

Limiting Consumption: Leverage Points from Alternative Consumption

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Keywords: Alternative consumption, consumption limits, social practices, leverage points.

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to extend and articulate an understanding of reduction and limits to consumption as a pathway for achieving resource use within planetary limits. We inquire about leverage points to limit consumption. Our units of analysis are initiatives based on practices of alternative consumption. The context for the study is Norway, an affluent society, and the examples are from the city of Trondheim. We enquire with the research question “which aspects of these initiatives could be leverage points for the establishment of consumption limits in everyday life?” We frame alternative consumption as consumption that refrains from mainstream and normalized forms of product acquisition, use, and discarding. Consequently, we frame limiting consumption as a political project that could help in avoiding unnecessary production and waste, which requires changes in the interlinking between materials, meanings and competences. We analyze 11 examples from the data available and propose three leverage points. 1) Technical knowledge and skills — social learning. 2) Motivation — environment, money savings, and community. 3) Social acceptance — transgression. These are three aspects that could aid in bringing about change across multiple social practices. We link these three aspects to the meanings and competences and to the appropriation of production. Autonomy in defining consumption limits could result from a reappropriation of production as part of participation in social practices.

Introduction

This paper is part of an overarching research about the circular economy, alternative futures, and consumption in everyday life. Our main aim is to extend and articulate an understanding of reduction and limits to consumption as a pathway for resource use within planetary limits (Gates et al., 2014). Here, we inquire about leverage points (Meadows, 1999) to limit consumption. Our units of analysis are initiatives that demonstrate and actively promote practices with alternative consumption. Consumption is embedded in and an outcome of social practices (Warde, 2005). Alternative consumption is understood as consumption that refrains from mainstream and normalized forms of product acquisition, use, and discarding, i.e. the purchase of commodities for use during a short period with their eventual disposal as waste in the so-called linear economy. The concept of alternative consumption integrates aspects of diverse economies (Gibson-Graham, 2008), prosumption (Toffler, 1990), and social practices (Shove et al., 2012).

This study is contextualized in Norway, where overconsumption appears to be entrenched in

everyday life. Norway is among the countries with the highest per capita consumption of material resources, calculated in the range of 31 and 44 tons per capita per year (OECD, 2021; Circle Economy, 2020). As an affluent society, Norwegians have access to vast and diverse products and services. Most of the products consumed in Norwegian households are manufactured abroad. Most of the emissions produced for Norwegian consumption are exported to other regions of the world. Limiting consumption implies a responsibility for the emissions at a global scale.

In the city of Trondheim, the municipal authorities promote repair, reuse, and sharing of products as strategies to address high consumption levels. Limiting individual consumption is not an easy target, because of its connection to distribution of welfare and well-being. Norway's State is heavily oriented to governance that favors equal welfare distribution through full employment and taxation, while allowing liberty of decision on aspects of consumption, with some exceptions controlled through specific regulation — for example, taxation and regulation to advertisement to reduce the consumption of

sweets and alcohol. However, interventions supporting modes of alternative consumption based on limits could be integrated as part of a policy mix.

The main inquiry question is ““which aspects of these initiatives could be leverage points for the establishment of consumption limits in everyday life?” We refer to limits as constrained forms of consumption, in stark opposition to overconsumption. Ideas about limiting consumption are found in other concepts such as need satisfaction (Max-Neef, 1998), sufficiency (Princen, 2005), and degrowth (Kallis, 2011). The following section introduces the context of the study and the conceptual framing.

Framing consumption limits

In affluent societies, lifestyles are dependent on the cornucopia of goods available. The overproduction of artifacts is rooted in a distortion of needs and creation of wants, to achieve fast replacement rates and continuous product availability. This does not eliminate the possibility of practices that pose a path to alternative modes of consumption — at a human scale (Max-Neef, 1998).

Limiting consumption could lead to reductions in manufacture and waste streams. Specific modes to limit consumption can be approached through policies that restrict access to resources, individual decisions, and social modes of production and consumption. We do however recognize that limiting consumption must happen within the structure of current capitalistic societies. This means identification of strategies to limit consumption, here explored by addressing existing opportunities for change — proto or niche practices (Shove et al., 2012).

Production activities are required to satisfy the materiality of social practices. Thus, a duality of production and consumption appears a natural and consecutive cycle. The activities of production and consumption are usually studied and accounted for separately as offer and demand. Notwithstanding, offer and demand are mutually influenced, in such a way that demand is cause and consequence of offer — following Shove and Walker (2014), mainstream consumption patterns and arrangements are an outcome of what demand is for. If Warde (2005) is right, changes in social practices could lead to reduced consumption, which could result in less demand.

Material satisfiers play an important role in the satisfaction of human needs. According to

Max-Neef (1998, p.82), the dominant economic discourse implies that development is achieved by reaching the material levels of the most industrialized countries to gain access to a larger spectrum of artifacts. This reification of development in terms of access to material goods is what is known as affluence.

In recent years, the unsustainability of overproduction has been addressed by the proposal of concepts such as the circular economy and the sharing economy. These concepts propose changes in how products are owned, accessed, and distributed, with some strategies that would reduce or eliminate unnecessary manufacturing processes. However, concerns are raised about changes which could lead to inequalities in the opportunities to participate in consumption. Welch et al. (2019) propose to use the concept of consumption work. This means that some of the conveniences and easiness of access in present-day market-based consumption will be lost, requiring more time (from some) to fully participate in the circular economy through certain social practices (Warde, 2005).

In addition to circular and sharing economy, degrowth is one of the political projects that put limiting consumption and production at the forefront. Kallis (2011, p.879) argues that the main requirement in the transition to sustainability, from the perspective of degrowth, is to study the conditions for well-being that stems from equality, relation, and simplicity. Some of the critical voices against degrowth support their claims on fears about scarcity (Kallis, 2021), it is incorrectly assumed that limiting consumption would lead to low standards of living and more inequalities. On the contrary, the idea of having limits is supportive of sufficiency in the use of resources through collective action (Princen, 2005).

Social practices do not change only because a policy mandates it. The same applies to consumption. From a social practice theory perspective the practices that are considered normal emerge and are reproduced in the interlinking of materials, competences, and meanings (Shove et al., 2012). Overconsumption is normalized in the interlinking of products as commodities (materials), purchase convenience (competence) and a disconnect between material sourcing and the needs or wants it fulfills (meanings). This framework allows us to see initiatives that support alternative forms of consumption as involving proto or niche

practices that may offer insights into how to support limited consumption.

The following section describes our empirical approach addressing examples found in the city of Trondheim, Norway.

Materials and Methods

We take inspiration from constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2015; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2019) as an approach to review the examples of alternative consumption found in the city of Trondheim. We interpret and construct data obtained through unstructured interviews (n=8) as our main source, and reinforced by other interactions, field visits, and public events (n=9), as well as internet/social media content (n=4), see Table 1. We approach constructivist grounded theory as an orientation to go over the available data in an iterative and interpretative process.

Example	Sources
Online clothes' repair club	1. Interview — 2. Online content (private social media group, website).
Individual repairer	1. Interview — 2. informal conversation
Group for the promotion of hand-craft techniques	1. Interview — 2. Online content (public social media)
Tool sharing workshop	1. Interview — 2. Online content (public social media) — 3. Site visit.
Housing area	1. Interview (n=2) — 2. Guided site visit.
Bike repair group	1. Interview — 2. Shadow observation
E-waste recoverer	1. Interview.
E-products fix	1. Public talk (n=2).
House goods recovery (Students)	1. Site visit — 3. Public talk
Secondhand store/market	1. Site visits (n=2)
'Dumpster diving'	1. Online content (public social media)

Table 1. Examples and data sources

The access to examples of alternative consumption is difficult by the fact that there is not a homogeneous group of people or pointers indicating who consumes in a mainstreamed or an alternative mode. This led us to examples based on visible activities of resource use prolongation, such as repair (clothes, bicycles, electric and electronic products), sharing (tools, common areas in residences), waste recovery (legal and illegal streams), handwork (experts and learning), recirculation (secondhand products). Activities such as refraining from unnecessary consumption, or following a simpler life, were not identified.

Results and discussion

The examples we use as sources share many similarities, however they are not homogeneous. Here, we focus on three aspects identified in the alternative consumption as proto practices:

1. Technical knowledge and skills — social learning

The initiator of the online clothes' repair club mentioned a technical education on fashion and clothes making, and an interest in making things from a young age — she got her first sewing machine at 15, coupled with the example of her father as someone who repaired things at home — someone to learn from. In a similar fashion, the individual repairer, who has a background in design, indicated that she grew up being inspired by an aunt and her grandfather who were "hands-smart" people. The e-waste recoverer mentioned his knowledge in electronic repairs, gained through his recent education, his job at an electric and electronic appliances store, and the inspiration from his father, who works as an electronics engineer. In these examples, the participants also thrive on showing others the things they can do and what they know.

In the examples about community spaces, we also found that in one, the initiator of the sharing workshop, the knowledge comes from his trade as a sculpture artist and his interest in making things. This inclination towards the technical is also sought from the inhabitants at the housing area, as they must undertake the housing maintenance activities. In the bike repair group example, familiarity with technical skills is not expected, but instead a will to develop them.

Technical skills or technical expertise are also an important aspect in salvaging products from becoming waste. In the case of e-waste it implies knowing what can be repaired and maintained, while in the secondhand markets it implies knowing if the price of something is the right one, it is also important for people to know what to donate, what to resell and what to discard. The technical competence in these practices represent a tension between what an expert knows and what is not known.

2. Motivation — environment, money savings, and community

We identified implicit motivations in most of the examples. In the online clothes' repair club, the environment is mentioned as the initial motivation. For the individual repairer, it is

about the relation to the experiences of her daughter — a concern about the future. The group that promotes handcraft techniques is also invested in the environment to engage people in repairing and gaining knowledge about craft techniques — sustainability is an important part of their agenda.

Besides the environment, monetary savings or value gained through products is an important aspect. Doing self-repair of products is an opportunity to avoid the high prices of repair services — in Norway due to taxes. In product recovery from waste streams, it is also an opportunity to have access to products for a cheaper price or for free. In the two examples related to e-waste recovery, the main motivation is the value of the product in relation to cost/efficiency. In the tool sharing workshop and the housing area, access to products is also seen as a way of overcoming negative preconceptions about poverty.

Community building or social interactions is also a strong motivation. In the online clothes' repair club and the bike repair group, it is about creating a community of likeminded practitioners who can share knowledge and advice on materials and best practices. In the tool sharing workshop and the housing area, the interaction of people living in proximity, sharing spaces, and recognizing each other is the ideal. In the examples of the individual repairer and the e-waste recoverer, roles as experts in their community of friends and family are mentioned.

These three motivations are part of the meanings in the performance of these proto or niche practices. We can say that thinking about environmental impacts is important to the understanding of the practice, but the gains in value (money or functionalities) and social interactions are stronger motivators.

3. *Social acceptance — transgression*

In the interviews conducted and the observed public content (site visits, talks or social media communication), we can infer an interest in changing what is socially accepted and seen as normal. In the online clothes' repair club, it is about making acceptable or 'cool' the use of clothes that are not perfect, pieces that have visible amendments, stitches or are a little worn out. The individual repairer puts emphasis on having less products that can be repaired and will last for longer, while also mentioning the uptake of clothes that have been previously owned.

In the group that promotes handicrafts, their intention is to change the meaning given to handicrafts, from an understanding of it as a hobby of retired, mainly female, participants, to being a productive activity that can be done by anyone. The group has a project strongly focused on connecting handicrafts with sustainability, in what can be interpreted as a rebranding of handicrafts.

In the tool sharing workshop and the housing area, the social change is in the collective meaning of scarcity. The tool sharing workshop includes some connected projects, a public bench as a space for neighbors to socialize and a fridge offering free food that otherwise would become waste, all with an online presence. In the housing area, the change is about the conditions and standards of the buildings, which are sufficient to support a good life, but require that inhabitants engage in maintenance activities.

In the example of the e-waste recoverer, the recovery happens in a situation that under current policies could be considered illegal. The e-waste recoverer has access to and salvages products that are discarded in his place of work, where the mandate is for them to be given to waste management. Similarly, the direct recovery from waste in 'dumpster diving' requires dealing with notions of public property and ownership of waste.

In the recovery of products as secondhand, change is in dealing with something that has already been owned, used, and reused by someone who is unknown. For example, in the site visit to the warehouse of an initiative that circulates goods among students, there was a room filled with bed clothes, many of these were stained, and the room had a particular odor.

Conclusion

Based on the initiatives studied, we propose three possible leverage points from the initiatives studied. The first is an individual orientation towards technical knowledge and skills. The second is a motivation to use those technical skills. The third is a disposition to transgress socially accepted economic and aesthetic standards. These three aspects could leverage change in consumption across bundles of multiple social practices. They relate to meanings and competences required for producing and reproducing the material in configurations that are independent from mainstream market offerings that commoditize products and make overconsumption a

convenience. Thus, autonomy in defining consumption limits could result from reappropriation of production as part of participation in social practices.

Acknowledgments

We thank the voluntary contribution of the participants in the interviews.

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