



## Review

# What influences consumption? Consumers and beyond: Purposes, contexts, agents and history



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## ABSTRACT

Consumption of goods and services is a complex phenomenon at the root of environmental problems, but it is still often framed in terms of individual behaviour, which can be related to a lack of wide cross-disciplinary explanations for consumption. To contribute to filling this gap, we conducted a literature review across ten disciplines. We provide a cross-disciplinary overview of what influences consumption, juxtaposing dominant with less-heard explanations for consumption and adding cross-disciplinary evidence to counter the view of consumption as a chiefly individual phenomenon. The resulting conceptual framework depicts consumption as influenced by three levels that undergo historical transformations: the micro level of consumers, purposes and products; the meso level of the direct context in which consumption takes place; and the macro level of societal contexts and agents. Future research should investigate which kinds of interactions between levels, agents and contexts can lead to minimising social and environmental impacts of consumption.

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## 1. Introduction

Consumption of goods and services, hereon referred to as consumption, is a key driver of global warming, climate change and environmental degradation, as energy and resources are needed for the phases of production, distribution, sale, use and disposal (Satterthwaite, 2009; Heiskanen and Pantzar, 1997; Liu et al., 2017). Producing more efficiently is a way of alleviating resource use, but it does not necessarily lead to an absolute reduction of resources, due to the rebound effect<sup>1</sup> (see Sorrell (2010) and Binswanger (2000)).

For these reasons, consumption is increasingly considered, both in academic literature and in the public discourse, as something that must be addressed and made “sustainable”. Sustainable consumption is a multidisciplinary research field (Middlemiss, 2018; Liu et al., 2017), but it is also a prescription for making (unsustainable) consumption sustainable. As a prescription, it implies a change in what is consumed (e.g. less environmentally harmful products, produced under better working conditions) and a reduction of consumption (Fuchs and Lorek, 2005).

As a research field, sustainable consumption is relatively young (since the 1990s) but multifaceted. One distinction made by Lorek and Vergragt (2015, p.20) is between “research on existing (often unsustainable) consumption patterns and practices, and studies reflecting the aspiration of sustainable consumption”. According to Middlemiss (2018, p.4–5), sustainable consumption, besides researching social and environmental impacts of consumption, and how to consume less and differently, involves “understanding the way in which high-consumption lifestyles are embedded in the

material, social, cultural and political world”, and asking questions such as “why do people consume the way they do?”

This last goal and question have been studied for decades by many disciplines, from economics and psychology to history and anthropology. However, cross-disciplinary reviews on consumption are rare. For Wilk (2002), “consumption is still a poorly understood phenomenon and the social, cultural, economic, and psychological variables that determine consumption have not been clearly identified”. Calls for cross-disciplinary research on consumption have already existed for a long time (Storkey, 1993; Heiskanen and Pantzar, 1997; Wilk, 2002), but they have been largely unheeded.

In this paper, we try to understand what influences consumption by taking the interdisciplinary stance that consumption is a complex phenomenon that cannot be fully explained by individual disciplines, as each discipline provides only partial accounts of reality (Szostak, 2007; Wilk, 2002). As Wilk (2002 p.8,9,12) emphasises, each theory on consumption “has something important to offer, and none can be rejected logically or empirically”, so it is better to take a broad, or “pragmatic pluralistic approach”, that does “not assume, a priori, what kinds of variables and what kinds of knowledge or data or analyses are going to be fruitful”. To understand what influences consumption in a more comprehensive way, we need to consider the multiple perspectives of a wide scope of disciplines. Doing so, can also help to tackle the dominance of narrow understandings of consumption, e.g. that consumption occurs mainly due to individual [consumer] actions, driven by selfishness and competition (see Chapter 5, “People are selfish” in Middlemiss, 2018).

Previous cross-disciplinary<sup>2</sup> works on consumption serve as a reference and inspiration for this paper (Miller, 1995; Jackson, 2005; Ilmonen et al., 2010; Preston et al., 2014). But, as

<sup>1</sup> Some authors would argue that reducing consumption might also have rebound effects (e.g. Alcott, 2008) as reduced consumption can lower prices and consequently lead to consumption elsewhere. This effect highlights the need to consider unintended consequences and the complex interrelations in consumer behaviour as well as in global socio-economic systems.

<sup>2</sup> With “cross-disciplinary”, we mean research that is conducted across different fields and that can be multi-disciplinary or interdisciplinary.

**Table 1**  
Previous cross-disciplinary works on consumption.

Disciplines or Fields	This Paper	Miller, 1995 "Acknowledging Consumption – a Review of New Studies"	Jackson 2005, "Motivating Sustainable Consumption, a review of evidence on consumer behaviour and behavioural change", reviewing models	Ilmonen et al., 2010, "A Social and Economic Theory of Consumption"	Preston et al., 2014, "The Interdisciplinary Science of Consumption"
Neurosciences	X				X
Animal Behaviour					X
Evolution					X
Psychology	X	X	X		X
Marketing/ Consumer Behaviour	X	X	X	X	
Economics	X			X	
Behaviour Economics	X		X	X	
Sociology	X	X	X	X	
Political Economy	X	X		X	
Anthropology	X	X	X	X	
Geography	X	X			
History	X	X			
Media Studies	X				
Behaviour Change			X		

represented in Table 1, they tend to focus on limited groups of disciplines (Preston et al., 2014), or on a certain theme (consumer behaviour in Jackson (2005)). Also, these works do not specifically focus on explanations for what influences consumption, but they describe all kinds of consumption research within each discipline (apart from Jackson (2005)). Generally, the knowledge from each discipline or field is presented in separate chapters, and all works lack an integrative section, i.e. an attempt at condensing the knowledge from all disciplines into one framework or narrative.

Other authors have drawn from different disciplines to provide an overview of what influences consumption (Thøgersen, 2014; Røpke, 1999; Wilk, 2002; Sanne, 2002; Middlemiss, 2018), but they did not explicitly conduct a cross-disciplinary review.

This paper reviewed theories and explanations for what influences consumption in the disciplines and fields indicated in Table 1. We found that there are four main themes that are addressed when explaining consumption:

1. Purposes fulfilled by consumption
2. Influences on consumer behaviour
3. Societal contexts and agents that influence consumption
4. Historical growth of consumption

These themes are addressed by many disciplines, although some disciplines focus more on one topic than others, e.g. marketing focuses predominantly on consumer behaviour, while history deals more with the evolution of consumption over time.

Our review serves different purposes: 1) providing an overview of the different disciplinary explanations on consumption to academics from different disciplines working on sustainable consumption; 2) juxtaposing dominant with less-heard explanations for consumption; and 3) contributing with cross-disciplinary evidence to counter the perspective of consumption as a mainly (selfish) individual phenomenon.

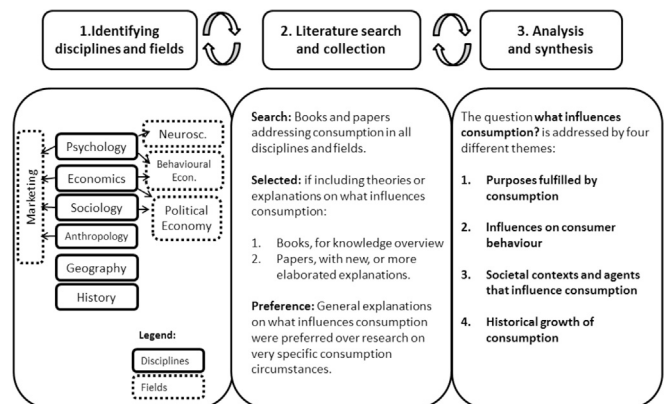
The set-up of the paper is as follows. Section 2 presents the review method. The results, structured around the four topics are presented in Section 3. This is followed by a presentation of a conceptual framework of what influences consumption (Section 4). Afterwards, we discuss and provide recommendations for future research (Section 5) and offer some conclusions (Section 6).

**2. Research methods**

An interdisciplinary literature review on theories and explanations for what influences consumption was conducted across disciplines to integrate different perspectives into a more nuanced understanding of consumption (Uiterkamp and Vlek, 2007). The steps of the review were inspired in grounded theory's (GT) constant comparison method as proposed by Wolfswinkel et al. (2013) for conducting rigorous literature reviews. The review followed the steps of 1) identification of disciplines and fields that address consumption, 2) search and collection of literature, and 3) analysis and synthesis of the literature. All steps were iterative, guided by the principle of theoretical sampling, i.e. the data collection was guided by the ideas arising from the data collected (Boeije, 2002). The three steps are represented in Fig. 1.

*2.1. Step 1: Defining scope and identifying disciplines and fields*

"Consumption" was seldom defined in the work that we reviewed, but we found that consumption seemed to imply the acts and processes of acquisition and (or) use of goods and services. Some of the reviewed authors focus more on the phase of acquisition, and others on the phase of use.



**Fig. 1.** Iterative steps of the research methods.

Disciplines and fields were selected if they presented theories or explanations for what influences consumption. Something was considered “an explanation” when it provided a reason and arguments for why people consume, or for what drives consumption. The disciplines first considered were the ones mentioned as social sciences in the Social Science Encyclopedia (Calhoun, 2004, p.957). Disciplines which did not appear to have theories or explanations for consumption were left out of the review. Other fields (interdisciplinary or sub disciplines) which came up in the search phase as having theories, or explanations for consumption, were added to the review. Ten disciplines were reviewed: economics, psychology, anthropology, sociology, geography, history behavioural economics, neurosciences, marketing and political economy (Fig. 1). The field of management, or business, was left out because it focuses more on the aspect of production. Also, management literature addressing consumption is to some extent already represented in marketing literature.

2.2. Step 2: Literature search and selection

The method had to be sufficiently open to encompass different theories and explanations. This meant casting a wide net within each discipline, both in terms of literature sources and period of publication. Limiting the search to certain journals or periods of time would bias the research to certain dominant theories or explanations within a journal, or within a period of time. We began the search using academic books or book chapters which provided an overview of the consumption knowledge in a discipline, as recommended for interdisciplinary research (Repko and Szostak, 2017). For each discipline and field, the knowledge acquired from books was complemented by academic papers on consumption, when adding new explanations, or when further elaborating on

some explanations. Research that presented general explanations for consumption was preferred to research focusing on very specific circumstances of consumption (e.g. consumption motives in a certain village, or the reactions of consumers to failed service encounters (Bougie et al., 2003)).

The literature, i.e. papers and books, was searched via academic databases (Scopus [www.scopus.com](http://www.scopus.com), Google Scholar <http://scholar.google.com>), and through the library catalogue of Utrecht University Library (Catalogus, <http://aleph.library.uu.nl>). The search terms used started from simple and broad (“consumption”) to more discipline specific (“consumer behaviour”, “consumer psychology”, etc.). Additionally, the snowball method was used by consulting the references of papers.

In total, we selected 93 literature materials: 39 books, 41 papers and 13 book chapters. In Fig. 2, the selected literature per discipline is represented in a graph that indicates the year of publication on the x-axis and the total number of literature sources selected per discipline on the y-axis. The disciplines which got the lowest amount of literature sources are behavioural economics and neurosciences. This can be explained by different reasons: first, they share similarities with marketing and psychology, which would result in a redundancy of sources; second, neurosciences is a relatively recent science in which only few studies actually focus on consumption. In this case, and in other disciplines, books were used, which provided an overview of the research in the topic of consumption within the discipline, with chapters written by different authors. Apart from those two disciplines, the review was based on 7–14 different sources per discipline. The figure shows that the literature selected within a discipline covered, in most cases, more than two decades. Considering all the literature, the oldest source is from 1968 and the most recent from 2016.

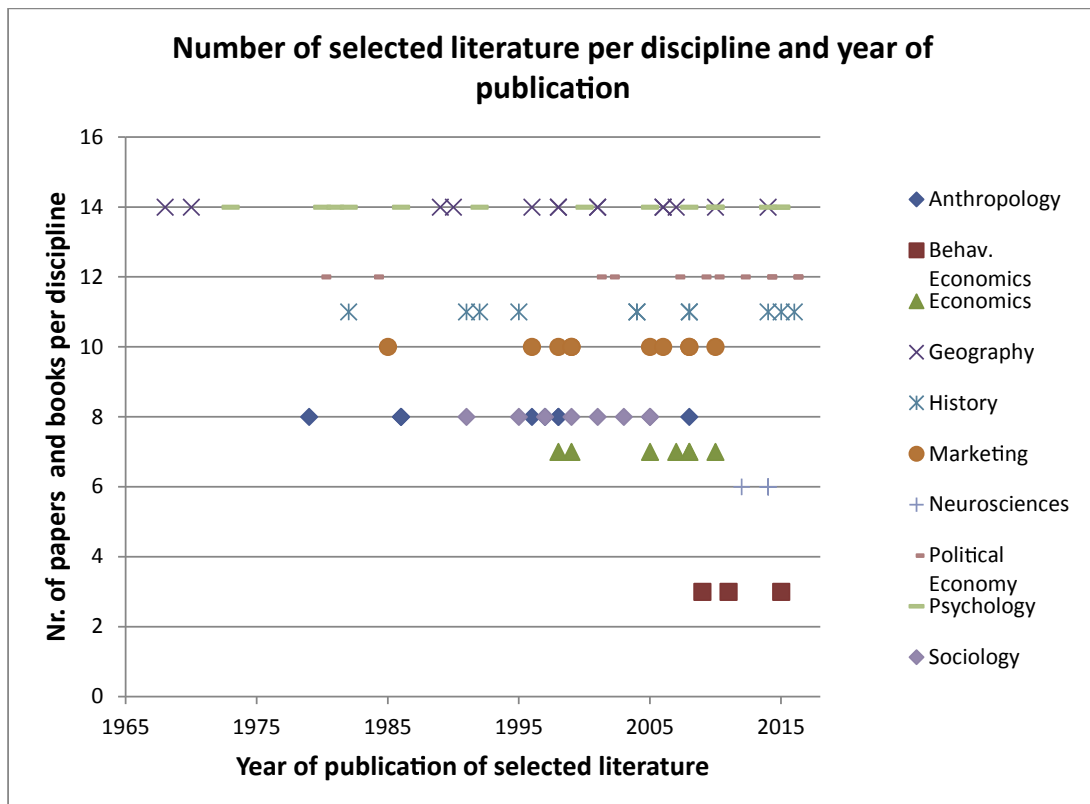


Fig. 2. Number of papers and books selected per year and per discipline. (References from the same year are plotted on top of each other).

### 2.3. Step 3: Analysis and synthesis

The selected literature was fully read, aggregated and summarised per discipline and field. The summaries were then analysed using comparison for “categorizing, coding, delineating categories and connecting them” (Boeije, 2002, p.393). The summaries of the literature were coded in the iterative steps of open, axial and selective coding (Wolfswinkel et al., 2013), using the coding software NVivo 11.

While reading, different categories emerged inductively (open coding step of GT) as explanations for consumption, e.g. advertising's emergence as something that influences consumption. By re-reading and comparing, other categories emerged as meta- or subcategories (axial coding), e.g. the meta-category of purposes of consumption emerged, including subcategories like expressing identity and relationships.

Finally, relations between the main categories were established (selective coding), as it was observed that the explanations for consumption differ because they address different themes. These themes, already mentioned in the introduction, are *the purposes fulfilled by consumption, the influences on consumer behaviour, the societal contexts that influence consumption, and the historical growth of consumption.*

The synthesis has two steps. First, cross-disciplinary knowledge is integrated within each theme, including visual representations at the end of Sections 3.1 and 3.2. Second, the conceptual framework (Section 4) visually represents the integration across the four themes.

### 2.4. Limitations

The trade-off between width of scope and depth of detail is particularly present in cross-disciplinary reviews. The wide scope of the research implied that we were limited in the extent to which we could detail the knowledge in each discipline. Still, this review provides a more comprehensive understanding of what influences consumption than what would be offered by a smaller sample of disciplines.

We considered only material published in the English language, as English is the main language used in academic research and facilitates the consultation of references. The majority of writers reviewed are from Western countries, and the study or reflection on consumption is often in a Western context. Some of the excluded material, typically in other languages and reflective of more non-Western contexts, could have presented alternative explanations for consumption.

## 3. Results

The answers to “*What influences consumption?*” are structured along the four themes, and the discipline or field of each explanation is indicated.

### 3.1. Purposes fulfilled by consumption

Explanations for consumption often focus on the functions that it serves, or, in our words, the purposes it fulfils, e.g. expressing status. The purpose of status, while dominant in common discourse on consumption, is only one of many consumption purposes found in literature.

While some purposes seem to have always existed, other purposes may have first appeared in modern history. We aggregated all the purposes mentioned across disciplines in the categories of *individual survival, individual aspirations and satisfaction, social, practical and political* (see Fig. 3).

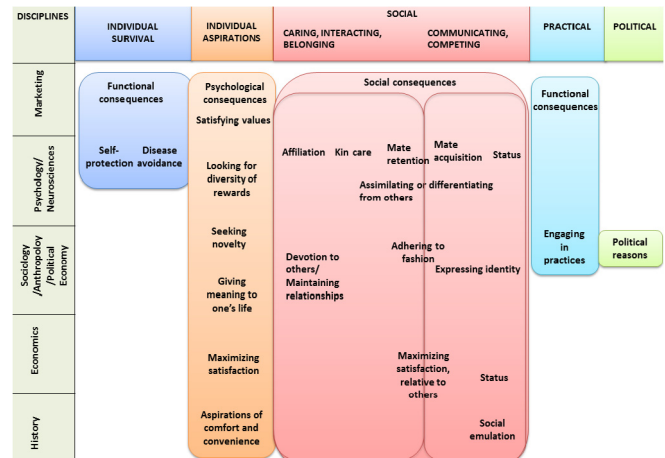


Fig. 3. Purposes fulfilled by consumption.

In Fig. 3, the left column indicates the broad group of disciplines mentioning each purpose. The top line represents our aggregation of the different purposes into general categories.

#### 3.1.1. Individual survival

Neurosciences and evolutionary psychology see consumer behaviour as shaped by evolutionary reasons due to millions of years of evolution (Saad, 2014). Humans share evolutionary instincts with other mammals, birds and rodents, and these instincts are rooted in a long tradition of looking for food, shelter and safety (Sherry, 2014).

According to Griskevicius et al. (2014), the main evolutionary motives driving behaviour are self-protection, disease avoidance, affiliation, status, mate acquisition, mate retention and kin care. Depending on the motive prevalent on a certain moment, consumers show different behaviours. In this paper, we interpret these motives as purposes, as they can be seen as goals driving behaviour. The purposes of self-protection and disease avoidance refer to basic survival and self-preservation at an implicit individual scale, so we called them *individual survival* purposes. The other evolutionary purposes refer to relationships or communication to others, which are part of *social* purposes.

Purposes of individual survival can be met through food, water or safety instruments that allow self-preservation. These individual survival purposes relate to what is mentioned in marketing by Peter et al. (1999) as functional consequences of consumption, which we include under *individual survival* and *practical* purposes. Peter et al. (1999) also mention psychosocial consequences, which we separate into psychological and social and relate respectively to *individual aspirations* and *social* purposes.

#### 3.1.2. Individual aspirations

Besides survival, consumption also fulfils other purposes: aspirations, satisfaction, seeking novelty and giving meaning. History reminds us that consumers' aspirations are one of the main reasons for increases in consumption (e.g. de Vries, 2008). Satisfaction is also a common explanation for consumption. In marketing, Peter et al. (1999) speak of psychological consequences, i.e. how the consumer feels when using a product, e.g. stylish, attractive, happy. Besides activating positive emotions, products also act as “value satisfiers”, i.e. a means through which personal values are satisfied.

Neoclassical economics sees consumption, and ultimately human behaviour, as having the purpose of maximising satisfaction (Lipsey et al., 1999). From a neuroscientist's perspective (Sterling, 2012), humans are hardwired to seek satisfaction, but satisfaction

is a short-term goal as humans keep searching for a diversity of rewards in the long-term (e.g. eating, drinking, warmth, social affiliation, etc.). Also, satisfaction is partly dependent on the effort required. Sterling argues that social organisation under capitalism limits the diversity of rewards to material consumption and reduces the effort, which makes rewards predictable, inducing less satisfaction, and resulting in intensified consumption. This argument is similar to the sociologist Campbell's (1995) explanation of seeking novelty. For Campbell (1995), consumers project an idea of imagined pleasure onto new products, which is often not achieved by the actual consumption, and becomes then projected onto expectations about other new products.

For anthropologist Miller (2008), the purpose of consumption is not seeking novelty, but giving meaning to one's life. Miller opposes the idea that more stuff leads to more superficial and materialistic lives, instead showing how people's material possessions matter to them in a meaningful way and reflect their personal histories and identities. In a similar strand of research, consumers are seen as appropriating and giving their own meanings to possessions (e.g. Hebidge's (1979) counterculture youth and the "subversive meanings" of their dressing styles).

### 3.1.3. Social

Some economists theorise that it is not consumption *per se* that is a mediating factor between income and happiness or satisfaction. Rather, it is relative income – relative to others in one's environment, or oneself in time – that plays a critical role in mediating between income and happiness (Clark et al., 2008; Luttmer, 2005). This highlights the role of one's social environment.

Among social purposes of consumption, status is perhaps the most famous. In economics, the notion of "conspicuous consumption" was introduced separately by John Rae and Thorstein Veblen in the late nineteenth century, which refers to consumption that is driven by social status and prestige (Mason, 1998; Lipsey et al., 1999).

Sociology has looked at the relation between fashion, luxury goods, social classes and status in works by Simmel and Veblen (Ilmonen, 2001). Anthropologists also mention the role of taste and fashion in consumption. According to Appadurai (1986) the demand for goods in every society is socially regulated through "taste-making" mechanisms. For him, the main difference in demand between Western and smaller societies that are based on simpler technologies is the high turnover of fashion present in Western societies. Tastes, as shown by Bourdieu (1986), reflect and reinforce social distinctions between classes, gender and types of prestige (Miller, 1995, p.275).

Following fashion trends can be seen as part of the evolutionary motive of affiliation. Psychologists Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) distinguish two social purposes for which things can be used: differentiation - in order to stand out from the others; and similarity – to express integration with one's social context. Fashion can be used in both cases, adhering to a certain mainstream fashion in order to assimilate, or adhering to an unconventional fashion taste, as a way of differentiating from others.

Differentiating from others through consumption can be a motive, but can also be the result of expressing one's identity, one of the main uses of consumer goods (Dittmar, 2008). Advertising often uses this purpose by associating products with visions of identity and well-being, and suggesting that consumers can achieve those visions by consuming those products. Baudrillard (1998 [1970]), a sociologist, argues that products are not consumed for their own use, but for their signs, symbols or meanings. Other sociologists also see consumption as a "meaningful social activity" (Ilmonen, 2001, p.2688) "which conveys information about the consumer's identity to those who witness it" (Campbell, 1995, p.111).

Anthropologists see material possessions as carriers of social meanings and as communicators in the making and maintaining of social relationships (Douglas and Isherwood, 1996 [1979]). Miller (1998) gives the example of the stereotypical housewife whose daily shopping for the household can be seen as a way of manifesting love and devotion to her family. The purpose of showing devotion is in line with Appadurai's (1986, p.31) view of consumption as "eminently social, relational, and active rather than private, atomic, or passive", and it relates to the evolutionary motives of mate retention, kin care and affiliation. This social purpose is related to the social consequences in marketing, e.g. what other people will think of one's consumption of a product (Peter et al., 1999).

### 3.1.4. Practical

A recent trend in sociology points to a different purpose of consumption that we call *practical* purpose. Consumption allows people to engage in practices. As Warde (2005, p.137) says "practices, rather than individual desires .... create wants". This strand of research shows that there is a material side to most, if not all, human practices, and that a relation exists between products, social practices and infrastructure. Shove and Pantzar (2005) argue that new practices often involve and create new ways of consumption, exemplifying it with the dissemination of the practice of "Nordic walking", which required the product of walking sticks. This is similar to the "functional consequences" of consumption mentioned in marketing (Peter et al., 1999, p.66), i.e. "tangible outcomes of using a product that consumers experience rather directly". Physiological outcomes (eating, drinking) fit more in the individual survival purposes, but "performance outcomes" are related to practices, e.g. a hair drier allows and speeds up the process of drying one's hair.

### 3.1.5. Political

Closer to political science, Micheletti (2002) and Micheletti and Stolle (2007) show that consumption can be seen as an act of political participation, i.e. *political* purposes. Throughout history, products have been avoided or promoted for political reasons, e.g. boycotts of Jewish shops in the inter-war period in Europe, appeals for buying national cloth in the fight for India's independence, or more recently, boycotts of products made in questionable working conditions, like sweatshops.

## 3.2. What influences consumer behaviour?

Many explanations of consumption focus on consumer behaviour. Understanding consumer behaviour is at the core of marketing research, which draws from many disciplines: psychology, behavioural economics, anthropology and sociology. In this section, we summarise the key aspects that influence consumer behaviour, using insights from marketing and other disciplines.

First of all, it should be noted that "marketing", in this paper, refers sometimes to the academic discipline, and sometimes to the managerial practice, related to advertising. The discipline of marketing researches and teaches how to conduct the practice of marketing, but academic literature on marketing is rarely explicit in this distinction, perhaps because marketers have always had a mediating role between producers and consumers and between economics [theory] and managerial practices (Cochoy, 1998, p.195).

For marketing (discipline and practice), understanding consumer behaviour makes it possible "to respond to the customer's needs and wants", and "to influence and predict reasons for purchase" (Wright, 2006, p.7). We analysed different models of consumer behaviour (e.g. Macinnis and Folkes, 2010; Peter et al., 1999; Kotler et al., 2008) to identify the key influences. As shown in Fig. 4,

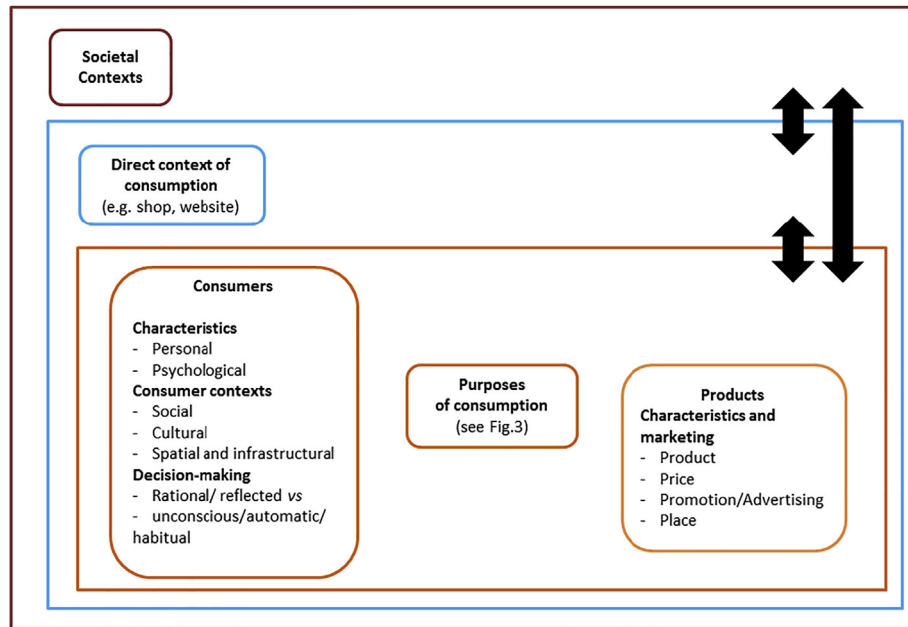


Fig. 4. Influences on consumer behaviour.

consumer behaviour is influenced by consumer characteristics and contexts, decision-making, the purposes of consumption, the characteristics and marketing of products and by the direct context of consumption and societal contexts.

Characteristics and contexts of consumers influence what they consume. Drawing on the factors described by Kotler et al. (2008), we define personal and psychological characteristics as well as social and cultural contexts.

### 3.2.1. Characteristics of consumers

Personal characteristics, i.e. age, job, income, lifestyle and personality, are often related to people's tastes and spending patterns. Lifestyles are "a person's pattern of living as expressed in his or her activities, interests and opinions" (Kotler et al., 2008, p.252). Personalities refer to psychological traits such as self-confidence, dominance, sociability, autonomy, defensiveness, adaptability and aggressiveness (Kotler et al., 2008, p.253). People with certain personalities are more inclined to consume certain products, as products can act as an extension of the self (Szmigin and Piacentini, 2015, p.235), stimulated by advertising that targets certain personality types (Haugtvedt et al., 1992). Marketing typically categorises people into different lifestyles and personalities in order to better target subgroups of consumers. Income, or one's economic situation, also plays an important role in what one can buy. From an economics perspective, income is the most relevant characteristic, and many studies describe changes in consumption due to changes in income, i.e. income elasticity of demand (see Lipsey et al., 1999).

The psychological characteristics of consumers described by Kotler et al. (2008, p.255) relate to aspects mentioned by other authors as part of the process of decision-making (Bettman, 1986; Jansson-Boyd, 2010; Szmigin and Piacentini, 2015; Norton et al., 2015): motivation, perception, emotions, knowledge, learning and memory, attention, persuasion, attitudes and beliefs. Peter et al. (1999) also highlight the cognitive and affective systems, i.e. the thinking and emotional responses of consumers. In marketing, several characteristics are studied in the setting of consumption: what motivates consumers to consume, how they perceive information on products (and which emotions drive consumers to

consume), how they learn and know what brand to choose, what captures their attention, how they can be persuaded to opt for a certain brand and how they develop beliefs and positive attitudes towards certain products or brands.

Kotler et al. (2008, p.257) relate motivation to needs, as "a need becomes a motive when it is aroused to a sufficient level of intensity". Emotions such as stress and anxiety trigger some people to go shopping, which can provide a sense of security, control and distraction (Yarrow, 2014, p.4; Preston and Vickers, 2014). But how do consumers go from feeling a need to a specific act of consumption? This depends on the type of consumption, but is usually related to the ways through which consumers perceive, interpret and process information, their product or brand knowledge (product attributes, positive consequences of using products, the values the products help to satisfy, etc.), and to their attitudes and beliefs (Peter et al., 1999; Kotler et al., 2008).

Beliefs are thoughts that people have about something, either based on real knowledge, opinion or faith, and attitudes are someone's "relatively consistent evaluations, feelings, and tendencies towards an object or an idea" (Kotler et al., 2008, p.260). Attitudes and beliefs are learned over time and can be influenced by peers, family, television and advertising (Jansson-Boyd, 2010). However, research has shown attitudes failing as proxies for behaviour, in what is sometimes called the intention- or attitude-behaviour gap (e.g. Ajzen and Fishbein, 2005; Carrington et al., 2010).

### 3.2.2. Contexts of consumers

Social contexts of consumers are the groups to which consumers belong, or would like to belong, e.g. friends, family, reference groups (Kotler et al., 2008). It is in these groups that consumers seek information about products, although nowadays online consumer reviews also play that role (Chen and Xie, 2008). Consumers are also influenced by their groups, e.g. dress codes (Peter et al., 1999). Through socialisation processes, families pass on knowledge and beliefs about culture, subcultures and social class to their children, influencing their ways of thinking and feeling as well as their behaviour (Moschis, 1985).

The cultural context of consumers refers to shared aspects among most people in a society: values, goals, attitudes and beliefs, the meanings of certain behaviours, rituals, and norms of social institutions and of physical objects (Peter et al., 1999). Consumer culture theory (CCT), associated with anthropology and sociology, sees consumption as a sociocultural practice that is historically shaped (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p.875). People can be part of a culture, but also of subcultures (e.g. an immigrant group), and of a social class, within which attitudes and behaviours are somewhat shared. Also in psychology, culture is increasingly acknowledged as an explanatory factor for different consumption patterns and a key factor in the success or failure of international expansions of consumer products (Maheswaran and Shavitt, 2000; Ng and Lee, 2015). Anthropologists working in marketing firms research how consumers relate to products in their daily lives, in order to better inform companies on which kind of products are needed, or better suited to different [e.g. cultural] contexts (Salvador et al., 1999). Marketers are also attentive to the potential market opportunities created by changes in culture, e.g. a health and fitness boom (Kotler et al., 2008).

To the social and cultural contexts, we add the spatial and infrastructural context, as consumer choices depend also on where one lives and on their infrastructure, e.g. one does not buy CDs if one does not have a CD player. Consumers' decisions of where to buy will depend on their means of transportation and on the available spaces of consumption within their reach.

Consumer choices of and access to consumption spaces are studied in geography literature. Williams et al. (2001) show that ninety percent of UK consumers use their car for their main grocery shopping. But access to retail by carless, less affluent people has deteriorated. This is visible in food deserts, or areas of cities which lack shops selling (affordable) fresh fruits and vegetables. Shaw (2014), however, reinforces that alongside spatial accessibility, lack of culinary skills and personal preferences can also be strong barriers to consumption of fruits and vegetables. Consumers choose their shopping locations based on the goods they want to buy, and on notions of convenience, access, the value of goods and the shop ambience (Williams et al., 2001). Notions of convenience, value and habit vary from household to household, and depend also on the context of their daily routine (Jackson et al., 2006, p.47). While consumer choices between stores seem to be influenced by accessibility and convenience, choices of products within stores were mediated by value, price and quality.

### 3.2.3. Decision-making

Consumer behaviour is seen as the result of decision-making, and many theories have been proposed to describe how consumers make decisions (for a detailed review, see Jackson (2005)). In neoclassical economics, individual consumers process information and decide rationally what to consume, to maximise their satisfaction (i.e. utility in economics vocabulary). The assumption of consumer rationality is contested by all other disciplines. The field of behavioural economics uses insights from psychology to explain behaviour when the assumption of rationality does not hold (Dellavigna, 2009; Cartwright, 2011).

Still, some theories in psychology are close to the rationality model and explain decision-making as resulting from an evaluation of how the value of products characteristics measure up against expectations about the products (e.g. expectancy-value theory, see Jackson (2005, p.43)). The theory of reasoned action, developed by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980), integrates individual and social aspects. This theory sees behaviour as resulting from individual beliefs and attitudes about a certain behaviour, but also from individual beliefs about what others think of the same behaviour (Jackson, 2005).

In marketing, Kotler et al. (2008, p.265) describe the decision

process as going through the phases of need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post purchase behaviour. However, Kotler et al. also acknowledge that buying behaviour depends on the product (e.g. if it is expensive, or there is a lot of diversity between the brands of a certain product). If it is an expensive product with high degree of brand differences, it is more likely that a consumer conducts a reflective mode of thinking, i.e. follows the different phases of the decision process, and consciously ponder a decision.

In cases of cheaper and more routine shopping, consumers act on automatic or default modes of thinking (Szmigin and Piacentini, 2015), i.e. consumers rely on habits instead of following the phases of decision-making. The social practices theory in sociology conveys that much of what is consumed is not done in conscious intentional ways, but is actually part of routines and habitual behaviour (Shove, 2003). Even in complex situations that require consumer involvement, it has been observed that instead of rational optimising, people use heuristics, i.e. mental shortcuts that simplify reasoning in order to arrive more easily at a decision (Kahneman and Tversky, 1982; Tversky and Kahneman, 1973).

### 3.2.4. Purposes of consumption

Some neuroscientists explain differences in consumer behaviour by the evolutionary purpose activated, e.g. if the self-protection motive is activated, people will seek safety and take consumption decisions that emphasise adherence to the usual, so as not to draw attention (Griskevicius et al., 2014). But if the purpose of mate acquisition is activated, people are more willing to take risks and to stand out.

### 3.2.5. Characteristics of products and marketing

Consumer behaviour depends also on the characteristics of what is consumed and on how products and services are marketed. These two influences are illustrated by the notion of income elasticity of demand in economics and by the concept of “marketing mix” in the marketing discipline.

The law of demand in economics states that demand is inversely proportional to the price of a product (Lipsey et al., 1999), which indicates product prices as the main factor influencing demand. However, when studying the change in consumption due to a change in income or price, i.e. income or price elasticity of demand, economists found that demand depends not only on prices but also on the type of product. For some goods, demand increases when income increases (“normal goods”), for other goods demand decreases when income increases (“inferior goods” e.g. whole milk, starchy roots, in the US), and for another type of goods demand does not seem change with higher incomes (“inelastic goods”, e.g. basic items of consumption, like food). In the case of “status goods”, demand is positively related to their price, as prices confer status appeal.

The price of products is also mentioned in marketing literature as one of four elements, next to product characteristics, promotion/advertising and the place where products are accessible (Kotler et al., 2008). These elements are collectively called “marketing mix” because they can be directly influenced by marketing (practice), unlike the characteristics and contexts of consumers.

Authors in other social sciences are often critical of how marketing (practice) and advertising are used to influence consumers. Baudrillard, in *Consumer Society* (1998 [1970], p.74), states that the “system of [consumer] needs is the product of the system of production”, pointing out that needs are created by advertising and marketing. Also, political economists see advertising as a key instrument in the creation of new “needs” and in “manipulating consumer preferences” (Schnaiberg, 1980 p.175; Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 2001; Galbraith, 1984 [1958]). Marketing (practice)



appeals to consumers in many ways—the product design, the packaging design promotion for the product, via advertising on TV, outdoor, the internet—but also in the context where consumption takes place, i.e. the direct context of consumption.

### 3.2.6. Direct context of consumption

The environment or context where the choice takes place (e.g. the shop, the website) can also influence decision-making, either by choice architecture which can be changed to promote certain behaviours, or by priming (Szmigin and Piacentini, 2015). Colours, sounds and smells are all aspects used to influence consumers in the physical places where they make consumption decisions.

### 3.3. Societal contexts and agents that influence consumption

Based on Kotler et al. (2008), the societal contexts are demographic, economic, political/institutional, technological and cultural. To these five contexts, we add a geographic/spatial/infrastructural context, referring to the natural and physical environment of the city, region or country in which the consumer lives. We describe also the role of agents in some societal contexts.

#### 3.3.1. Demographic context

The demographic context refers to the age distribution of a population and to migration patterns. An ageing population causes concerns with social security and implies larger governmental spending on health and senior care, as well as a higher demand for products favoured by the elderly (Kotler et al., 2008). International immigration can result in higher diversity of products being offered and demanded. Urbanisation, a development highly related to consumption increases, results from migration to cities.

#### 3.3.2. Cultural context

The cultural context can be the same, or different, from a consumer's own cultural context, e.g. immigrants are used to a certain cultural context in their home country, and they deal with a different cultural context in the society where they live. Research in different disciplines shows how patterns of consumption differ, e.g. economists observed that the kinds of goods that qualify as inferior, normal, inelastic and status vary across countries and cultures (Lipsey et al., 1999). The societal cultural context exists at many levels, e.g. eating culture, work culture, socialising culture. All these different cultures reflect certain ways of living, with an associated consumption.

#### 3.3.3. Economic context

The economic context of a country determines very much how things are produced, or imported, and consumed. For example, for Kotler et al. (2008, p.197), subsistence economies “offer few market opportunities” because they produce most of what they consume. Many authors emphasise that in market economies and in capitalist systems, consumption is not only important, but actually essential. Neuroscientist Whybrow (2014) speaks of the dependence of the economy on mass consumption. The ecological economist Tim Jackson (2009, p.97) argues that the “throw-away society” is less due to consumer greed than a structural element of the economic system which needs novelty to keep expanding. The drive for economic growth fuels the need for innovating, selling more goods and stimulating higher levels of consumer demand (Jackson, 2009). Environmental sociologists, whose objectives are kindred to political economy (Foster et al. (2010, p.382)), warn against consuming less and saving more, as savings in a capitalist economy are used for investing and expanding the scale of the economy, and “such expansion is the chief enemy of the environment”.

Skidelsky and Skidelsky (2001, p.40) describe the factors

through which “capitalism has inflamed [what they call] our innate tendency to insatiability”: competition-driven creation of new wants through advertising; inequality of wages driving people to work more, in order to increase their wages; the free-market ideology hostility to the idea of having “enough”; and the ongoing monetisation of the economy, thus increasing the “sphere of relational competition” and promoting the love of money for its own sake.

A discussion on the relations between working, leisure time and consumption is present in sociology and political economy. This discussion can be traced back to Keynes, who predicted that productivity increases would lead to great reductions in working time, resulting potentially in a more leisure-oriented society (Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 2001). There is an ongoing debate on whether these predictions have come to fruition and to what degree (Trentmann, 2016). Schor (1991, 1999) sees the origins of post-war consumerism at the level of labour markets, as companies facing productivity growth preferred increasing wages to lowering working time. For Schor, consumerism is a learned behaviour, a specific product of capitalism, promoted by businesses, new ways of advertising and increased possibilities to pay through credit or instalments (Schor, 1991). The availability of credit is often mentioned by political economists (e.g. Galbraith (1984), Santos et al. (2014)), as it extends the potential for consumption. Many of the aspects here discussed, e.g. credit availability, worktime hours, advertising, wages, novel products, are defined and controlled by agents other than consumers, e.g. banks, governments, businesses.

Foster et al. (2010) criticise environmentalism's increasing focus on consumption, for emphasising the role of the consumers and disregarding the role of investors, production and profits. Similarly, Schnaiberg (1980) is wary of putting the responsibility solely on consumers, reminding us that while most production activities result in consumer goods and services, the decisions on production belong to producers, not consumers. Conceptualising consumption as inseparable from production, Fine (2016) developed the concept of systems of provision. He emphasises that an “analysis of consumption cannot be divorced from the systems of production to which it is attached, not just because they set prices for goods but because they are driven by the imperative of profitability that leads to changes in the nature of what is provided and corresponding attitudes to this by consumers” (Fine, 2016, p.42).

#### 3.3.4. Political/institutional context

Kotler et al. (2008, p.211) describe the political environment as the “laws, government agencies and pressure groups that influence and limit various organisations and individuals”. Governments and other institutions influence consumers through incomes, taxes, credit availability, but they also influence what can be consumed, i.e. what is produced, how and where through regulations and trade agreements (Kotler et al., 2008). Economists study the effects of government expenditure on consumption (e.g. Galí et al., 2007; Cogan et al., 2010). Public procurement also contributes to consumption and plays a role in what is consumed (e.g. food) in public institutions like schools and hospitals.

Authors in political economy emphasise the role of states in consumption (e.g. Galbraith, 1984 [1958]; Schnaiberg, 1980). States can influence either by regulations (e.g. suburbanisation and the use of cars), or by the supply of public goods, which can both replace consumption or stimulate it, and consumption can be contingent to previous decisions of producers, consumers and governments (Schnaiberg, 1980).

#### 3.3.5. Technological context

Technological innovation affects not only products and how

products are made—the industrial revolution, for example, spurred by the steam engine, made it possible to mass-produce an increasing variety of low-priced products (Peter et al., 1999), but also how they are advertised. As consumers spend more time online due to the widespread use of smartphones, tablets and free Wi-Fi; also, companies spend more money on online publicity, and advertising is the main business model of the most popular technological companies. But technologies affect also infrastructures, such as through means of transport, which can in turn influence how products move, how people move and where they shop.

### 3.3.6. Geographic/spatial/infrastructural contexts

Consumption used to be much more restricted to what was available in one's geographical location. Nowadays, spaces of consumption are more and more accessible everywhere in the world, as well as online, but they are still the defining feature of contemporary cities (Zukin, 1998; Miles, 2010). Zukin describes modern urban lifestyles as increasingly involving cultural consumption, (e.g. in the form of art and food). But she also denounces increasing competition between cities “for the international distribution of the same standardised, mass-produced, consumer goods [...] as well as the same generalized ‘aesthetic’ products, such as art works and ‘historic’ buildings” (Zukin, 1998, p.826). This is visible in Spierings's (2006) account of inter-city competition in the Netherlands, where local authorities, driven by the competition of out-of-town retail spaces, upgrade their historical city centres by making them more accessible and walkable and by bringing in popular retailers.

While consumption in cities draws more and more of the world's resources, there is little attention to the global impacts of consumption. As Harvey (1990, p.422) says, “we can in practice consume our meal without the slightest knowledge of the intricate geography of production and the myriad social relationships embedded in the system that puts it upon our table”. Research on “commodity chains” aims to focus on the geography of production chains and is influenced by Fine's systems of provision (e.g. Hartwick, 1998; Jackson et al., 2006).

The influences of all these contexts, and of the actors acting in them, becomes most visible when studying the evolution of consumption throughout history, which is dealt with in the next section.

## 3.4. Historical growth of consumption

The growth of consumption is explained by historical transformations of many contexts and by the actions of many agents. Here, for different historical periods, the views of historians are interspersed with explanations from other disciplines.

Societies where consumption had a prominent role have developed in different times and places, e.g. fifteenth-century Renaissance Italy, China in the late Ming dynasty, seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, eighteenth-century England, and the inter-war and post-war period in Europe and the US (Glennie, 1995; Trentmann, 2016; Cohen, 2004; Blondé and Ryckbosch, 2015). The history of increasing consumption is diverse throughout the world. It is time and country specific, but there are also common patterns, namely “rise in middle-class, culture of domestic comfort, urbanisation, boost in discretionary spending and increasing home ownership” (Trentmann, 2016, p.356).

### 3.4.1. The long eighteenth century (1650–1850)

Throughout the long eighteenth century (defined as 1650–1850), in the Netherlands and afterwards in England there was a significant increase in consumption and production (de Vries, 2008; Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2016; McKendrick, 1982). Evidence

shows that cultures of consumption preceded industrialisation's factory-style mass production (Trentmann, 2016; Glennie, 1995; de Vries, 2008), and demand was met by “artisan and protoindustrial production” (Glennie and Thrift, 1992, p.427).

De Vries (2008, p.52) states that in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, a society emerges for the first time in which “the potential to purchase luxuries and novelties extended well beyond a small, traditional elite.” In this period, fashion started to play a greater role than durability regarding material possessions (McKendrick, 1982). Similarly to fifteenth-century Italy, the value of goods became less linked to the intrinsic value of its raw materials and more to the taste and the artistic design of the crafted products, leading to a growth in the use of cheaper materials (Blondé and Ryckbosch, 2015).

The increase in consumption and production is related to an increase in working hours per household, as holidays were cut back across Europe, and women and children joined the workforce (Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2016; de Vries, 2008). There is no general consensus on what led to the related increase in working time and consumption, but possible explanations abound, e.g. social emulation, changing consumer aspirations, urbanisation and colonial expansion. McKendrick (1982) proposes social emulation in explaining the consumption increase in eighteenth-century England, alongside rising incomes and the fervent spread of commercialisation and advertising by mean of merchants, shopkeepers and peddlers. Through social emulation, lower classes imitate and copy the living style of higher classes. Trentmann (2016, p.109), on the other hand, argues that what is considered tasteful differs across classes. In other words, merchants and the middle class in 1750s Britain, instead of copying the old elite, “used new goods and tastes to establish new distinctions and create their own, more private culture of comfort”.

Changing consumer aspirations are emphasised by de Vries (2008, p.52) as the driver behind “the industrious revolution”, the pre-industrial revolution period in which households allocated more of their time to work. Increasingly exposed to a greater diversity of goods and shopping places, people grew accustomed to exercising their individual choices. In this period, fashion and taste instead of being solely related to higher classes became linked to a sense of modernity. There was also a growing appreciation of novelty as a source of pleasure in itself (Glennie and Thrift, 1992).

Exposure to new products in shops and markets was more common in cities. London, the capital of the colonial empire, hosted a significant share of England's population, serving as shop window for the country, particularly in the yearly “London season” (McKendrick, 1982). Trentmann (2016, p.93) describes four impacts of urban living on consumption: population density and mix allowed for product differentiation and services specialisation; new products and tastes were easily promoted and showcased in shops; self-provision of clothes and food was limited in cities; lastly, “reputation and identity were more fluid”, which led to dressing being used as a sign of identity. Glennie and Thrift (1992, p.427) relate modern consumption in England to an unprecedented “confluence of capitalism, colonialism, and widespread urbanisation”.

The increase in consumption is also inseparable from colonial expansion, technological progress and a changing notion of consumption as “an integral part of personal and social improvement” (Trentmann, 2016, p.106). Geopolitics, states and empires have shaped consumption using war, taxes and displacing people and goods throughout the world (Trentmann, 2016). Global colonial trade allowed for and promoted the widespread dissemination of new commodities (e.g. tea, coffee, sugar and tobacco). The adoption of these new products in Europe and by colonisers in the Americas involved material and social changes. It might have even caused

physiological changes, as coffee and tea acted as stimulating beverages, allowing for longer work and substituting a warm meal (Hunt, 2014; Smail, 2008; Trentmann, 2016). Drinking tea became a new social habit and a sign of civilisation and refinement, and the spread in coffee houses stimulated a public sphere for discussion of public and political life (Hunt, 2014).

#### 3.4.2. From 1850 to 1960

Authors in geography and sociology mention the appearance of new spaces of consumption in cities. Benjamin (1968) analysed the spaces of consumption that emerged in the nineteenth century: world exhibitions and shopping arcades. World exhibitions were places where goods from all over the world, often from imperial colonies, were displayed. Benjamin (1968, p.81) described them as “places of pilgrimage to the fetish Commodity”, where people “yielded to the [market] manipulations while savouring their alienation from themselves and from others”. Shopping arcades were grandiose symbols of booming textile trade and of emerging new patterns of leisure and consumption shared across classes (Shields, 1989).

Department stores came after shopping arcades, followed by supermarkets and malls. Sennett (in Corrigan, 1997) explains the emergence of the department store as a response to the factory. Changes in production made it easier to produce a greater quantity and diversity of goods in very short times. The outflow of these goods required new spaces, as small shops could not handle the increase in supply. Department stores were endowed with persuasive tactics: an awe-inspiring architecture, fixed prices, free entrance for everyone, a luxury atmosphere (in contrast with the cheap products), the possibility of ‘just looking’, window displays and a pleasant, inviting staff (Corrigan, 1997).

Consumption has seen another surge throughout the twentieth century. Demand was stimulated through Fordism (Miller, 1991; Short, 1996), advertising and the promotion of consumption as a civic duty. Fordism involved increasing workers' wages to reduce absenteeism and worker turnover and to make workers potential customers (Bonneauil and Fressoz, 2016). This process, alongside the provision of consumer credit by major companies, is described by Bonneauil and Fressoz (2016) as “disciplinary hedonism”, an approach that intends to discipline labour and to stabilise markets by stimulating demand. This process involved also a shift in values, as habits of “repairing, economizing and saving were presented as outdated and harmful to the national economy” (Bonneauil and Fressoz, 2016, p.156). This led, alongside technological innovations, to abandoning recycling practices, widespread in the nineteenth century (e.g. rags for paper, excrement for manure, etc.). The concept of convenience also emerged, and there was a shift in the perception of waste, which started to be more associated with time than with materials. Advertising shifted perceptions of cleanness and health in households when promoting new appliances such as fridges and vacuum cleaners (Miller, 1991). Already in the early twentieth century city suburbs in the U.S. dealt with increasing costs with servants' labour and longer distances from fresh food markets and shops, paving the way for the adoption of new household appliances.

After the Second World War, during years of economic boom, consumption became truly widespread in Western countries. According to the geographer Short (1996, p.112), factors that contributed to mass consumption were relatively high salaries, availability of credit and “an ideology that sanctions and fosters continued consumption”. Short also highlights two icons of high consumption: the car and the suburbs. Cars permitted living in the suburbs and carrying more products, as shopping started to be done less frequently (Alonso, 1970; Shaw, 2014). At the core of these developments, Alonso (1970) describes higher and more equal

wages that drew women into the workforce, which reduced the time available for home production and daily shopping and led to a greater use of time-saving household appliances and manufactured products. Other authors, such as economist Cardia (2008), suggest that it was technology, e.g. running water, that liberated women from household chores. Technology was also important for spaces of consumption, as inventions like escalators and air conditioning allowed for the development of indoor retail spaces of significant size like shopping malls (Weiss and Leong, 2001; Leong and Weiss, 2001).

The historian Cohen (2004) says that despite the need for goods created by a decade of depression and war, consumers in the United States were at first careful with spending their savings and war bonds. But an assembly of multiple actors (governments, labour unions, business, mass media, advertisers) propagated the notion that consuming, rather than indulgence, was a question of “civic responsibility” through which living standards of all Americans would be raised, by creating more jobs and consequently more consumers (Cohen, 2004, p.236).

In this period in Europe, Trentmann (2016) highlights the role of states in the consumer boom, as they decreased social inequalities by expanding social services in housing, health and education. He also reports throughout history and in different countries the emergence of consumer organisations and of cooperatives of consumers, showing the agency of consumers in lobbying for their rights and in actively shaping the consumption that is available to them.

#### 3.4.3. From 1960 to present

The 1960s and 1970s saw problems with demand, as markets were saturated with standardised goods, the norm in post-war production. Streeck (2012), political economist, describes how advancing technology allowed producers to re-engineer products and processes, in order to diversify and differentiate previously standardised products, cars for example. This contributed to accelerated obsolescence and to the idea that only markets can satisfy consumers' specific and individual demands (Streeck, 2012).

Since the 1970s, and more significantly since the 1990s, consumption has been shaped by economic policies termed neoliberal, espoused by countries such as the US and the UK and by international organisations, such as the World Trade Organisation (Klein, 2015). Neoliberal policies champion free trade and promote globalisation in the form of extending global trade networks, with the goals of economic efficiency. They have allowed for lower costs in manufacturing and subsequently, lower prices and higher demand for mass goods. These policies are criticised for benefitting mainly multinational corporations and threatening the development of local economies in less industrialised countries. But they are also promoted for stimulating the emergence of a consumer middle class in developing countries, through which wealth would trickle down (Kutting, 2004). Consumer aspirations have also increased and changed throughout the world, due to “the spread of global mass media, tourism, immigration, the export of popular culture and the marketing activities of transnational firms” (Ger and Belk, 1996, p.271). Currently, widespread access to social media only increases this phenomenon.

## 4. Conceptual framework

The cross-disciplinary review shows that there is a diversity of answers to the question of “what influences consumption?”. The conceptual framework represented in Fig. 5 is an attempt at integrating cross-disciplinary views. In this framework, consumption is seen as influenced by three levels: micro, meso and macro. These levels interact with each other (visible by the black arrows), and

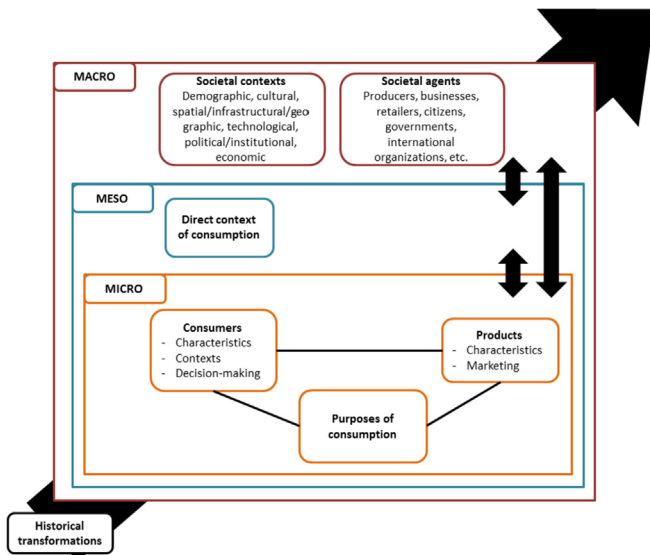


Fig. 5. What influences consumption? a conceptual framework.

they undergo historical transformations through time (depicted by the wide arrow in the background).

At the micro level, consumption is influenced by the following: i) consumers (characteristics, contexts and decision-making); ii) purposes of consumption; and iii) products (characteristics and marketing). However, consumption decisions often take place at a meso level. This level refers to the direct context in which consumption occurs (e.g. supermarket, online shop, etc.) Ultimately, consumption is also influenced by the macro level, i.e. societal contexts and agents (e.g. governments, businesses, citizens, trade organisations, etc.). Societal agents shape and are shaped by societal contexts (e.g. economics, institutions, politics, infrastructure). Elements at the micro and meso levels are also influenced by societal contexts and agents.

In Fig. 6, we show how the framework can be applied to show how historical changes in the different elements contributed to the growth of consumption. Consumption growth in history results from the interconnected changes in societal contexts, consumers and products, purposes of consumption and the actions of agents

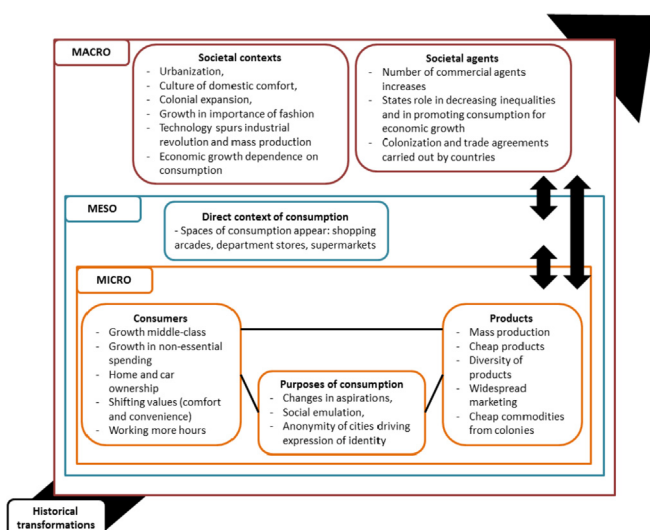


Fig. 6. What influenced the historical growth of consumption?.

other than consumers.

## 5. Discussion

The initial aim of this paper was to provide a cross-disciplinary overview of explanations for what influences consumption. The cross-disciplinary review described four general themes of explanations, which were integrated into a conceptual framework. In this section, we discuss the added value and the limitations of reviewing 10 disciplines to better understand what influences consumption. For each theme (themes 3.3 and 3.4 were combined), we discuss 1) the main contribution of this research and 2) suggestions for future research. Afterwards, we discuss general limitations and recommendations.

### 5.1. Diversity of consumption purposes

#### 5.1.1. Main contribution

Section 3.1 shows that consumption fulfils a rich diversity of purposes: individual preservation and survival, individual aspirations and satisfaction, social, practical and political. The results demonstrate that different disciplines sometimes explain consumption through similar purposes (see Fig. 3), e.g. neurosciences and anthropology mention kin care and expressing devotion, respectively. We have not found in literature such a cross-disciplinary summary of the purposes of consumption, although some authors, like historian Trentmann (2016), refer to a diversity of reasons for why people consume. Somewhat analogously, Middlemiss (2018) reviews disciplinary explanations for unsustainable consumption, although not focusing specifically on purposes.

In some disciplines, like sociology and anthropology, different decades saw different purposes dominating their inquiry (Ilmonen, 2001). The currently trendy practices approach that highlights the practical purposes of consumption, overtook the cultural approach, which focused on meaning and identity. While new trends bring new insights, the dominance of any explanatory theory is counterproductive. Theories or explanations that stop being dominant do not stop being relevant, and they still have explanatory power which should not be forgotten. We believe such a cross-disciplinary visualisation of consumption purposes can help keep this diversity in mind.

#### 5.1.2. Suggestions

Two central research questions that could be asked. One, are all purposes innate in human beings, or have purposes evolved—and how have the ways through which purposes are fulfilled evolved? The purpose of expressing one's identity appears to have developed more in modern history, triggered by the anonymity of city living and by the increasing affordability of consumer goods (Røpke, 1999). The second question is how purposes could still be fulfilled with reduced consumption. This question could be explored by investigating consumers who aim to reduce their consumption and make it more sustainable.

### 5.2. Consumer behaviour – merits and limitations of marketing

#### 5.2.1. Main contribution

Reviewing consumer behaviour across disciplines revealed the substantial cross-disciplinary work conducted by the marketing discipline, and it brought marketing's merits and limitations to the fore. Of all the reviewed disciplines, marketing is undoubtedly the most interdisciplinary, and it offers the most complex description of consumption. Marketing's models of consumer behaviour, although focused on consumer decision-making, acknowledge the

existence of political, economic and sociocultural contexts, and our own conceptual framework builds on those models.

The limitations of marketing become evident, when seeing that these contexts are not very much studied, as they are seen as less malleable, in contrast with the factors that can be influenced by marketing (“marketing mix”: product, price, promotion and place). This might be caused by the agenda of marketing discipline and practice. The goal is not only to understand consumer behaviour, but to influence it as well. Some marketing authors might insist that marketing merely identifies consumer needs in order to meet them, but others argue that marketing (practice) creates new needs, stimulating more consumption and a materialistic culture (Black et al., 2017), even if it could be used to stimulate less consumption (see research on “demarketing”, e.g. Sodhi (2011)). Leaving aside the discussion on the role of marketing for sustainable consumption, we want to show the limitations of marketing in explaining consumption by focusing on two examples.

First, there is a tendency in the marketing textbooks reviewed (Peter et al., 1999; Kotler et al., 2008) to provide case-studies and examples of multinational corporations and brands. Bocconcelli et al. (2018) mention that large companies have always received more attention from marketing, and that knowledge about small and medium enterprises (SMEs) is still lacking, as usually SMEs were assumed to be just a smaller scale version of large organisations. In addition, less attention is paid to the wide diversity of contexts of SMEs (Jocumsen, 2004). Although apparently there is growing research on marketing of SMEs, the textbooks still highlight marketing in the context of multinationals. As small, local businesses can provide alternatives to mass-produced globalised products, one could ask how would marketing strategies differ, and be adapted to small businesses with little time and resources to spend on marketing. Perhaps marketing textbooks—the main introductory mean to the discipline—could be adapted to be of service not only to corporations but also to small businesses, producers, artisans and cooperatives, which also provide part of the world’s consumption.

The second example is how the notion of consumer “knowledge” is described as something that influences consumer behaviour. It is straightforward to think that all kinds of knowledge influence consumer behaviour. However, in marketing textbooks, the examples refer to the knowledge of certain brands.

### 5.2.2. Suggestions

We argue that for the purpose of reducing and changing consumption, knowledge other than of brands is interesting to investigate: knowledge of repairing and maintaining practices, of using less and more environmental products, knowledge of the environmental and social consequences in the supply chains of most products (among all kinds of people). This understanding of knowledge and skills is also proposed by Thøgersen (2014) as one of the human limitations that causes unsustainable consumption.

### 5.3. Role of history and of non-consumer agents

#### 5.3.1. Main contribution

In Sections 3.3 and 3.4, we showed the interactions between large scale societal contexts, the agency of businesses, states and consumers, and historical transformations in society. The importance of looking at the agency of non-consumer actors is in line with Akenji (2014), who calls it avoiding consumer scapegoatism, and with Sanne (2002), who emphasises the role of businesses, governments and people as citizens.

The dynamic between agents, technology and societal contexts becomes more tangible when focusing on specific cases. For example, washing machines were intended to save time, but people

today own more clothes, which they wash more often, as standards of cleanliness have also changed (Røpke, 1999, p.412). The complex dynamics between agents, contexts and products are evident when studying the history of consumption.

The historical view is seldom researched within sustainable consumption (with some exceptions: Røpke (1999) and Chappells and Trentmann (2015)). A historical perspective is essential because it reminds us that societies were once different, even not that long ago. Many countries have transitioned to open market economies in the last 50 years. There is still a lot of memory, perhaps of poverty, which might have contributed to embracing consumption (Røpke, 1999), but also of knowledge of living with less and without wasting.

#### 5.3.2. Suggestions

The first question that can be asked is what forces caused that knowledge to become less important, and can this knowledge be still revived and used? A second question is itself triggered by bringing to light the role that different agents played in stimulating consumption through history, that of which agents should influence societal contexts in ways that stimulate sustainable consumption, and how they can do it.

### 5.4. A more nuanced understanding of consumption – but what about production?

#### 5.4.1. Main contribution

Integrating cross-disciplinary explanations for what influences consumption leads us to depict consumption as embedded in three levels and across multiple contexts, influenced by many agents and elements. These results support viewing consumption as a systemic problem, entrenched within economic and political systems in modern societies, as stressed by other authors (e.g. Akenji, 2014; Brown et al., 2017; Fuchs and Lorek, 2005). But our framework also regards the role of consumers, emphasising that for consumption to be truly understood, all levels, with corresponding agents, contexts and elements, have to be considered.

#### 5.4.2. Limitations and suggestions

When seeking explanations for what influences consumption, we often found answers that pointed to production (e.g. products, marketing, producers). It appears that consumption is inseparable from production, and that it makes more sense to speak of production-consumption systems (Vergragt et al., 2014; Geels et al., 2015). While it was outside of our scope, it would be equally important to understand what influences production. How would a conceptual framework for what influences production look like?

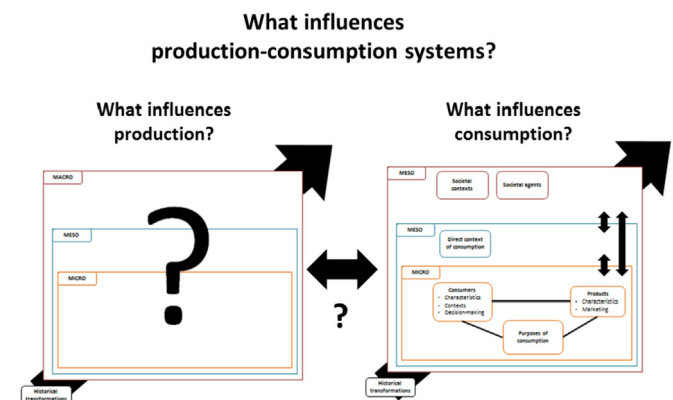
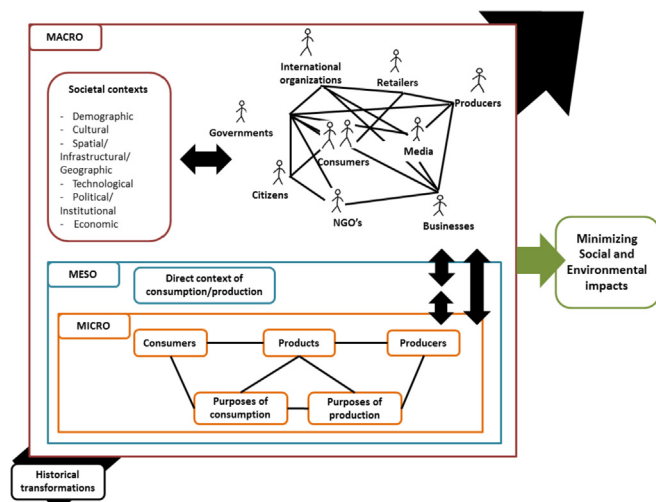


Fig. 7. What influences production-consumption systems is still unknown.



**Fig. 8.** Researching production-consumption systems in order to understand how to minimise social and environmental impacts - a hypothetical framework.

How can the dynamics between production and consumption systems be understood? These questions are represented in Fig. 7.

Understanding production-consumption systems is relevant because sustainability can only be achieved when the environmental and social impacts from these systems are greatly reduced, both through changes in the material nature of what is produced and consumed and through an overall scaling-down of these systems. Assessing impacts of consumption was also out of our scope, but ultimately for the goal of sustainability, we should investigate what kinds of interactions between the different elements of the framework can contribute to minimising social and environmental impacts of production-consumption systems.

In Fig. 8, we hypothesise how a framework including production systems could look like, and we highlight interactions not only between agents and contexts, but also between agents themselves.

At the micro level, we speculate that producers would have their own production purposes, which would be also related to the products. Again, all levels are interacting and undergo historical transformations. Future research could investigate what kind of interactions between all levels, agents and contexts contribute to reduced social and environmental impacts and what is required from the different contexts and agents to reduce impacts.

Using a broad definition of consumption was useful to keep a wide cross-disciplinary perspective and allowed to build the conceptual framework. However, to apply the framework, it would be better to focus on specific cases of consumption, or of production-consumption systems, as reiterated by Geels et al. (2015) and Fine (2016). Likewise, cross-disciplinary research is essential to keep in mind the multiple facets of a phenomenon, but it is not necessarily always required when investigating specific aspects of that phenomenon. The interactions between the levels of Fig. 8, represented by the double arrows and their relations to social and environmental impacts, are to our knowledge less widely investigated in literature. That knowledge will likely require disciplinary and cross-disciplinary work and is essential to devise sustainable production and consumption policies, which are at the core of the UN's Sustainable Development Goal Number 12: Responsible Consumption and Production (UNDP, 2018).

## 6. Conclusion

Drawing from 10 disciplines to investigate what influences

consumption allowed us to represent consumption as influenced by three levels, where multiple agents, contexts and other elements interact and which undergo historical transformations. These results add cross-disciplinary evidence to claims that consumption should be conceptualised as a systemic issue (including consumers) rather than an individual consumer phenomenon. We showed as well that, contrary to common discourse, consumption is not mainly caused by individual greed, or status purposes, but that there is a rich diversity of explanations for what influences consumption.

While production was out of our scope, the results often mentioned production, products and producers as influences of consumption, suggesting that consumption is inseparable from production. To contribute to the SDG Goal of Responsible Consumption and Production, future disciplinary and cross-disciplinary research on production-consumption systems should investigate which kinds of interactions between levels, agents and contexts can lead to minimising social and environmental impacts.

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