



# Consuming Less as a Rational Choice: A Review of Applied Social Exchange Theory in Topical Research on Sustainable Consumption

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## ABSTRACT

Along with a fast expansion in volume, research on sustainable consumption is confounded with inconsistencies in definitions and terminology. For a better categorization and thus utilization of the knowledge already accumulated in the field, a synthetic approach outlining conceptual differences and commonalities within the multitude of research appears useful. Contributing to this conceptual approach, this article pursues the role of the paradigm of rational choice in topical (2019 – 2023) research on sustainable consumption. By way of a theory-based review, the particular areas of sustainable consumption research in which social exchange is applied are scrutinized, highlighting specific structures and inclinations in terms of the history of ideas. The findings point out a preference towards the sociological take on social exchange theory (as opposed to the socio-psychological) and demonstrate that the application of social exchange theory is significant particular in research on sharing economy. On the other hand, no application of social exchange theory in areas of sustainable consumption like minimalism, downshifting or voluntary simplicity could be documented.

**Keywords:** Sustainable consumption, Sharing economy, Social exchange theory

## 1 Problems of definition and terminology in research on sustainable consumption

Attitudes, behavior and practices leading to less material consumption have gained increasing scholarly attention in the light of climate change (Boström, 2021; Coverdale *et al.*, 2022; Meijers *et al.*, 2022; Schaupp, 2022) and, more recently, in regard to a perceived energy crisis (Barbeta-Viñas, 2022; Best *et al.*, 2022; Husin *et al.*, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2022). In fields with high quantities of research output, meta-research helping with structuring, compiling and reviewing the knowledge produced so far is beneficial for the quality of academic progress (Bahishti, 2021), and that is arguably the case for the broad field of research on ways of sustainable or reduced consumption. For such a comprehensive perspective on research it is important to have at hand either a clearly defined terminology (Oktamovna & Nasriyevich, 2021) or synthetic concepts of the underlying notions that can be used for mapping the territory (Kasper, 2021). Yet, for the field of research on sustainable consumption and associated lifestyles, terminology doesn't present itself as a viable candidate for systematically structuring a review: Terms like minimalism, voluntary simplicity, frugality, anti-consumption or downshifting (Cherrier & Lee, 2022) are used to denote sometimes similar, yet still different phenomena, sometimes sub-categories of one umbrella term, sometimes actually identical items. To name a typical example, Pangarkar *et al.*, (2021) define minimalism as an umbrella term for associated phenomena, while Hook *et al.*, (2021) equate minimalism to voluntary simplicity. In fact, the problem of unambiguousness in terminology in the field has been discussed for some time now (Rudmin and Kilbourne, 1996; Johnston & Burton, 2003; Shaw & Moraes, 2009), but becomes even more pressing with the inflation of research.

Consequently, for any survey of the field it seems advisable to shift the focus away from a terminology that appears somewhat arbitrary and ad-hoc and instead look into similar properties behind the different phenomena and how these are pursued in research, thus go for the less analytic and more synthetic way of mapping the territory alongside underlying theoretical structures.



From a sociological perspective, there are several structures that would present themselves as useful in that regard. The deviant nature of reduced consumption has been pursued as a theoretical construct by applying critical theory in the widest sense (e.g. Eckhardt, 2018; Middlemiss *et al.*, 2019; Koskenniemi, 2021). Besides environmental concerns on a societal level – including questions of inequality and the chances to voice concerns, respectively – other major structures behind consuming less are personal well-being and identity construction (Martin-Woodhead, 2021). Items like self-actualization, self-esteem, self-control, self-expression and self-definition on the motivational side as well as personal well-being, happiness and satisfaction as potential benefits have been investigated extensively (Makri *et al.*, 2020). Accordingly, applying a generic view, sociological research in the field appears to be largely dominated by phenomenology and symbolic interactionism when traced back to its underlying paradigms. In terms of sociological approaches, an alternative structure that is grounded in the micro level very much like aforementioned constructionist approaches, yet focused on interests rather than values (Wallace & Wolf, 1995, p. 11), is the rational choice paradigm (Foy *et al.*, 2018; Diekmann, 2022). Given that sustainable consumption is ultimately an economic issue, a comprehensive sociological approach should thus be expected to consider the homo economicus as well (Jackson, 2005; Shah *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2022). While, at least for voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption, the application of functionalism, conflict theory (including its hybrids with post-modern influx) as well as constructionism has been discussed (Jakab, 2022), rational choice perspectives in general and social exchange theory (SET) in particular have so far been omitted in that regard.

## 2 Objective and Scope

This paper is organized as a conceptual review (Hulland, 2020) and aims for closing a research gap in terms of a lack of synthetic understanding of the role that rational choice approaches play in the research on the diverse phenomena that can be subsumed as “sustainable consumption”. As a first step, this paper illustrates in which specific areas (like: voluntary simplicity, downshifting etc.) within the vast field of sustainable consumption concepts of action based on rational choice and social exchange are employed. Secondly, it demonstrates which underlying structures or phenomena of consuming less or differently – regardless of one single area in focus – are foregrounded by the theoretical underpinnings of rational choice and exchange theory. The objective can thus be condensed into three research questions:

- Which areas of topical research on sustainable consumption emphasize the theoretical concept of rational choice?
- Which specific structural aspects of sustainable consumption are highlighted through the lens of rational choice?
- Which original scholars are referred to when SET is employed in research on sustainable consumption?

Within this scope, it is possible to illustrate the role of rational choice and social exchange approaches in topical research and review the abstract context these contribute to a synthetic understanding of sustainable consumption. This in turn can be utilized as a means to enhance the theoretical framework of any further research or as a tool to visualize holistic structures of applied sociology for teaching purposes.

## 3 Review Process

The methodical review process is logically organized alongside the three basic steps proposed by Tranfield *et al.*, (2003): (1) defining the key terms and search patterns, (2) acquiring and selecting the material and (3) compiling the relevant information and aligning it to the objective previously described. While doing so, still emphasize is put on openness towards new insights that might have not been within the original scope. Three basic categories of literature are considered for the review:

1. Core literature of topical research in the field that is more recent than five years (2019 onwards).

2. Support literature like sociological standard works or classics in the field that is chosen as topical as possible but can be less timely if necessary, particularly in order to point out the history of certain ideas.
3. Papers that employ social exchange theory but don't aim at sustainable consumption are used to demonstrate the significance of the former in recent research in general.

The review of the core literature itself is conceptualized as theory-based as suggested by Paul *et al.* (2021), so the condition that has to be met for any paper to be considered is to utilize any kind of sociological theory of rational choice. In that regard, "utilizing" is defined as either directly drawing from the theory as the main guide rod for the respective research or using main tenets (Post *et al.*, 2020). In any case, works that do not explicitly refer to either the term "rational choice" or "social exchange theory" are excluded. The domain-based (Paul *et al.*, 2021) terms that the research would expand on, like e.g. "anti-consumption", are used as – figuratively spoken – the "dependent variable". Thus, screening for which works to include and which to omit (Xiao, & Watson, 2019) followed this matrix (Table 1):

**Table 1: Review matrix**

Utilizing either... Rational choice theory	expanding on at least	<b>Sustainable consumption</b> - Anti-consumption
or	one of the items:	- Downshifting - Minimalism - Voluntary simplicity
Social exchange theory		

On both the side of theories employed and the items scrutinized, a simple, isolated reference doesn't qualify as "utilizing theory" or "expanding on". The respective items have to be integral part of the main rationale, though not necessarily the exclusive theoretical tool or subject of inquiry, respectively. The material is thus selected qualitatively in regard to its thematic fit, sorting out returns that fit semantically but not pragmatically (e.g. "rational choice" is often used as a general term that doesn't necessarily refer to the associated sociological paradigm).

In the next step, the relevant hits are screened in terms of their approach, namely review / conceptual, theoretical and empirical quantitative, qualitative or mixed, respectively (Makri *et al.*, 2020). Finally, each paper is analyzed in terms of its specific scope beyond the generic topics predefined by the search items.

#### **4 Theoretical Background: Rational Choice as A Sociological Paradigm**

In the field of sustainable consumption, micro level research on anti-consumption (Makri *et al.*, 2020) and voluntary simplicity (Rebouças & Soares, 2020) is predominantly based on phenomenological approaches in the widest sense, implying an interpretive methodology focused on values rather than interests. Rational choice would be the logical approach to fill the gap this paradigmatic incline leaves, since it is dealing with predictable decisions in an assumedly objective reality rather than with value-based situational emergence of reality while at the same time starting analysis from the micro level (Wallace & Wolf, 1995, p. 11).

Drawing from utilitarianism and economics, anthropology and ethnology as well as behavioral psychology (Wang *et al.*, 2020), rational choice and social exchange approaches are thus often considered to be closer to social psychology than sociology proper (Liao *et al.*, 2021). However, some of the associated theoretical strands have long been proposed as one of several additional paradigms of sociology (Partina *et al.*, 2019) besides the three classic schools of thought of functionalism, conflict theory and symbolic interactionism (Hechter, 2019; Rusu, 2020). In that regard, it has also found its way into sustainability research (Olsson & Jerneck, 2018; Jerneck & Olsson, 2020).

Laying the groundwork for establishing rational choice as a sociological paradigm, Homans (1961) points out the significance of social exchange in all kinds of interaction. He posits that social action is basically limited by considerations (whether deliberate or unreflecting) of gains and losses: The probability for choosing a path of action is higher when the action in question has frequently been rewarded before, when

a situation similar to one associated with a previous reward reappears, when the reward is appraised as valuable and after an already expected reward has indeed materialized. Yet, with increasing frequency of an action followed by a certain reward, the reward loses value. Thus, when given a choice between different actions, the action that is assessed best in terms of the value of the reward and the chance of that reward to indeed materialize will show the highest probability of being chosen (Enayat *et al.*, 2022).

In regard of the scope of this paper, it is important to highlight the fact that while drawing from these economic principles in the widest sense, still social exchange is not to be confused with a purely economic type of exchange (Blau, 2017, pp. 15 - 18). Social exchange in a sociological sense is way more complex than a simple matrix of material gains and losses and embraces the fact that the immediate economy of decisions is immersed in a wider social context, thus the values exchanged cannot easily be quantified and any assessment has to consider intrinsic rewards as well (Jin *et al.*, 2015). The fact that a simple measurement of investment and returns is impossible in social exchange implies that trust in and by reciprocity are essential and social exchange can thus transcend sheer economic self-interest (Buchan *et al.*, 2002; Blau, 2017, pp. 91 - 105; Cook & Hahn, 2021; Torro *et al.*, 2022). Blau (2017, pp. 35 - 42) also points out that participants in social exchange want to maximize both the expected value of the extrinsic benefits they offer to others as well as the intrinsic rewards of association. Following this notion, in recent research impression management has been considered as an important mediating factor for every kind of social exchange (Naijuan & Guoqing, 2016; Collewaert *et al.*, 2021).

It is worth mentioning that the socio-psychological perspective on social exchange originally building on the work of Thibaut and Kelley (1959) shares some significant elements with aforementioned sociological school of thought. However, the socio-psychological approach mainly starts from experimental research on the micro level and builds up more complex assumptions about group behavior from there whereas e.g. Homans, also considering already established findings from ethnology and anthropology, is working the other way around employing a more reductionist approach (Emerson, 1976).

## **5 Findings of the theory-based review**

The application of the review framework brought forth some unanticipated results already in the screening phase. Firstly, it turned out that the search condition of “rational choice theory” had to be abandoned because it wasn’t useful in terms of the given focus on sociological and socio-psychological work even in the widest sense. The returns were quite unspecific and no research using “rational choice theory” as a key concept while otherwise tackling sustainable consumption or one of its sub-concepts could be produced. Even simplifying the query to just “rational choice” didn’t bring any useable results. Thus, on the side of theoretical concepts, the screening had to be reduced to “social exchange theory” after the first run already. Surprisingly, even after this adjustment, there were only a few thematic intersections in terms of research utilizing the social exchange theory and expanding on concepts other than sustainable consumption as an umbrella term. Only three papers that (also) embraced anti-consumption could be identified.

In terms of the type of research, the majority out of the 19 papers (Table 2) that met the criteria were of the empirical type, mostly quantitative research (9) along with two mixed method studies and only one purely qualitative. Given that social exchange theory is based on objective reality presumptions, this tendency to quantitative approaches points towards a logical fit between the theoretical paradigm and the chosen method. The second biggest cluster are review / conceptual papers with five entries, and there are only two studies that can be considered purely theoretical, although the line between theoretical and review was sometimes hard to draw (e.g. Joseph, 2020). More significant than the methodical inclination is the main topic, with twelve out of 19 papers dealing with the phenomenon of sharing economy, the rest with consumer behavior, sustainable consumption in a particular sector or with ontological issues.

**Table 2: Topics, research types and research areas**

Research using SET as a theoretical framework (chronologically)	Main topic	Type of paper	Sustainable cons.	Anti-consumption	Downshifting	Voluntary simplicity	Minimalism
Khalek & Chakraborty, 2023	Sharing economy	review / conceptual	x				
Arnould, 2022	SC and ontology	theoretical	x				
Bui <i>et al.</i> , 2022	Consumer behavior	empirical: mixed	x				
Thomas <i>et al.</i> , 2022	Consumer behavior	empirical: quant.	x				
Tian & Liu, 2022	Consumer behavior	review / conceptual	x				
Xiang <i>et al.</i> , 2022	Sharing economy	empirical: quant.	x				
Chuah <i>et al.</i> , 2021	Sharing economy	empirical: quant.	x				
Jiang & Pu, 2021	SC in a particular sector	review / conceptual	x				
Tsai <i>et al.</i> , 2021	Sharing economy	empirical: quant.	x				
Wang & Yu, 2021	Sharing economy	empirical: quant.	x				
Arnould, 2020	SC and ontology	theoretical	x				
Carrigan <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Sharing economy	review / conceptual	x				
Davlembayeva <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Sharing economy	empirical: quant.	x	x			
Joseph, 2020	Consumer behavior	review / conceptual	x				
Küper & Edinger-Schons, 2020	Sharing economy	empirical: mixed		x			
Lai <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Sharing economy	empirical: qual.	x				
Sands <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Sharing economy	empirical: quant.	x	x			
Boateng <i>et al.</i> , 2019	Sharing economy	empirical: quant.	x				
Wang <i>et al.</i> , 2019	Sharing economy	empirical: quant.	x				

Throughout the variety of topics, SET is used to visualize certain structural aspects of sustainable consumption behavior: Chuah *et al.*, (2021) and Küper & Edinger-Schons (2020) both emphasize the role of trust and reciprocity in the functioning of sharing-based economies. Another, significant portion of the research inquired in this review applies SET to investigate the role of social norms and perceived non-monetary benefits (as well as their interplay, respectively) in increasing the willingness to pay for sustainable products or adopt sustainable practices (Bui *et al.*, 2022; Thomas *et al.*, 2022; Jiang & Pu, 2021; Tsai *et al.*, 2021; Wang & Yu, 2021; Arnould, 2020; Carrigan *et al.*, 2020; Davlembayeva *et al.*, 2020; Lai *et al.*, 2020; Sands *et al.*, 2020; Boateng *et al.*, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2019). The abstract theoretical framework outlining behavioral and interactional dimensions of exchange processes that SET provides has also been used to establish a typology of different types of exchange within the sharing economy, thus highlighting differences and hybrid forms of collaborative and access-based consumption (Khalek & Chakraborty, 2023). Finally, SET is also employed in reviewing the dual role of consumers as producers alike within the sharing economy, highlighting the dimensions of economic motivation, service flexibility and service knowledge defining the role of the prosumer (Xiang *et al.*, 2022).

Since this review also intends to demonstrate the history of ideas behind topical research in the field, the theoretical references in regard to SET were examined as well (see table 3). Interestingly, the majority of papers provided no citation of original authors whatsoever, either referring to secondary literature when outlining the approach on SET or not at all specifying the concept of SET any further. For the remaining research, SET was indeed mostly referred to as a sociological concept, with only one study also mentioning the socio-psychological strand of SET theorizing. As mentioned, the constructionist approaches that dominate contemporary research on sustainable consumption share the micro level perspective with the rational choice paradigm (Wallace & Wolf, 1995, p. 11). However, the fact that the single most cited scholar in this sample is Peter M. Blau points toward a more macro level-oriented understanding in SET-based research on sustainable consumption.

**Table 3:** *References to original scholars on SET*

<b>Research using SET as a theoretical framework (chronologically)</b>	<b>Homans</b>	<b>Blau</b>	<b>Coleman</b>	<b>Emerson</b>	<b>Thibaut &amp; Kelley</b>
Khalek & Chakraborty, 2023					
Arnould, 2022					
Bui <i>et al.</i> , 2022					
Thomas <i>et al.</i> , 2022		x			x
Tian & Liu, 2022					
Xiang <i>et al.</i> , 2022		x			
Chuah <i>et al.</i> , 2021	x	x			
Jiang & Pu, 2021					
Tsai <i>et al.</i> , 2021					
Wang & Yu, 2021					
Arnould, 2020					
Carrigan <i>et al.</i> , 2020		x		x	
Davlembayeva <i>et al.</i> , 2020	x	x	x	x	
Joseph, 2020					
Küper & Edinger-Schons, 2020		x			
Lai <i>et al.</i> , 2020		x		x	
Sands <i>et al.</i> , 2020				x	
Boateng <i>et al.</i> , 2019	x	x	x		
Wang <i>et al.</i> , 2019					

## 6 Discussion of the findings

This review found that in topical research on sustainable consumption, when the rational choice paradigm is employed, it is exclusively in the form of SET. It can also be inferred that the scope of application of SET in that subject area is more limited as compared to approaches that are theoretically rooted in constructionist, say: symbolic interactionist and phenomenological, thinking. This is consistent with research on the role of SET in marketing literature concerned with sustainable consumption (Bryla *et al.*, 2022).

Recent subject-specific research drawing from SET as a theoretical framework is mostly focused on the wider concept of sustainable consumption, while more specific concepts are covered by a small portion only (anti-consumption) or not at all (voluntary simplicity, downshifting, minimalism). The extensive amount of micro-level research on the latter is, in stark contrast, mostly based on constructionist approaches (Makri *et al.*, 2020). Even more mentionable is the clear thematical inclination of SET-based research towards topics concerned with the sharing economy as one central item within sustainable consumption. SET appears to be appreciated as an ideal theory to demonstrate that sharing can neither be understood as solely value-oriented action, nor as a purely goal-oriented economic exchange. In a sharing economy seen through the lens of SET, reciprocity (which would in itself work in a purely economic rationality as well) is quite subtly connected to the establishment of long-term trust as well as to those perceived indirect benefits which are crucial for sustainable consumption in general, ranging from reducing cognitive dissonance (Markauskaitė & Rütelionė, 2022) to acquiring social capital (Toth *et al.*, 2022).

In terms of the history of ideas behind recent research, it becomes obvious that SET is commonly used as a theoretical tool without further acknowledgement of its paradigmatic implications. This can be inferred from the fact that the majority of research reviewed doesn't refer to any particular original author at all in the field of rational choice in general and SET in particular. For the slightly smaller portion of research which does so, there is a clear inclination towards the sociological strand of SET as compared to the socio-psychological approach. This and the fact that the most cited single author is Peter M. Blau can arguably be interpreted as an effort to integrate an understanding of systemic structures into a basically micro-level approach on sustainable consumption in general and the sharing economy in particular.

## **7 Conclusion**

The paradigmatic level of theorizing isn't usually considered in an explicit way when defining and designing research. However, in a reflective way, paradigms can still be a useful tool for retracing implicit research motivations and biases that are not explicitly discussed in the respective research itself. They provide a synthetic perspective that can help to identify conceptual differences and commonalities that are invisible on the level of analytic definitions while at the same time avoiding the problem of an inconsistent terminology. In recent research on sustainable consumption, the paradigmatic lens of rational choice is commonly applied in the form of SET, where it is used to conceptualize the structures of social exchange underlying the adoption of sustainable practices or the acceptance of higher prices for sustainable products. The single most popular field within sustainable consumption where SET is employed is the concept of sharing economy. There, SET is used to conceptualize the role of trust, reciprocity and non-monetary rewards in a middle ground between value-oriented constructionism (which in turn dominates the neighboring research fields of minimalism, downshifting or voluntary simplicity) and a sheer economic logic of material gains and losses. Likewise, SET appears to be appreciated as a useful framework for theorizing the dual role of consumers as producers alike within the sharing economy. In terms of the history of ideas, it is predominantly the sociological take on social exchange that is utilized this way while the socio-psychological one appears to be significantly less relevant in this particular field.

## **8 Declarations**

### **8.1 Study Limitations**

This review does not provide a comprehensive outline of the history of ideas in research on sustainable consumption, rather focusing on recent findings (2019 onwards) and a quite specific theoretical inclination. Furthermore, this paper is focused on a solely sociological perspective of the relevant models. While it could be demonstrated that the socio-psychological approach on SET does only play a minor role in recent research on sustainable consumption, other familiar concepts like the theories of planned behavior or reasoned action have not been considered in the first place. To further contribute to a better understanding of the practical application of sociological paradigms in the field, more extensive reviews similar to this

paper should be provided for other meta-theoretical concepts. For the time being, the meta-theoretical research is mostly focused on constructionist approaches, often merging them with postmodern thinking and rather omitting conflict theory or functionalism.

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