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Published online: 14 Nov 2023.

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Ethical consumption in three stages: a focus on sufficiency and care

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ABSTRACT

Given the excessive consumption of natural resources in affluent contexts across the world, this paper argues that there is a need to discuss, critique, and advance the concept of ethical consumption, which is commonly understood as involving only relatively minor practices of consumption refinement, such as acts of boycotting and buycotting. The paper does so by linking ethical consumption to the concepts of sufficiency and care and suggesting a temporal categorization. The sufficiency lens is applied to show why and how the understanding of ethical consumption cannot be restricted to that of consumption refinement but must also address consumption reduction, due to high ecological and climate footprints in many countries. A temporal categorization is helpful for further expanding on this idea. Therefore, we propose understanding ethical consumption in three stages; *pre-consumption*, *consumption* and *post-consumption*. Finally, we emphasize the need to nurture a culture of responsibility and a sense of caring for others, including people, materials, and nature. Such a more comprehensive framework could help bring attention to both the promises and contradictions within ethical consumption, and some avenues for further research are suggested in the conclusion.

1. Introduction

The excessive consumption of natural resources has led to an alarming state of our planet. Recent bodies of research indicate that a plurality of changes, involving behavioural, social, economic, cultural, technological, and political aspects are needed to equip us to combat resource degradation and climate change (Alfredsson et al. 2018; Persson and Klintman 2021; Sandberg 2021; Welch and Southerton 2019; Welch, Sahakian, and Wahlen 2022). Environmental social science has taken significant strides in closely examining factors that contribute to unsustainable consumption patterns and volumes. Simultaneously, it is actively exploring potential avenues for counteraction. This paper focuses on ethical consumption, departing from the assumption that practices of ethical consumption could potentially play a crucial role if understood in a different way than what is frequently found in both scholarship and policy.

Ethical consumption has typically been characterized as practices that entail refraining from and/or acquiring specific products or services due to concerns related to their social and environmental impact. This conception has attracted a variety of critiques (see Carrington, Zwick, and Neville 2016; Jacobsen and Dulrud 2007, Soper 2008; Stoner 2021). For instance, ethical consumption is sometimes criticized for potentially rationalizing excessive consumption and supporting growth-oriented economic models; because it perpetuates individual responsibility-taking within the cycle of consumption by creating room for transitioning from A to B rather than prompting reflection on the necessity of consuming specific items. Critical theory addresses this issue to explain how the supposed sovereign eco-consumer fits the dominant neoliberal agenda (Gould, Pellow, and Schnaiberg 2004; Gunderson 2022; Maniates 2001; Stoner 2021; Stuart, Gunderson, and Petersen 2020), which distracts attention away from systematic and structural sources (e.g. capitalism, treadmill of production) of unethical and unsustainable resource consumption/production. This critique, including the request for collective mobilization, is valid, but goes too far in neglecting the possibility of an ethically conscious agency. A related critique of ethical consumption is that it is based on *guilt fetishism* (Cremin 2012). Consumption refinement, it is argued, should not be considered as a safety valve to maintain consumption volume or, worse yet, as a way to justify an increase in consumption in the name of 'ethical' values. Carrington and Chatzidaksi (2018), argue that neoliberal corporate interest has taken advantage of ethical consumption, using initiatives like fair trade, local food systems, and the living wage movement to legitimize the notion of a sustainable growth ideology. That is, it adheres to a market-driven approach, operating within predefined parameters. At the same time, it feeds consumers with the illusion of freedom of choice and consumer sovereignty (see Carrington, Zwick, and Neville 2016). Therefore, it fails to adequately address the pressing

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issue of climate degradation, which demands actions extending beyond mere consumption refinement and requires consumption reduction (Akenji et al. 2021).

While acknowledging limits and critiques of the concept and phenomenon of ethical consumption, we aim to contribute to a nuanced theoretical understanding of the potential of ethical consumption practices for sustainable transformation by suggesting linkages to principles of sufficiency and care. By combining these perspectives, we can both further the critical-analytical gaze on the phenomena and, normatively, provide constructive ways to relate to ethical consumption in practice. Furthermore, we will also add a temporal perspective with the objective of elucidating how various ethical concerns and practices become relevant across three stages of consumption.

Our contribution and line of argument in this paper will accordingly be threefold. In the next section, we provide an overview of ethical consumption, by addressing its various forms and drivers. Then, we explore the interconnection between ethical consumption and sufficiency, arguing why and how they are intertwined. In doing so, we argue that ethical consumption is a multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing often neglected capacities such as care that promote the preservation of resources and societies. In section 3, we delve into the various practices associated with ethical consumption in three stages of consumption process: *pre-consumption, consumption*, and *post-consumption*. We identify different forms of ethical considerations and practices at each stage and discuss the extent to which ethical consumption and sufficiency-oriented practices complement (or contradict) each other at different stages of the consumption process. In section 4, the argument is developed one step further by introducing the notion of care, for instance how caring for others and for material belongings can bring about changes in the different stages of consumption and bridge them together. We end the article with a conclusion section and provide an outline of some potential directions for future research.

2. Ethical consumption and sufficiency

Ethical consumption refers to consumption practices that carry a sense of responsibility towards society and the environment (see Carrington et al. 2021; Casais and Faria 2022; Chatzidakis, Shaw, and Allen 2021; Lee, Jin, and Shin 2018; Li et al. 2020). That is, associated practices with this concept are commonly understood as practices that aim to protect natural resources from devastation, contamination, and depletion, as well as to prevent inequality, exploitation, and injustice in societies (see Costa Pinto et al. 2020; Lee, Jin, and Shin 2018). Ethically oriented consumers normally go beyond instant gratification in their decisions and are more concerned about the consequences of their

purchasing and consumption decisions and practices than neutral consumers. Therefore, they have created various ways to participate in resource-protection practices and reduce their anthropogenic impacts. In scholarship of political consumerism, scholars have identified different forms of political consumption, including boycotts, buycotts (buying to support a practice), lifestyle political consumerism and discursive political consumerism (see Boström, Micheletti, and Oosterveer 2019). These categories can be applied to ethical consumerism as well. These forms of consumption have the message that in comparison to neutral consumers, ethically conscious consumers are more concerned about the consequences of their consumption activities on the lives of others, both near and far as well as their present and future. Simply put, ethically conscious consumers care about the well-being of other people and species in addition to their own self-interest (Barnett et al. 2005; De Pelsmacker, Driesen, and Rayp 2005; Pellandini-Simányi 2014).

'Ethical consumers' express their concerns through various actions. One way they do this is by engaging in practices such as sharing possessions or purchasing second-hand goods, which helps preserve natural resources. They also take the initiative to inquire about the raw materials used in production processes and the detrimental effects of human activities on the environment, striving to minimize their impact on consumption. Additionally, ethical consumers actively engage in discussions with others, raising awareness about individual responsibilities in environmental protection or degradation. They may choose to boycott or protest against services or producers that harm the environment or society while supporting those entities that demonstrate contrasting values. Moreover, ethical consumers embrace simpler and less materialistic lifestyles, aiming to reduce their ecological footprint. They also prioritize fair labour conditions, encompassing factors such as wages, working environments, and human dignity. In addition to these efforts, ethical consumers may actively engage in campaigns against oppressive regimes, their servants, and products associated with them. They strive to isolate the agents of such regimes from international networks, aiming to bring attention to and combat human rights abuses and social injustices (see Boström, Micheletti, and Oosterveer 2019; Harrison, Newholm, and Shaw 2005). We should emphasize that what we here call "ethical consumer" is an ideal type. Even if some people are more ethically conscious than others, in everyday reality, they will likely inconsistently apply ethical principles in consumption practices due to the variety of social circumstances as well as consumption domains.

The literature demonstrates that a variety of factors serve as drivers for individuals to engage in ethically oriented activities, including responsibility to others

(see Carrington et al. 2021), emotions (Berki-Kiss and Menrad 2022; Gregory-Smith, Smith, and Winklhofer 2013), religious beliefs (Schneider, Krieger, and Bayraktar 2011), seeking minimalism (Uggla 2019), cosmopolitanism (Lee, Jin, and Shin 2018), anticipatory guilt (Steenhaut and van Kenhove 2006), and pride (Gregory-Smith, Smith, and Winklhofer 2013). People may purchase organic foods for their own health, or they may share goods with others to save money, appear 'good' to their peers, and develop trust and social capital within the community (see Carfagna et al. 2014 on eco-habits). While it may be argued that self-oriented motivations and behaviours are not ethical (Harrison, Newholm, and Shaw 2005), part of the literature suggests that both self-oriented and other-oriented actions can be combined to form acts of ethical or political consumerism (see Carrington et al. 2021; Micheletti 2003). It could be argued that simultaneously caring for oneself and possessing a sense of empathy and responsibility for others is common in most ethically oriented consumption practices. These concerns have gained significant recognition and prevalence within modern Western consumer culture in the last decades. Such practices have, however, been traced in this culture before capitalism gained prominence in shaping consumption patterns in this region. For instance, through the Calvinist condemnation of consumption and promotion of plain life, frugality was a part of consumer culture in Europe throughout the 1700s (Lastovicka et al. 1999).

Ethical consumption and sufficiency are intricately intertwined, even though the literature may use other terminology. For many people, ethical consumption is akin to principles such as thriftiness and asceticism, which urge adherents to pursue spiritual growth by avoiding squandering God's blessings. In East Asian cultures, such as Buddhism (as explored by Lage 2022), and within religions like Islam, which holds prominence in the Middle East and some African countries, ideas with resemblance to sufficiency have deep cultural roots. Sufficiency can also be related to various cultural values seen among some traditional communities. Consequently, religious communities with a stronger reliance on land and agriculture exhibited a greater inclination towards sufficiency-oriented visions, primarily driven by the need to ensure livelihood security. Thus, although sufficiency may be a novel term in the field of sustainability literature, it has historically held significant importance in various societies (Belk 1983; Lastovicka et al. 1999) albeit not necessarily linked to environmental protection or concerns.

Both ethical consumption and sufficiency approaches have addressed norms and value changes on the consumption side. In Slower Consumption, Cooper (2005) argues that sufficiency approaches carry the idea that consumption patterns in affluent nations should not come at the expense of people in other parts of the world and future generations. Recently, in a systemic review conducted by Jungell-Michelsson and Heikkurinen (2022), it was argued that altruism constitutes a fundamental principle of sufficiency. In line with this, other scholars, informed by social practice theory, shed light on the importance of caring about others and nature within the sufficiency culture (see Beyeler and Jaeger-Erben 2022) and ethics of care (Gram-Hanssen 2021). These perspectives on sufficiency exhibit ideas around ethical considerations, thereby presenting opportunities to explore the convergence of ethical consumption and sufficiency to enrich the implications of both concepts. These approaches acknowledge agency, without placing the main burden on individuals, and address the possibility of intentionally changing consumers' values, attitudes, and practices about levels of consumption while maintaining or even increasing their quality of life.

According to Sandberg (2021), sufficiency is manifested through four types of changes in consumption: *absolute reduction*, *modal shifts (*from one mode of consumption to another one), *sharing practices*, and *product longevity*. The perceived meaning of sufficiency within this typology is similar to that of ethical consumption. That is, both emphasise consumer-based practices such as reducing consumption or completely avoiding some types of goods and services to protect nature and society. However, the sufficiency literature also more explicitly promotes more radical changes by challenging 'over-consumption as an unnecessary and unsustainable use of scarce resources' (Freudenreich and Schaltegger 2020, 4). The main emphasis in most sufficiency-oriented approaches is staying within limits of – consumption (the idea of 'consumption corridor', see Fuchs et al. 2021) that neither exceeds planetary boundaries (over-consumption) nor imposes deprivation (underconsumption), and that includes consideration of equity (Lehtonen and Heikkurinen 2022). In this regard, sufficiency-oriented norms reflect the idea that our consumption practices are interconnected with others' lives, giving rise to moral concerns. The common emphasis of both these concepts (ethical consumption and sufficiency) on how onsumption practices of an individual or a group may impact both human and non-human entities establish a link between them. This connection can be further accentuated when viewed from a temporal standpoint. The subsequent section delves into the exploration of ethical consumption practices across three distinct stages.

3. Ethical consumption in three stages

In order to clarify the position of 'ethical' in consumption practices, we suggest that ethical consumption practices may be stimulated differently in the three stages which we label *pre-consumption*, *consumption*,

and *post-consumption*. These stages, which are sum-marised in Table 1, bear some resemblance to the three consumption dimensions introduced by Alan Warde: acquisition, appropriation, and appreciation (2010; 2014). We draw on these but pay additional attention to the ways materials are discarded, reused or recycled as possible key topics in ethical considera-tions (see Godin and Langlois 2021; Vitell 2015). We do so because we agree with Evans' (2019) assertion that consumption studies often prioritize the investigation of acquisition and consumption practices, while over-looking the equally significant aspect of handing over commodities, which includes actions such as devalua-tion, divestment, and disposal.

3.1. Pre-consumption

In the *pre-consumption* stage, consumers' demanding, planning and decision-making are in focus, and these processes may or may not be influenced by ethical considerations. It includes (a) social-psychological pro-cesses of needing, wanting, and desiring objects (see Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003; Boström 2023), (b) contemplating if such urges ought to result in posses-sion and if so, through which ways (i.e. conventional markets, flea markets or second-hand markets) and in which quantity, (c) decisions on which products should be chosen or should be disregarded or which compa-nies and services should be supported because of their pro-social or pro-environmental approach and which should be avoided or even boycotted. Planning to move from intensive resource consumption to a more sustainable form (shifting from A to B, such as repla-cing the car with a bicycle) or from fast fashion to products that offer longer durability or repairing ser-vice (see Freudenreich and Schaltegger 2020) is akin to what ethically conscious consumers do to protest

(boycotting) or support (buycotting) specific policies, products and services, and norms. Most studies on ethical consumption have focused on this stage and on how factors such as economic status, availability, knowledge and awareness, individual preferences and values, and social norms influence decision-making (for instance, see Ackermann and Gundelach 2020).

This stage can be very short, as in an impulse buy (although the social-psychological processes trigger-ing the impulsive purchase can be longer), or it can take much longer for a large or important purchase. Longer *pre-consumption* phases can involve learning about the item itself and the ethical aspects of having or not having an item, comparing prices, and other considerations, which may or may not involve deciding whether to advocate for or against specific businesses or organisations, products, production processes, poli-cies, communities, people, or services. Hence, the course of the *pre-consumption* stage can be influenced by a combination of personal and non-personal fac-tors, which may be shaped by local, national, or global issues, including media coverage of various topics. As an illustration, consumers may consider to avoid con-suming non-seasonal fruits and vegetables due to their detrimental environmental effects; or may deliberate over buying local products to support the local labour force, national products to support political or cultural priorities (such as nationalism or religious food regula-tions like halal products), or international goods to support fairtrade and cosmopolitanism. Pellandini-Simányi (2014, 145) distinguishes between patriotic consumers who 'choose products with a higher con-tent of local raw materials and labour' and more glob-ally oriented consumers concerned about worldwide inequality.

In the context of ethical consumption practices, one may ask how well social regimes including markets and

Table 1. Consumption stages.

Stages	Processes	Sufficiency ethics
Pre-consumption	Practices of acquiring services and commodities: • Experiencing needs and desire • Contemplating • Planning • Deciding	• Developing ethical literacy, learning • Evaluating specific objects • Evaluating consumption volumes
Consumption	Practices of appropriation and appreciation: • Purchase • Adaptation to domestic context • Using	• Extending life span of goods by mindful usage, • Repairing (function, aesthetics) • Resource-efficient use of goods • Slow consumption
Post-consumption	Practices of handing over things: • Discarding waste • New cycle of consumption • Reclaiming • Expanding the purpose of use	• Minimizing waste • Carefully discarding, redesign • Repurposing, sharing • Dampening cycles of desire

systems of provision can facilitate consumers' access to products considered ethical. Consumers' acquisitions are highly dependent on the economic system, system of provision, and infrastructure arrangements (Carrington, Zwick, and Neville 2016; Evans 2019). In addition, micro factors such as financial status, individual's values, attitudes, knowledge, and social relationships also influence how ethical consumption plays out in everyday practice (Carrington, Neville, and Whitwell 2010; Zaikauskaitė et al. 2022). While the *pre-consumption* stage serves as an entry point for ethical consumption, it does not guarantee it, as research demonstrates inconsistencies and discrepancies between intentions and actual behaviour for various reasons like costs, limited availability or conflicting social norms (see Ackermann and Gundelach 2020; De Pelsmacker, Janssens, and Mielants 2005; Wiederhold and Martinez 2018; Zaikauskaitė et al. 2022). Accordingly, ethical considerations may fail to be practised and moved forward to the *consumption* stage.

The likelihood of ethical consumption and sufficiency coming together increases when people, at this stage, engage in thoughtful considerations of the quantity of their consumption. For example, this contemplation might lead the person to exercise restraint in acquiring goods or services (e.g. frugality). It can involve questions such as how well a particular product, or more generally a certain shopping habit, really enhances one's life, including social relations. The potential of reducing the quantity of consumption in the context of ethical consumption can be triggered as a response to social and environmental concerns, particularly new insights about the problems of high ecological and climate footprints in wealthy parts of the world (see Akenji et al. 2021; Li et al. 2020). Sufficiency approaches can also relate to social justice arguments focused on keeping consumption volume at a level that guarantees decent life for everyone (Lage 2022). Such reduction of consumption volumes for ethical reasons can be accomplished by ideas around alternative lifestyles such as voluntary simplicity, minimalism, conviviality, and downsizing. Such alternatives emerge when people prioritize social and environmental concerns over personal well-being and act beyond self-interest replacing the pursuit of pleasure through material acquisition with alternative forms of consumption-related satisfaction (see next subsection). At this point, sufficiency and ethical consumption intersect as they both involve a heightened sense of responsibility for the well-being of human and non-human. This entails reducing consumption in light of ethical considerations, which can be accomplished by purchasing fewer items or opting for less resource-intensive products.

3.2 Consumption stage

While the *pre-consumption* stage involves considering a purchase of an object, the *consumption* stage begins when the actual purchase is made, marking the completion of a market transaction. The *consumption* stage involves, accordingly, the completed act of *purchasing* the item and then *using* it. The process of using involves appropriation, and therefore, consumption per se is in the spotlight (see Warde 2010; Evans 2019; Sassatelli 2007, 101–106, on the appropriation of commodities). Appropriation, which refers to 'adaptation and using up of items' (Warde 2014, 284) is shaped by the expectations people have of the goods and services they obtain, which may be based on prior consumption experience, information exchange, or the consumer's imagination. Put simply, appropriation includes how goods are used for personal, social, and practical purposes (Southerton 2013). Commodities are appropriated for reasons such as personal taste including moral, social, symbolic, and aesthetic judgements (Evans 2019). These are further shaped by motivations connected to memories, positive emotions, pleasure-seeking, identity, social status, convenience, and more (Boström 2023). Ethical considerations in this stage concern the manner of consumption: to what extent people care for their material belongings to expand their lifespan. It can also involve minimizing/reducing resource consumption (energy, water, etc.).

Furthermore, it involves the responsible care and maintenance of one's possessions to extend their lifespan, thereby reducing the need for constant new consumption and high volumes of waste. Good caring and maintenance hold the potential to introduce a moral dimension that encourages a re-evaluation of consumption practices. For example, individuals avoid buying new items such as shoes, clothes, electronic devices, home appliances and so on because their existing possessions function well. In the sufficiency literature, decelerating (Freudenreich and Schaltegger 2020) and slower consumption (Cooper 2005) describe this phenomenon. Caring is also associated with product longevity (Cooper 2005; Sandberg 2021) and requires possessing a good-quality commodity. In this stage, ethically conscious consumers may prioritize durability over disposability, which is an important area for literature on ethical consumption to further explore.

Practices of consuming less demonestrate how new meaning can be associated with the limited number of goods one possesses (Callmer 2019; Uggla 2019). Having access to smaller quantity of goods implies that more time can be devoted to each item, promoting greater care and appreciation for the possessions one has or can access. Schor and Thompson (2014) suggest the term 'true materialism' to characterise

this phenomenon and to distinguish it from the hunt for status and throw-away mentality, often called materialism, connected to the values of mainstream consumer culture and fast fashion. In contrast, true materialism involves an appreciation of an object's materiality, including its texture, aroma, construction, taste, and other qualities. 'True materialism is an ecological, social, and aesthetic commitment to respect the materiality of products and the people who made them' (Schor and Thompson 2014, 14). Highlighting the importance of responsible and sustainable ownership, embracing sufficiency at this stage encourage individuals to contemplate the ethical implications of their consumption practices beyond the act of purchasing itself.

3.3 Post-consumption stage

A more complete development of ethical considerations would extend beyond mere consumption. In the *post-consumption* stage, different ways of divestment and disposing of an item can become a focal point. Sociopsychological processes such as remembering and longing for the item once it is gone can be activated in this stage. Such post-consumption feelings might lead to feedback loops and new cycles of consumption of the same or similar thing (for example, see Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003, on the concept cycles of desire). By combining the perspectives of ethical consumption and sufficiency, we can see that the *post-consumption* stage may involve reclaiming practices such as restoring discarded items, allowing them to be utilized again in the future or repurposed for a different usage (see Scott and Weaver 2018).

Ethical practices in this stage concern careful waste management such as recycling or efforts to bring the item back into use, for example through handing them over to second-hand (circular economy) and flea markets, as well as re-use, repair, re-design and sharing. While certain practices like re-design or re-use might not have been explicitly addressed in the realm of ethical consumption, they are widely acknowledged as actions undertaken by consumers for diverse purposes such as minimizing consumption, reducing waste generation, and preserving resources. Hence, post-consumption habits hold the capacity to encompass ethical considerations.

During this stage, the primary emphasis is placed on sustaining the item within the cycle of use by involving other users or expanding its purpose. The pleasures of consumption (appreciation) lead sooner or later to devaluation (Evans 2019) and both the economic and cultural values of goods are reduced or lost over time. Devaluation also happens with repetition. Repetition

carries the risk of reducing the duration of the consumption stage, mainly because our consumer culture promotes novelty (Bauman 2007; Jackson 2017). The urge for novelty implies the rapid obsolescence and turnover of products, exemplified by fast fashion. The concept of a 'cycle of desire', which has been suggested to capture this restlessness in consumer culture (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003), involves accelerated processes of devaluation through the mechanism of insatiable demand. In this regard, Cooper (2005) argues that obsolescence has several aspects other than physical degradation. One is psychological obsolescence, which links more to aesthetics and social constructs, and another is economic obsolescence: it is often cheaper to buy new products than to repair them. Hence, the process of devaluation is also a multifactor phenomenon, involving economic, socio-psychological, and cultural dimensions. An important aspect of ethical consumption is to counteract such processes of rapid devaluation, efforts to resist cycles of desire, and slowing down the entrance of the *post-consumption* stage.

Within the framework of ethical consumption, the cultivation of an ethically conscious post-consumption stage has the potential to address the drawbacks of the 'cycle of desire' and mitigate the adverse effects of excessive consumerism. The appreciation and depreciation of the economic and cultural worth of goods can persist in various forms as they are supplied to new users. New cycles of users create new values and hence extend the life cycle of materials. When people find themselves bored with their belongings, they can take proactive steps by giving, sharing, or selling them to others, enabling them to embark on a new cycle of acquisition and appropriation. This facilitates to transfer items to new users, extending their lifespan and hence reducing waste. Materials can be supplied to others for several ethical reasons, ranging from supporting individuals who are less privileged to concerns about resource depletion. Moreover, exchanging one's belongings can be motivated by the desire for variety and creativity. By engaging in such practices, people may seek to contribute to sufficiency-oriented practices such as a more equitable distribution of resources, and minimising waste, while at the same time facilitating a demand for novelty and curiosity. Accordingly, sufficiency norms can contribute to bolstering ethical considerations in the *post-consumption* stage.

4. Care and devaluation of excessive consumption

In today's increasingly complicated state of the planet, simply changing our consumption practices may not be enough for one to be recognized as an ethical consumer. One could argue that pursuing more than

basic needs satisfaction without considering its impact on others' lives reflects a certain level of ignorance and can be deemed irresponsible and unethical to uphold the public good. This is the moment where responsibility-taking plays a key role. In this article, we introduce attention to responsibility-taking in the form of 'care'. The disconnect between concepts such as ethical consumption, sufficiency, and responsibility (care) implies neglecting attention to issues such as the depletion of valuable resources, the perpetuation of artificial needs, and the generation of significant amounts of meaningless waste (throwaway culture). These consequences sometimes even come about under the guise of ethical consumption as the primary focus remains on refining consumption rather than reducing it. Without embracing care and responsibility-taking, consumers may be unable to break free from the overwhelming abundance of false needs and unnecessary satisfiers (see Spangenberg and Lorek 2019), or only seek light green 'environmentally friendly' choices in the chase for cultural capital and social status (Carfagna et al. 2014).

Care is a multifaceted concept that has recently gained more attention in consumption studies (see Godin 2022; Godin and Langlois 2021; Gram-Hanssen 2021; Shaw et al. 2017; Shaw, McMaster, and Newholm 2016; Wahlen and Stroude 2023). It spans across multiple dimensions, including person-to-person, person-to-material, and person-to-nature relationships. Caring involves taking on responsibilities not only towards those in close proximity but also towards individuals who may be distant, considering the needs and well-being of both present and future generations, as well as well-being of the natural world (for a detailed review of the concept of care see e.g. Shaw et al. 2017; Tronto 2013). According to Gherardi and Rodeschini (2016), care is defined in relation to ethical conceptions and in this article we argue that this can contribute to additional conceptual bridges between ethical consumption and sufficiency. The ethical implications of caring include a sense of responsibility that consumers bear for the benefit of the public and respect for the effort, time, and creativity invested in transforming raw materials into products for consumption. A common sense of caring in the context of ethical consumption is, for instance, buying fair trade products with the aim of caring for 'distant others' (see De Pelsmacker, Janssens, and Mielants 2005; Godin 2022; Shaw, McMaster, and Newholm 2016). Furthermore, caring in the specific context of consumption refers to the idea that we need to maintain our belongings in a way to keeps them usable for a longer time (see Shaw et al. 2017; Tronto 2013).

However, a caring attitude, framed within sufficiency-oriented principles, may still appear as exception. Such a caring attitude faces inherent incompatibility with structural and cultural features of mainstream society, including norms, practices, values, beliefs, and obligations that promote various forms of mass/excess consumption. Furthermore, macrolevel factors, such as production regulations, neoliberal market ideology, and the singular pursuit of economic growth present additional challenges to the widespread adoption of caring. The neoliberal market ideology even applauds a sense of irresponsibility: as autonomous sovereign consumers we ought to care only for our self-interest, which will automatically benefit the public. In this consumer culture, care is understood as *to consume*, consume for the sake of keeping the economic wheels spinning, for jobs, welfare, and economic growth. You care for others by (over)consumption (see Boström 2023).

These contradictory notions of caring are likely to become more present in debates on ethical consumption. The sufficiency approach helps to highlight these. Indeed, the notion of caring has gained increasing significance in consumption studies, driven by the precarious state of our current lifestyle, which poses a threat to the well-being of all living beings. There is also a compelling argument for the ethical implications of caring (Godin 2022; Shaw et al. 2017; Wahlen and Stroude 2023). When people actively engage in caring practices and, inspired by sufficiency principles, value the resources and materials that contribute to our possessions, they can take significant steps towards minimizing ecological footprints and waste. By doing so, they may even shield themselves from the overwhelming influence of constant novelty, boredom, and the 'cycle of desire' in contemporary consumer culture (Jackson 2017).

Caring practices may be stimulated for many reasons including financial restrictions, and attention to the health, status and well-being of family members, and prosperity in the local community. In these cases, a caring culture could, due to goal- and value-conflicts, have adverse environmental consequences rather than promoting environmentally sustainable practices; see Boström (2023) and Gram-Hanssen (2021). However, caring practices could also integrate pro-environmental concerns and being informed by a sufficiency principle. The question is: how can a culture of sufficiency and caring reinforce one another?

A comprehensive answer to this question is beyond the scope of this paper. Here we are just suggesting that, along with sufficiency principles, we may look at caring culture as a unifying force of responsibility-taking that connects the three consumption stages. We provide one example: the embodiment of caring values that place importance on extending the lifespan of products. In the pre-*consumption stage*, consumers can actively seek out high-quality products that align with this value. They can then adopt a mindful approach to using their belongings, promoting

coherency with their possessions. In this context, their engagement goes beyond mere consumption, transforming into a lifestyle intertwined with their cherished commodities which in the long run leads to cultivating an 'alternative rationale' (Gherardi and Rodeschini 2016, 268) concerning consumption practices. Possessing high-quality products not only enables consumers to decrease their consumption levels and extend their longevity but also incorporate repairability or reusability, thereby prolonging the *post-consumption* stage as well. Institutional and infrastructural factors can facilitate this. For example, by realising the importance of regulatory changes (Giesler and Veresiu 2014), the European Commission, under the European Green Deal, set a new requirement in March 2022 obliging producers and suppliers to 'make products more durable, reliable, reusable, upgradable, reparable, easier to maintain, refurbish and recycle, and energy and resource-efficient' (European Commission 2022). Higher-quality products will necessarily be more expensive; therefore, the topic of sufficiency must always be connected to solving the problem of drastically increasing inequalities within and across nations (Oxfam 2020). Rising inequality poses a significant obstacle to ethical consumerism as poverty, including relative poverty (how one perceives and compares oneself in relation to other social classes/groups in society), can compel or incentivize a substantial portion of the population to seek out low-cost goods and services (Boström 2023). Accordingly, a caring culture, worthy of its name would always integrate concerns of justice and equality. Extending the life span of products is just one example. More generally, the promotion of a caring culture and the associated devaluation of excessive consumption entails a collective endeavour, necessitating the involvement of a multitude of actors as well as both bottom-up and top-down processes: the public, civil society groups, policy-makers, media and systems of education, and not the least new models for running business (see Gherardi and Rodeschini 2016; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Lage 2022).

5. Conclusion and future research

In this paper, we have advocated for advancing the concept of ethical consumption by emphasizing three key aspects. First, through the lens of sufficiency, we aimed to enhance the agency and critical potential of ethical consumption in relation to the excessive volume of consumption, which has hitherto not received adequate attention in literature. Secondly, we have proposed to understand ethical consumption in three different stages; *pre-consumption*, *consumption* and *post-consumption* to better identify a range of ethical implications and their interconnectedness. Finally, we have explored

how focusing on responsibility-taking in the form of "care" can shed additional light on the evolution of ethical consumption as a concept, thereby expanding its critical edge.

By reading ethical consumption and sufficiency together and understanding their significant overlaps in meaning and implementation, we can expand our gaze on both problematic (e.g. consumption with high ecological and climate footprints) and more promising (long-term sustainable) consumption practices. This would also bring attention to some ethical dilemmas and contradictions in varieties of ethical consumption (for example, between consuming differently versus consuming less). Temporal categorization is a means to gain a deeper understanding of how sufficiency principles can be perceived and applied at various stages of consumption process. It also sheds light on the potential contradictions that might arise within and between these stages. We argue such a categorization is particularly important when sufficiency principles are discussed because features such as extending lifespan of goods, and dampening rapid cycles of desire become critical. By incorporating the aspect of time and different stages, the focus on ethical consumption extends beyond mere consumption refinement and is critical for the ability to trigger consumption reduction.

There is certainly a potential for much research in the study of ethical consumption to explore its connections with caring culture, including broader human relationships as well as that of the material and natural surroundings. While the study of care-related topics has garnered attention in recent years, it is crucial to recognize that our understanding of the interconnectedness and collaborative nature of various caregiving practices is still in its early stages. Exploring how these different forms of care can enhance each other's impact or possibly counteract one another (for instance by the contradictory norms between consumerism and sufficiency) is of paramount importance. By unfolding the mechanism of these relationships, we can better comprehend how they contribute to a mindful lifestyle that prioritizes collective well-being.

Integrating a sense of care into ethical consumption will enable us to affirm that ethical consumption is indeed a collaborative endeavour, even though it is important to recognize that the concept of caring can sometimes be ambiguous and conflicting. Within the case of consumerist culture, individual efforts to address system-wide problems such as overconsumption require massive moves from different actors: for example, non-governmental organisations or grassroots movements to develop interactions and deliberative forums to broaden social acceptance of new-emerging norms (Lorek and Fuchs 2013; Persson and Klintman 2021); as well as policy actors that can stimulate technological, infrastructural, and regulatory

changes. These would not only address consumption practices but also target production cultures and systems in favour of post-growth alternatives. A crucial move is to facilitate willingness to change among all actors from micro to macro contexts. Now, it is clearer than ever that we need collective action for transformative change. Coordinated efforts across scales are necessary to facilitate transformative changes towards sustainability in consumption practices (Beyeler and Jaeger-Erben 2022; Callmer 2019; Karimzadeh and Boström 2022; Persson 2022; Spangenberg and Lorek 2019). Sufficiency and care within the production system remain marginalized and vague because it is totally dominated by an economic system wired towards profit, shareholder values, capital accumulation, market competition, consumerism, and rapid turnover of products as well as a dominant ideological mindset favouring green growth and technological fixes. The possibilities to challenge these forces are gigantic. However, research cannot shy away from the need to also investigate the possibility of ethical production based on fundamentally new principles around sufficiency, care, and values other than profit.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

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