more than ever, science-supported action is also needed to ensure that necessary change will not exacerbate inequalities.



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Questions of justice are key to understanding the current dynamics of unsustainable consumption, as well as to any form of sustainable change, as reflected in recent debates about upper and lower limits to consumption. And yet, even such a notion runs the risk of being subverted by fossil-fuel lobbyists who seek to stop or at least delay the socio-ecological transformation.

There are spaces where researchers can actively support more sustainable consumption. The classroom is one such space, as is the campus; these priority themes can be applied directly to our workplaces. But researchers are also people living in communities, and more engagement is needed between research, teaching and action, bridging divides and fostering 'weird alliances' towards lasting and sustainable change.

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