Consuming Sustainability: Identity, Distinction, and the Limits of Green Consumerism

Florian Andrei VLAD[1*]
Senny LUCKYARDI[2]
Tatan TAWAMI[2]
Dedi SULAEMAN[3]

Abstract
Contemporary consumer culture has proved spectacularly adept at transforming environmental criticism of hyperconsumption into new opportunities for consumption. This article examines the contradictions of green consumerism through the interconnected questions of identity, social distinction, and the commodification of sustainability. Drawing primarily on Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption and Bourdieu's account of taste and cultural capital, it explores how environmentally responsible practices acquire symbolic value and become markers of identity and status. Particular attention is given to conspicuous conservation, sustainable fashion, second-hand consumption, and the circulation of green identities under platform capitalism, with selected references to Indonesian consumer culture. While acknowledging the material benefits of environmentally responsible consumption, the discussion questions the tendency to locate sustainability primarily within individual purchasing decisions. It argues that the cultural and systemic limits of green consumerism become especially apparent when environmental responsibility generates further patterns of acquisition. Repair, reuse, and reduced consumption thus offer ways to challenge the consumerist expectations through which even sustainability becomes commodified.

Keywords: *green consumerism; sustainable consumption; conspicuous conservation; cultural capital; consumer identity; platform capitalism; Indonesian consumer culture*

Introduction: The Paradox of Consuming Sustainability

One of the more intriguing contradictions of contemporary consumer culture is its ability to transform environmental criticism of hyperconsumption into new opportunities for consumption. Environmental concern has generated a growing repertoire of supposedly better choices, from sustainable clothing and reusable products to electric vehicles, organic food and recycled materials. Some of these choices make a genuine, measurable difference, and consumer pressure can affect both corporate practices and wider expectations about environmental responsibility. At the same time, the emergence of the green consumer poses the somewhat awkward question of what happens when sustainability itself becomes something to consume.

The question becomes more complicated once commodities are understood as doing considerably more than satisfying material needs: they communicate taste

[1] Ovidius University of Constanța, Romania
*Corresponding author: af_vlad@yahoo.com; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1661-6614
[2] Universitas Komputer Indonesia, Indonesia
[3] Sunan Gunung Djati State Islamic University Bandung, Indonesia

and aspiration, establish affiliations and, under certain conditions, make status visible. Ethical commitments can enter the same symbolic economy, and green products are especially interesting here because environmental and social value need not pull in opposite directions. Status motives, Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh (2010) found, can increase preferences for environmentally friendly products when those products are comparatively costly and consumed in public (392). Elliott (2013) complicates the picture further: the social differentiation associated with green consumption does not necessarily depend upon conspicuous signalling (294). Sustainability may become a marker of distinction without the consumer consciously setting out to display status, a possibility that recalls Bourdieu's (1984) understanding of taste as a socially conditioned practice through which distinctions are reproduced, often without deliberate intention.

Digital consumer culture gives these processes considerably greater visibility. A reusable bottle, an electric car, a second-hand outfit or a minimalist interior can be used, photographed, displayed and circulated, sometimes reaching an audience far beyond the consumer's immediate social environment. In Indonesia, for example, recent work on sustainable fashion and second-hand consumption similarly brings environmental concern into contact with green self-concept and digitally mediated practices (Anisah et al., 2024; Swarnawati et al., 2026). Social media adds another layer to an already complicated relationship: consumption communicates identity, while the communication of identity can itself stimulate further consumption.

I approach green consumerism, then, as an ambiguous development within consumer culture. Its environmental benefits can be quite real; so can its capacity to generate new commodities and new ways of attaching identity to them. Veblen (2007) and Bourdieu (1984) provide the principal coordinates for exploring this tension, although the argument reaches back to Marx (1977) and Marcuse (2002) and forward to the conditions of platform capitalism. The Indonesian examples discussed along the way are intended to widen this cultural frame rather than constitute an empirical case study. Sustainability can alter what and how people consume while still becoming entangled in familiar questions of taste, status and identity. Consumer culture, after all, has shown an impressive capacity to accommodate its own criticism.

From Consuming Goods to Consuming Identities

Consumer demand is easily imagined as preceding production: people have needs, producers manufacture objects to satisfy them, and consumers choose from the available goods. In the 1857 "Introduction" later published with *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx (1977) was already suspicious of so tidy a sequence. Production creates both the commodity and the conditions under which it becomes desirable: "Production accordingly produces not only an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object" (Marx, 1977: 21). The implications extend beyond the nineteenth-century commodity. Consumer capitalism does not merely become more efficient at satisfying demand; it continually participates in producing

new desires and, with them, consumers for whom those desires appear increasingly natural.

Marcuse (2002) pushes the argument further in *One-Dimensional Man*. His distinction between autonomous and "false needs" directs attention to desires imposed by particular social interests and sustained, among other things, through advertising, consumption and entertainment (5). The distinction between authentic and manufactured needs is notoriously difficult to maintain, but Marcuse's larger point survives that difficulty. Desire develops within social and economic arrangements that already offer us objects, aspirations and models of the good life. The consumer choosing between commodities is hardly operating in a cultural vacuum.

Choice, moreover, carries social meanings of its own. Veblen's (2007) *The Theory of the Leisure Class* remains the obvious starting point here: conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure make expenditure visible and turn it into evidence of social position. Bourdieu's (1984) *Distinction* broadens the picture considerably. Spectacular displays of wealth are only one way in which consumption differentiates. Seemingly personal judgements of taste emerge through habitus and through unequal distributions of economic, social and cultural capital; hence his wonderfully economical observation that "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (6). A choice tells us something about the chosen object and, potentially, quite a lot about the person doing the choosing.

Naturally, the difference matters when the commodity in question happens to be green. An expensive electric vehicle or a premium item of ethical clothing fits easily enough into a Veblenian reading of visible expenditure. Yet, as Elliott's analysis of green consumption suggests, environmental preferences can also participate in the reproduction of social distinctions through everyday practices and judgements of taste (2013: 294). Bourdieu thus takes us beyond Veblen's emphasis on visible expenditure, towards forms of distinction embedded in dispositions and everyday practices that consumers may experience primarily as ethical choices.

Identity adds a further dimension. Stuart Hall (1992) rejects the idea of a stable interior self simply waiting to find expression, emphasising instead identities formed and transformed within systems of cultural representation and historically situated practices (277). Consumption is hardly the only resource involved in that process, but it is an unusually pervasive one. A green commodity may express an environmental identity that already exists; repeated choices, practices and affiliations can also help consolidate that identity. The environmentally conscious consumer is, in this sense, partly constituted through the cultural repertoire from which he or she chooses.

Seen together, these approaches shift attention away from the commodity as an isolated object. Marx and Marcuse place desire itself within social relations; Veblen makes consumption socially visible; Bourdieu turns taste into a classificatory practice, while Hall helps explain how such practices enter the continuing and fluid construction of identity. Sustainability arrives in a world where commodities are already doing all these things. Once environmental

responsibility acquires cultural value, green consumption inevitably carries meanings beyond the material properties of whatever happens to be bought.

From Conspicuous Consumption to Conspicuous Sustainability

Once consumption becomes a means of communicating identity and social position, there is little reason to expect environmental consumption to escape the same process. Sustainable commodities may even be particularly well suited to acquiring symbolic value, for relatively predictable reasons. They are often more expensive than conventional alternatives, carry recognisable ethical associations and, in some cases, are conspicuous enough for others to notice. An electric vehicle can reduce particular environmental costs while also saying something about its owner's status, taste and lifestyle, so these two functions can coexist quite comfortably.

Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh (2010) capture one version of this overlap with the deliberately Veblenian notion of "conspicuous conservation." Their experiments found status motives particularly relevant when environmentally friendly products were comparatively costly and publicly visible; altruistic behaviour, in this context, could operate as a "'costly signal' associated with status" (392). Uren et al. (2021) later found cost, effort and visibility similarly important in perceptions of high-status pro-environmental behaviour (455). There is an interesting irony here. Some of the very characteristics that might discourage environmentally responsible consumption—the additional expense or effort involved—can also increase its symbolic value when that behaviour is socially visible.

Still, conspicuous conservation explains only part of the picture. Taken too literally, it risks reducing green consumption to old-fashioned status display in ecological clothing. Elliott's (2013) analysis is useful precisely because the social differentiation she identifies does not depend upon consumers consciously signalling status (294). Someone buying organic food, cycling to work, preferring local produce or wearing second-hand clothes may have no intention of impressing anybody. That said, these practices acquire socially classificatory meanings. Bourdieu's account of taste helps explain why: distinction also operates through dispositions that feel personal, ordinary and sometimes ethically self-evident.

Carfagna et al. (2014) pursue this possibility through what they call an emerging high-cultural-capital "eco-habitus" (158). Among the relatively privileged ethical consumers they study, ecological concern becomes associated with particular forms of knowledge, taste and responsible consumption, while continuing to maintain "a strategy of distinction" (158). The formulation is useful because it leaves room for sincerity. Environmental commitment can shape everyday practice quite genuinely and, at the same time, become culturally legible as evidence of education, discernment or moral competence. There is no particular contradiction in someone caring about the environment and possessing the cultural capital required to care about it in socially recognisable ways.

The issue becomes more complicated when such practices settle into lifestyles. Research on Indonesian Generation Z consumers, for instance, connects preferences for sustainable fashion with environmental concern, green self-concept and other

social and psychological factors (Anisah et al., 2024). Identity is hardly an incidental addition here. Values become durable partly because people incorporate them into their sense of who they are and how they wish to live. Yet recognisable sustainable identities also have conditions of access: money in some cases, but also knowledge, time and familiarity with the appropriate cultural codes.

Green consumption therefore occupies an awkward space between environmental practice and social classification. Veblen helps with the expensive electric car deliberately (or simply inevitably) on display; Bourdieu is more useful for the less spectacular world of tastes and dispositions. Neither requires us to decide whether green consumers "really" care about the environment before examining what their practices communicate. Environmental and symbolic value can inhabit the same object, and social media makes that coexistence considerably harder to overlook.

Performing the Sustainable Self under Platform Capitalism

Much of this symbolic work becomes unusually visible on social media. Clothes, food, travel, domestic routines and second-hand purchases can all become material for self-presentation, while even practices associated with consuming less, such as repair, reuse and minimalism, can circulate as images and content. None of this is entirely new, since consumption has long communicated social identity, as Veblen and Bourdieu make clear; platforms greatly expand the audience, persistence and commercial possibilities of that communication. The sustainable consumer can now perform a sustainable self before people he or she will never meet.

This visibility belongs to a wider transformation of everyday experience under platform capitalism. Zuboff (2019) describes surveillance capitalism as an economic logic in which human experience is appropriated as behavioural data and turned into material for prediction and commercial exploitation (8). Her argument reaches well beyond consumer identity, although it helps explain why seemingly mundane acts of self-expression have acquired economic value. Posting a thrift-store find or a carefully repaired garment communicates something about the person posting it; the activity simultaneously produces engagement and data within a commercial platform. Crary's (2013) *24/7* approaches the problem from another direction, placing digital connectivity within a capitalist temporality increasingly hostile to periods and spaces beyond economic activity. Between them, these accounts suggest an environment in which the boundaries separating consumption, leisure and self-presentation have become increasingly porous.

Influencer culture makes the convergence particularly easy to see. The successful influencer inhabits a curious position somewhere between consumer, advertiser and cultural intermediary, precisely because the boundaries between those roles are often difficult to maintain. A recommendation for sustainable clothing may provide useful environmental information, express a genuine ethical preference and promote a commodity all at the same time. Zhao et al. (2024) find that social-media influencers can affect green-consumption intentions, with effects varying by influencer and content characteristics. The commercial usefulness of

authenticity becomes especially apparent here: advertising works partly by resembling the ordinary communication of taste and lifestyle.

Visibility can also strengthen environmental identities. Schwartz, Loewenstein, and Agüero-Gaete (2020) found that making a pro-environmental identity salient can encourage subsequent environmentally friendly purchasing (746). There is good reason, then, for environmental practices to become publicly recognisable. People imitate one another, identities reinforce habits, and behaviours that once appeared marginal or alternative can become ordinary and mainstream. Yet visibility also makes sustainable practice available for aestheticisation and circulation, and platforms are remarkably efficient at converting recognisable identities into content.

Second-hand fashion illustrates the resulting ambiguity particularly well. Thrifting can extend the useful life of clothing and reduce demand for new production, while offering a ready-made vocabulary of individuality, taste and discovery. Research on Generation Z in Greater Jakarta places environmental communication alongside the social and digitally mediated practices surrounding second-hand consumption (Swarnawati et al., 2026). Sabrina et al. (2026), writing of a "paradox of green identity" in social-media thrift culture, identify tensions that include the aestheticisation of environmental values and the justification of high-volume second-hand purchasing (23). The thrift haul is an almost perfect expression of the problem. The clothes may be reused rather than newly produced, but the familiar consumerist rhythm—acquisition, abundance, display, novelty—survives remarkably well.

Platforms consequently intensify a tension already present in green consumption rather than creating it from scratch. They give sustainable identities larger audiences and provide environmental practices with considerable communicative power; those same practices enter systems organised around attention, engagement and commercial value. A repaired jacket can become evidence of ecological commitment, an aesthetic object, an Instagram post and perhaps an advertisement. Its material environmental value does not disappear in the process. What changes is the cultural circuitry through which that value travels.

The Limits of Green Consumerism

Green consumerism begins from a reasonable premise: consumers can reduce some forms of environmental harm by choosing differently. Lower-impact products, second-hand goods and reduced waste all matter, and changes in demand can exert pressure further along the chain of production. Difficulties arise when this relatively modest claim expands into a much larger political expectation, with consumer choice carrying responsibility for problems whose causes lie across systems of production, infrastructure, regulation and consumption. At that point, the environmentally responsible consumer begins to look suspiciously like the preferred solution to a problem he or she did not create alone.

Akenji (2014) calls this displacement "consumer scapegoatism," criticising the disproportionate burden placed upon consumers to drive sustainability while systemic change receives considerably less attention (13). The term is deliberately

provocative, though the underlying point is altogether less extravagant: individual choices are made within arrangements that determine what is produced, available, affordable and culturally desirable in the first place. Evans, Welch, and Swaffield (2017) similarly trace the growing prominence accorded to consumer behaviour and individual conduct in sustainable-consumption governance (1397–1398), while pointing towards a more distributed understanding of responsibility across systems of production and consumption (1404–1406). Once responsibility is concentrated at the point of purchase, a collective environmental problem can conveniently reappear as a succession of private ethical decisions.

Markets, meanwhile, have unsurprisingly little difficulty responding to the demand for more ethical consumption. Sustainability can become a source of product differentiation, branding, certification and lifestyle marketing, creating an expanding field of commodities through which environmental responsibility is expressed. Greenwashing is the most obvious and frequently the most cynical manifestation of this process, but concentrating on deceptive claims alone misses the more interesting problem, which is that a product can genuinely be less environmentally damaging than its conventional equivalent, yet still participate in a consumer culture organised around continual, compulsive acquisition. Indeed, the ability of the market to sell environmental criticism back to consumers need not depend upon deception at all.

Commodity substitution brings the contradiction into particularly sharp focus. An electric vehicle may have environmental advantages over a comparable petrol vehicle, while a sustainably produced garment may be preferable to one produced under more damaging conditions. Such improvements remain relative to the commodities they replace. If greener products provide additional reasons for replacing functioning goods, expanding wardrobes or maintaining high levels of material consumption, some of the environmental gain can be compromised by the dogged persistence of the underlying consumerist logic. Evans, Welch, and Swaffield's (2017) distinction between consuming differently and consuming less is useful here (1397). Much green consumerism concentrates on the former, since markets are, for obvious reasons, considerably better equipped to offer alternative commodities than to encourage people to stop buying them.

Questions of class and distinction complicate matters even further. The recognisable performance of responsible consumption often requires resources that are unevenly distributed: sometimes money, knowledge, time, access or familiarity with cultural codes. Elliott's (2013) previously mentioned analysis shows environmentally oriented tastes participating in social differentiation (294), while Carfagna et al.'s (2014) eco-habitus connects ethical consumption with configurations of cultural capital (158). Premium organic food, ethically certified fashion or specialist sustainable products can consequently acquire a moral prestige unavailable, or less readily available, to consumers whose choices are more tightly constrained. Even minimalism is easier to celebrate when scarcity is voluntary.

Second-hand consumption again provides a useful complication because it does not fit comfortably into a simple account of privileged green consumption.

Thrifting can be economical as well as environmentally beneficial, extending the life of existing goods without requiring access to premium sustainable brands. Contemporary thrift cultures nevertheless show how quickly reuse can become entangled with novelty and accumulation. Studies of younger Indonesian consumers place second-hand fashion within networks of environmental communication, digital identity and fashion practice (Swarnawati et al., 2026; Sabrina et al., 2026: 23). A thrift haul may consist entirely of reused clothing and still reproduce the expectation that pleasure, identity and online visibility require a continual flow of newly acquired things. The object may have changed, but not necessarily the rhythm.

These tensions overlap in practice. Encouraging people to take environmental responsibility through consumption expands the market for goods through which that responsibility can be demonstrated, and some of those goods acquire status precisely because sustainable consumption has become culturally valued. Meanwhile, producers, retailers, infrastructures and regulators remain very much part of the environmental equation. Consumer choice retains importance within this larger field, but asking it to carry the burden of sustainability risks confusing one available form of agency with the system in which that agency operates.

Green consumerism is most convincing when its claims remain proportionate. Buying a lower-impact product can be objectively better than buying a more damaging one, just as buying second-hand can extend the life of existing goods. Refusing an unnecessary purchase may be even better. The larger difficulty concerns a culture in which environmental responsibility itself is so readily translated into a question of what to consume next. How sustainable can consumerism become while continual consumption remains its organising principle?

Beyond Green Consumption?

The limits of green consumerism become particularly salient when sustainability is reduced to commodity substitution, which makes practices that interrupt the cycle of acquisition worth closer consideration. Repair, reuse, sharing and voluntary simplicity operate differently from the purchase of a greener alternative because they can extend the lives of existing objects or remove the occasion for another purchase altogether. Rebouças and Soares (2021) associate voluntary simplicity with deliberate reductions in consumption and attempts to organise everyday life around values less dependent upon material acquisition (303). Ultimately, there is a significant difference between buying a more sustainable version of something and deciding that the existing version will do.

Repair makes this difference quite tangible. Consumer culture depends to a considerable extent upon replacement: objects wear out, become unfashionable or are simply superseded by something newer and flashier. Repair interferes with that sequence. Madon's (2022) study of repair cafés describes participants being socialised, through practical involvement, into "a new reflex of repair" (534), and the importance of such spaces exceeds the immediate environmental value of the objects they save. Repair can change expectations about what to do when an object

breaks, making maintenance and continued use plausible alternatives to disposal. The change may sound modest, perhaps because it basically is. Culturally, however, normalising the continued use of old things runs counter to an economy and advertising culture that have spent generations making replacement desirable.

Reuse and sharing can produce similar effects. Second-hand clothing keeps existing goods in circulation. Borrowing and sharing reduce the need for individual ownership in some contexts, and extending product lifespans slows the movement from acquisition to disposal. None of these requires consumers to renounce commodities or markets. What they have in common is a reduced dependence upon novelty as the organising principle of consumption. Green consumerism has been much more comfortable with consuming differently than with consuming less. There is, obviously, considerably less commercial opportunity in persuading someone to keep what they already own.

There is, predictably, no pristine space outside consumer culture waiting to be occupied by the repairer, minimalist or enthusiastic thrift shopper. Voluntary simplicity can become a lifestyle brand. Similarly, vintage goods can acquire considerable exchange and symbolic value, and the minimalist aesthetic has long since become commercially reproducible. Repair and reuse may communicate knowledge, authenticity or ecological virtue. From a Bourdieusian perspective, this should hardly surprise us. Once practices acquire cultural value, they become available for classification and distinction.

Their material consequences still matter. A repaired jacket may certainly carry cultural capital, advertise ecological commitment and even contribute to someone's carefully cultivated identity. If it postpones the purchase of another jacket, it has also extended the useful life of an existing object. Symbolic incorporation does not, of course, magically erase material effects. This is where a purely cultural critique of green consumption can, arguably, go too far, treating the discovery of distinction as though it settled the environmental question. It does not. The relevant issue is what these practices do to patterns of acquisition, replacement and resource use, alongside what they happen to signify.

A more ambitious understanding of sustainable consumption would consequently have to make room for consuming less as well as consuming better. That entails a cultural shift because commodities have become deeply embedded in how identities are expressed, relationships negotiated, and aspirations imagined. Repair, reuse and sharing are interesting partly because they loosen this connection at the level of everyday practice, however incompletely. They offer no heroic exit from consumer capitalism, but they do not need to. Their more modest, but perhaps more consequential possibility lies in making continual acquisition a little less normal.

Conclusion

Green consumerism has always contained a productive contradiction. It asks consumers to confront the environmental consequences of consumption through practices that remain embedded in consumer culture. Greener products can reduce particular forms of harm, just as second-hand markets can extend the lives of

existing goods, and consumer pressure can alter what companies produce. None of these are trivial matters. The difficulty begins when such practices are expected to provide a sufficient response to problems generated across much larger systems of production and consumption.

The cultural dimension makes that contradiction more complicated. From Veblen's conspicuous consumption to Bourdieu's account of distinction, commodities have long served as markers of status, taste and identity. Sustainability readily enters this symbolic economy. An electric vehicle, a second-hand wardrobe or a repaired jacket can carry environmental value while also communicating something significant about the person who owns, wears or displays it. Under platform capitalism, these meanings gain even greater visibility, as sustainable practices circulate through social media and become available for aestheticisation, branding, and commercial appropriation. Environmental commitment survives these processes, but it does not somehow stand outside them.

The limits of green consumerism become clearest when responsibility is concentrated at the point of purchase. Asking consumers to choose better can improve particular choices, but it can also leave largely undisturbed the expectation of continual acquisition that makes those choices necessary with such frequency. Repair, reuse, sharing and voluntary reductions in consumption push the argument further because they interfere, even if modestly, with the movement from desire to acquisition and from acquisition to replacement. They too can become practices of distinction. A minimalist lifestyle can be marketed, just as a repaired object can be displayed, or a second-hand wardrobe curated. Symbolic value and material consequence can coexist, and cultural critique may lose something important when the former is allowed to obscure the latter.

Sustainability thus raises a question larger than which commodities should replace environmentally damaging ones. Consumer culture has made commodities extraordinarily important to the construction of identity, and to the ways people imagine desirable lives, including how ethical commitments are expressed. Greener products can reduce some of their environmental costs, while repair, reuse and reduced acquisition begin to challenge the expectation that (hyper)consumption should remain so central to everyday life. Ultimately, the deeper challenge of sustainability lies in a consumer culture that has made consumption central to our sense of identity and has become remarkably adept at selling us solutions to the problems it perpetuates.

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