

Chapter 10. The influential role of austerity in normalising sustainable consumption

Deirdre O’Loughlin, Morven G. McEachern, Isabelle Szmigin, Kalipso Karantinou, Belem Barbosa, Grigorios Lamprinakos and María Eugenia Fernández-Moya

**Abstract**

The financial crisis of 2008 leading to the imposition of strict austerity measures particularly within certain EU states is an appropriately significant and enduring context in which to explore consumer attitudes and behaviour change. While the negative implications of austerity measures are well documented (Krugman, 2012), it proposed that economic downturns trigger a normative towards sustainable consumption (e.g. Evans, 2011) which is similarly reflected by pro-environmental behaviours evidenced during the on-going COVID-19 global pandemic (Orîndaru et al, 2021). This research draws upon social normalisation (Rettie et al., 2011, 2012) and practice theory (Warde, 2005; Shove, 2009) as key conceptual frameworks through which to explore the normalisation of practices among everyday consumers within the context of austerity. Employing an interpretive approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 38 EU consumers across 6 countries including Ireland, UK, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece. A multi-stage analysis of the data revealed three key themes: *Normalised sustainability practices*; *Social normalisation of frugality*; and *Normalisation of frugal-induced sustainability*. Given the prevalence and sustained nature of modern day crises, this study contributes to consumer research by offering an EU-wide account of how shifting consumer knowledge, attitudes, behaviour and cultural values in the context of austerity impact on everyday sustainable consumption practices. Our research highlights how sustainable consumption practices are being increasingly normalised for several reasons beyond environmental motivations including economic, (manifested by increased frugality), as well as social. Our research foregrounds the transformative and long-term effect of austerity on norms, practices, values and meanings at both individual and societal levels. We specifically reveal the critical influence of social norms in the form of values of shared empathy and solidarity vis-à-vis others affected by austerity. We also advance knowledge of the importance of the “carrier” role (Shove et al (2012) by evidencing how normalised, frugality-induced sustainability practices are performed and reproduced within EU countries. In conclusion, we

outline several recommendations for policy and practice to more effectively promote and support sustainability change and progression at local community and national levels.

**Keywords:** Normalisation; Sustainable consumption practices; Austerity; Frugality; Normalised sustainable practices.

## Introduction

Following the global financial crisis of 2008, many European countries adopted austerity policies which included increasing taxes and introducing pay cuts and job losses for many employees. Despite deep criticism regarding the appropriateness of an austerity regime (Krugman, 2012; Blyth, 2013), its widespread implementation has contributed to significant and long-term financial uncertainty for individuals and communities, and a prolonged economic downturn, especially within the UK and across many other EU countries (Szmigin et al., 2020; Hampson et al., 2018). In the UK alone, recent estimates suggest that 14.3 million people now live in poverty, including seven million in persistent poverty<sup>1</sup> (Social Metrics Commission, 2019; Moraes et al., 2021). While recognising the many negative implications of such financial hardship and poverty, it is argued that economic downturns may help normalise the practice of consuming less and engaging in sustainable consumption (Jackson, 2005; Evans, 2011). This study, therefore, aims to examine this claim and contribute to consumer research by offering an EU-wide account of how consumer knowledge, attitudes, behaviour and cultural values impact on everyday sustainable consumption practices.

More recently, the global COVID-19 pandemic and the associated prolonged lockdowns represented a similarly significant global crisis with far-reaching economic, social and health impacts. Importantly, the pandemic also revealed a significant reduction in consumption, and positive environmental gains (Orîndaru et al., 2021; Cohen, 2020). While austerity represents an opportunity to consume less and in a more sustainable way, it is argued that an economic crisis alone will not create sustainable consumption unless it is supported by governmental, political, social and cultural transformation (Evans, 2011). In other words, the success of a reduction in consumption lies in the extent to which it becomes 'viewed as normal' (Peattie and Peattie, 2009, p. 267; Rettie et al., 2011; 2012). Thus, in the absence of a consensus regarding a definition of sustainable consumer behaviour, and a lack of understanding regarding the normative dimension of practices (Jackson, 2005; Denegri-Knott et al., 2018), we argue that the current era of austerity is having a transformative effect on expectations, attitudes, behaviours, norms, values and meanings at both individual and societal levels. As part of this change, we propose that sustainable consumption practices are increasingly perceived and adopted as 'normal' for several reasons including economic and social, and not just environmental.

Practice theory (e.g. Shove et al., 2009) offers an appropriate lens through which to explore sustainability practices. It implies that practices are often everyday, routinely embedded, subconscious beings and doings which comprise of habits and routines that evolve, grow and alter over time, and which ultimately may result in a transformative change to social practices (e.g. Warde, 2005). Practices may also become normalised (Shove and Southerton, 2009). They also change in response to disruption or disaster (e.g. Wilk, 2009), particularly fundamental ones such as war, recession and mass unemployment (which is relevant to our study on austerity), where a collective change to social processes and political consciousness

may be triggered (Denegri-Knott et al., 2018). In these situations of disruption, which are part of normal life (Trentmann, 2009), life's elasticity is highlighted and agency may play a role. Therefore, further research is needed to understand how practices are carried and reproduced and the ways in which people talk about, organise and negotiate practices in their everyday lives (Rettie and Harries, 2013).

As a basis for the notion that sustainability may be becoming more 'normalised' during the era of austerity, this review draws on theories related to norms, normative influence and normalisation. While much of the research on norms and normative social influence is premised on a cognitive response by consumers to some normative influence where there is a change of attitude and or behaviour, this research draws upon practice theory (Warde, 2005; Shove, 2009) to explore the normalisation of practices in response to austerity. In so doing, we aim to contribute to consumer research by offering an EU-wide account of how consumer knowledge, attitudes, behaviour and cultural values impact on everyday sustainable consumption practices in the context of austerity, as well as expand knowledge on the adopted processes that help to create and maintain the shared meanings that lead to the construction of normativity. Our theoretical review begins, therefore, with a discussion of theories of normalisation followed by an overview of consumption practices and practice theory.

## 2 Theories of normalisation

The term 'normalisation' has theoretical origins in sociology (e.g. Foucault, 1977) and has been predominantly studied as a process in sociological and health contexts (e.g. Parker et al., 2002). Focusing firstly on norms and normative influence, extensive research has been conducted on what guides people to act in a particular way in a given situation as they are shaped by their social environment and, in particular, by reference groups which influence brand and purchase decisions (e.g. Bearden and Etzel, 1982). This is particularly prevalent when consumers are in uncertain, new or unfamiliar settings or circumstances (e.g. Griskevicius et al., 2006), when consumers are faced with decisions of either fitting in and conforming to a reference group norm or following an alternative path to the 'norm'. Social norms relate to how people must behave in a situation; they motivate both private and public actions by guiding people regarding accepted behaviours in a given situation (Cialdini et al., 1991). Social norms can also be categorised into descriptive or injunctive norms; descriptive norms refer to individuals' beliefs concerning the pervasiveness of a particular behaviour amongst significant referents whereas injunctive norms provide insight into the 'extent to which individuals feel pressured into engaging in a behaviour' (Rimal and Real, 2003, p. 186). Norms develop as a result of social interaction with significant reference groups and help contribute to the normalisation of behaviour (Aarts and Dijksterhuis, 2003).

There are a number of factors which influence people's response to norms and normative influence. For example, the notion of conformity acts as a basis for normative social influence which explores the power of conforming to the norm exercised by the majority on the minority. Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) explore social influence and conformity and propose that factors such as perceived similarity to others help guide people's response to conformity and to descriptive norms in particular. Other factors that may encourage individuals to follow the behaviour of salient others include age (Murray et al., 1984), personality (Carli et al., 1991) and gender (e.g. White et al., 2002). A study by Goldstein et al. (2008) found that descriptive norms played an important role in promoting pro-environmental behaviour among hotel guests in the US, where towel reuse rose by 28% due to normative adherence. Hence, normative social influence, particularly in the form of

descriptive norms, can be found to have a profound influence on consumer behaviour (e.g. Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004).

More recent research has found, however, that while normative messages have a strong persuasive influence on behaviour, they are often 'underdetected' by consumers (Nolan et al., 2012, p. 913). Exploring energy conversation among consumers, they found that consumer conformity to social behaviour may be largely subconscious in nature and that, while people may not believe that others influence their behaviour, their behaviour is in fact influenced significantly. More recently, a range of experimental and qualitative techniques were used to examine the effect of social norms on consumers, including providing web and email feedback to reduce energy consumption (Harries et al., 2013a; Rettie et al., 2013a), using a mobile phone application to increase walking (Patel et al., 2013; Harries et al., 2013b) and developing a Facebook application to encourage pro-environmental behaviour (Rettie and Harries, 2013). In contrast to policy-led, nudging approaches, these studies provided consumers with both individual and social norm information about their own consumption or activity (personalised social norms approach), how it compared to the consumption/activity of others (descriptive norms) as well as what they should be doing (injunctive norms). Their studies found that social norm feedback had varying effects on behaviour with consumers more affected by the group average in the energy study and motivated to beat the average in the walking study, while less engaged by social norms feedback in the Facebook pro-environmental behaviour study.

As part of his normalisation thesis, Foucault (1977) identified three key elements of disciplinary power, namely, hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and examination (p. 170). This was further theoretically developed by Wolfensberger (1980) who coined the term 'sociologized' normalisation, in terms of how deviant or marginalised individuals or groups were being included in 'normal' life (Wolfensberger, 1980). Related to normative social theory (e.g. Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004) and normalisation (e.g. Foucault, 1977), Rettie et al. (2011) developed the theory of 'social normalisation' to describe a process where activities and products gradually become accepted as mainstream, normal, or everyday, while other activities may be de-normalised and no longer perceived as normal. Rettie et al. (2011) propose that perceptions of what is normal change, either on an individual or social level, and use the word 'social' in 'social normalisation' to denote the fact that what is perceived as normal can be conceived at a social and not just individual level. Unlike the theory of the diffusion of innovation (e.g. Robertson, 1967), which points to the key role of early adopters in leading the process of adoption in the market, Rettie et al.'s (2011) social normalisation theory emphasises the importance of the majority in normalising the adoption of products and practices.

Rettie et al. (2012) also point to the important elements of practice theory that offer a temporal and evolutionary perspective to sustainable consumption, which suggests that practices can change over time and in response to objectives. They argue that know-how, objectives and meanings, in particular, must be in place to allow for change to occur and the resultant changed behaviour may be 'taken for granted, habitual and unreflective' (Rettie et al., 2012, p. 425). Rettie et al.'s (2011; 2012) theory of social normalisation, which draws heavily on practice theory, offers a strong framework through which current practices, including objectives, know-how and meanings can be understood and explored. While 'social normalisation' (Rettie et al., 2011; 2012) is a relatively recent and an interesting notion that includes a social/collective dimension and not just individual one, it is rather loose as a concept and largely under-explored, based primarily on the simple distinction between practices that are perceived as normal or not normal.

## 2.1 Practice Theory: Change, Normalisation, Habits, Routines and Disruptions

According to Shove (2009), practices exist as ‘provisional but recognisable entities, composed also of conventions, images and meanings, materials and forms of competence... but which require reproduction and performance’ (p. 18), which implies that practices must actually be carried out by people. Reckwitz (2002) suggests body, mind, the agent, structure/process, knowledge, discourse/languages and things as a more extended list of the elements to understanding practices. Schatzki (2002) lists practical understanding, rules, teleo-effective structures and general understandings as key elements to practices. Similarly, Warde (2005) highlights that practices represent a nexus of practical activity and their representations (through both doings and sayings), and therefore their understanding, must be co-ordinated through understandings, procedures, engagements and items of consumption (p. 134). While many researchers differ in the specific elements proposed to reflect practices, there is an overall similarity which can be captured by competences, meanings and products (materials) (Shove et al., 2009).

Theories of practice have predominantly focused on the significance of shared understandings, norms, meanings, practical consciousness, and purposes, all of which count as ‘social’ phenomena (Shove et al., 2012). Holt (1995) explores the notion of consuming as social action and draws upon the thinking of Bourdieu (1977) and Giddens (1979) who identified practices as embodied skills that people use in everyday life. Hence, practice theory adopts a distinct approach to studying social life (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2002) and is organised through a multiplicity of shared practices that are theoretically equally important and interconnected (Halkier and Jensen, 2011). Practices are also internally differentiated in that they depend on a range of factors such as the individual’s past experience, technical knowledge, opportunities, encouragement from others, and available resources, which in turn affect people’s understanding of a practice, the procedures they adopt and the values to which they aspire (Warde, 2005, pp. 138–139). Thus, practices are evolving phenomena characterised by both temporal and spatial dimensions, representing a ‘temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of beings and doings’ (Schatzki, 1996, p. 86).

Shove (2003) states that the focus of social scientists is often on explicit and visible aspects of life and less on inconspicuous routines that constitute daily life. She holds that much consumption is ‘customary, governed by collective norms and undertaken in a world of things and socio-technical systems that have stabilising effects on routines and habits’ (p. 3). It is the routinised dimension of consumption that a practice-based approach focuses on (Barnett et al., 2011). Thus, individuals are seen as practitioners that engage in the practice of everyday life (Barnett et al., 2011). Rather than the focus being on individual decision-making, individuals instead become the ‘carriers’ (Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2012, p. 7) of social practices, carrying with them the various activities and tasks that a practice requires (Hargreaves, 2011). Additionally, by participating in some practices and not in others, individuals locate themselves within society and in doing so simultaneously reproduce specific schemes and structures of meaning and order. This shows the effective positioning of both the practitioner and the practice within the social order (Shove et al., 2012).

Connections between diverse practices that constitute what people take to be a particular ‘lifestyle’ are more open and diffuse than a single practice. In describing these differences, Shove et al. (2012) distinguish between *bundles* of practices, loose-knit patterns based on co-location and co-existence, and *complexes*, representing stickier and more integrated arrangements including co-dependent forms of sequence and synchronisation. Thus, practice theory is not only important for understanding stability in practices (Schatzki, 2002) but also for gaining insight into how social change occurs over the long term. Therefore the critical

challenge for practice theory is to explain how practices remain the same and how practices change (de Certeau, 1984). As individuals represent the crossing point between practices, Warde (2005) questions how innovations and processes in one practice may affect other practices also.

Understanding the emergence, persistence and disappearance of practices is of prime importance to policy development and change. Although policy work and academic investigation generally view the consumer as the ‘natural agent of consumption’ (Barnett et al., 2011, p. 68), Warde (2005, p. 150) underlines that much consumption occurs ‘entirely without mind’, which explains the limited effectiveness of informational campaigns promoting reduced consumption, responsible consumption or ethical consumption. Instead, what Warde (2005) proposes as more crucial is an understanding of how consumers are recruited into practices, what levels of commitment they have to those practices and how the consumption of things and resources is embedded in these over time (p. 145). This implies that consumer choices are not based on rational decision-making but are related to meaning, status and identity (Princen et al., 2003, p. 14). Moreover, efforts to shape consumers’ choice-sets is therefore dependent on an acknowledgment that the ‘habitual and the deliberate, the affective and the cognitive are entangled together in people’s ordinary conduct’ (Barnett et al., 2011, p. 75).

Disruption to routines and habits as a result of disaster or crises highlights how important routines and habits are in our lives and describes normal life as ‘a synchronised dance’ in reflecting its complexity in terms of maintaining our body, intimate selves, our families, our social relationships, our homes, our finances, our pets, our vehicles, our communications (Wilk, 2009, p. 146). Disruption of the magnitude of an economic recession may represent a fundamental trigger to creating new social processes and political consciousness which may result, individually or collectively, in a range of responses including a stronger routinisation and commitment to everyday routines and practices, as well as a transformative change to habits, routine and ultimately social practices. Practice theory therefore presents as an appropriate lens through which to examine behaviours and attitudes in response to austerity, which are often shaped by individual-based factors such as knowledge, resources and values and manifested through everyday, taken-for-granted routines and activities.

### 3 Adopted methodology

Employing an interpretive approach (Spiggle, 1994), face-to-face, in-depth interviews were selected as an appropriate form of social enquiry (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Using a long interview protocol (McCracken, 1988), our study investigated the effects of austerity in terms of changes to everyday behaviour and experiences as well as comparing how things were done prior to and during austerity. Upon securing ethical approval, the semi-structured interviews began with some general questions regarding the home, leisure and working lives of participants before focusing on more detailed questions regarding participants’ sustainable consumption practices and day-to-day family and work life. Importantly, the data reported within this study only relates to aspects of sustainable consumption.

Using a purposive sampling approach, 38 participants were interviewed across six European countries (Ireland, UK, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece) which were all affected by the global financial crisis. The inclusion of participants from Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain (also known as PIGS), is justified on the basis that these EU states were observed as being the countries most affected by the knock-on effects of the US financial crisis (Halvorsen, 2016). Our participants represented a range of demographics including age, gender, life stage and income (see Table 10.1).

Table 10.1 Profile of participants

No.	Name	Nationality	Gender	Age	Profession/employment	Relationship	Children
1	Robert	Irish	Male	38	Senior court clerk	Married	2 young children
2	Ruth	Irish	Female	42	Community college teacher	Single mother	1 young child
3	Brid	Irish	Female	56	Training consultant	Married	2 adult children
4	Susan	Irish	Female	46	Founder of charity receiving unemployment benefit	Married	2 teenage children ,1 adult child
5	Sophie	Irish	Female	29	Fulltime volunteer receiving disability benefit	Single	No children
6	Alma	Irish	Female	54	Part-time volunteer receiving unemployment benefit	Married	2 adult children
7	David	Irish	Male	60	Fulltime student receiving back to education benefit	Separated	2 adult children
8	Emma	UK	Female	22	Unemployed office administrator, part-time kitchen staff	In a relationship	No children
9	Claire	UK	Female	53	Retired university professor	Single	No children
10	Martina	UK	Female	44	University librarian	Married	1 young child
11	Lisa	UK	Female	40	Self-employed transcriber	Married	No children
12	Linda	UK	Female	55	Carer	Married	1 adult child
13	Derek	UK	Male	64	Self-employed carpenter	Married	2 adult children
14	Louise	UK	Female	45	Teacher	Divorced	2 teenage children
15	Maria	Portuguese	Female	49	Stay at home mum	Married	1 teenage child, 1 adult child
16	Helena	Portuguese	Female	39	Architect	Married	4 young children
17	Manuel	Portuguese	Male	53	Unemployed construction worker	Married	1 young child, 1 teenage child
18	Rita	Portuguese	Female	33	Petrol station shop assistant	Married	No children
19	Amelia	Portuguese	Female	21	Unemployed shop assistant	Single	No children
20	Filipe	Portuguese	Male	65	Doctor	Married	3 adult children
21	Luisme	Spanish	Male	27	Part-time student/unemployed	In a relationship	No children
22	Rosa	Spanish	Female	60	Gardener	Married	1 adult child
23	Bernardo	Spanish	Male	46	Orthopaedic surgeon	Married	1 young child
24	Elena	Spanish	Female	30	Unemployed university lecturer	Single	No children
25	Pepe	Spanish	Male	34	Entrepreneur	In a relationship	No children
26	Ana	Spanish	Female	58	Unemployed dressmaker	Married	2 adult children
27	Antonio	Spanish	Male	38	Unemployed commercial director	Single	No children
28	Yiannis	Greek	Male	38	Full-time university academic	Married	2 young children
29	Christina	Greek	Female	53	Artist employed part time	Married	2 teenage children
30	Elisa	Greek	Female	46	Part-time teacher	Married	2 young children

31	Irene	Greek	Female	40	Full-time HRM position	Single	No children
32	Nikolaos	Greek	Male	41	Unemployed – setting up financial advisory business	Married	2 young children
33	Luisa	Italian	Female	47	Unemployed freelance worker	Divorced	1 adult child
34	Rosella	Italian	Female	42	Gym instructor	Single	No children
35	Iron	Italian	Male	18	Student	Single	No children
36	Giancarlo	Italian	Male	47	Sales manager	Divorced	2 young children
37	Gino	Italian	Male	47	Self-employed	Married	2 adult children
38	Mirella	Italian	Female	51	Sales representative	Married	1 teenage child

The demographic and socio-economic diversity of our participant profiles richly contributes to understanding the lived reality of how individuals of various ages, gender, socio-economic grouping and family size coped with austerity. Participant recruitment was facilitated through social networks, special announcements (e.g. social media; recruitment posters on notice boards in public areas), and other forms of snowballing. The interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to two hours and took place either in the participant's home or in a room at the respective researcher's university.

Interviews carried out in Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece were conducted by experienced bilingual researchers and translated into English. The transcripts were subsequently coded by all members of the research team, facilitating back-translation (see Horváth and Birgelen, 2015) and subsets of transcript codes were discussed and compared across all countries. As an appropriate method to interpret the data, a thematic analysis approach was used to move from description to interpretation (Clarke and Braun, 2013). Specifically, our analysis involved generating initial codes, conducting a deductive–inductive identification and review of themes, followed by defining, naming and reporting of themes (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Thus, the outcome of further coding and the refinement and development of our thematic analysis revealed three themes, namely (1) normalised sustainability practices; (2) social normalisation of frugality; (3) normalisation of frugal-induced sustainability, which are discussed in the next section.

#### 4 Normalising sustainable consumption

Alongside cognitive perspectives, the following analysis illustrates the influencing socio-cultural structures, such as lifestyle and symbolic identity, to reveal the 'continuous relational accomplishments in intersecting of multiple practices of everyday life' (Halkier and Jensen, 2011, p. 117). Shaped in particular by their social environment, our findings indicate how social norms influence both private and public activities. Our first theme reveals the routinely embedded, normalised sustainability practices engaged in by our participants.

##### 4.1 Normalised Sustainability Practices

Routine practices involving recycling, reusing/repurposing products and reducing waste became normalised as a way of life for many participants as a result of personal influences when they were growing up, and/or how they wanted to bring their own children up, for example:

We always recycle. I do try to reduce waste. It has nothing to do with the saving money or the current financial situation whatsoever. It's just the way I've been brought up and what was drummed into me as a kid and not to waste things. (Martina, 44 yrs, UK).



Overall, as a household we tend to be very conscious of environmental concerns and we try to do our bit. We recycle a lot, we avoid excessive consumption, and we reuse things as much as possible. (Christina, 53 yrs, Greece);

Although all participants spoke about everyday sustainable practices they engaged in, perceptions of normalised sustainable practices appeared more culturally driven in some countries, as discussed by Nikolaos, who was very much encouraged by his wife, and talked about a more collective responsibility towards the environment and felt that Greece was achieving greater recycling rates than the rest of the EU;

In the past ten years, Greek individuals and households, they have had the highest increase in recycling amongst all countries ... I have been trained by Maria. It is a custom and a habit in our house. (Nikolaos, 41 yrs, Greece);

This contrasts with some of the practice literature that suggest consumption is predominantly unconscious (e.g. Warde, 2005) and lacks agency (Barnett et al., 2011) and instead illustrates that shifting cultural norms can be consciously embraced where individuals adopt and model new practices that are normalised within and beyond their households and communities.

#### 4.2 Social Normalisation of Frugality

Reflecting media stories detailing the disruption and impact of austerity upon various countries (e.g. Spain and Greece), and rising statistics of individuals living with poverty, our second theme illustrates how frugal practices and habits became socially normalised. Indeed, as revealed by the following quotes, the practice of switching utility service providers to save money was common, as was cutting back on the use of energy-intense appliances, such as the washing machine, and household heating practices:

I've started doing the washing up during the week instead of using the dishwasher ... I've also started doing the washing at night, so put it in at night, and get it out next morning, because there are certain instances where I think the electricity is slightly cheaper at night. (Louise, 45 yrs, UK);

At home, we start turning on the lights later ... We were not able to pick the heating system, the house was already equipped with an electrical heating system, but it wasted too much electricity and was too expensive, so we opted to buy oil heaters that consume very little ... With gas we also only do the essential, like food. With water we only use what is necessary and we try to use only the minimum and this has really reduced the bills ... We have to use only what is really necessary. (Antonio, 38 yrs, Spain).

For some participants, however, attempts to reduce costs over the long term involved reinvesting in more energy-saving appliances/materials to save more money, for example:

I use 'long-life' light bulbs that last longer, because even if they are expensive, they have a long duration, and it is a saving itself. I have changed the washing machine, the dishwasher and the refrigerator with types of appliances with lower energy consumption. The difference is not a great one, it is about 20 euros per month, but it is a saving, nevertheless. These days I'm trying to save also using low consumption bulbs, so I am replacing the old ones with the new ones that are more economical. (Mirella, 51 yrs, Italy).

In the more public setting of the workplace, an increasingly normalised frugality-induced change in practice for many participants involved using meal leftovers from the night before and/or taking food from home to take to work rather than using external catering outlets, as evidenced by Yiannis:

I take food from home, I do not really join the more senior faculty when they go out to have a meal on their lunch break ... one reason is purely financial, I cannot afford having a meal out at a restaurant every day ... Thankfully many people at work are likeminded and we get together for lunch. That is very nice, you do not feel distant at all and you can have an affordable get-together ... Yes, there is a significant change in patterns there, very different from the past, when I would have a more substantial meal more often and would not mind if I spent 6–7–8–10 euros for lunch. (Yiannis, 38 yrs, Greece).

Similarly, changes to leisure and holiday activities were discussed by participants such as Antonio and there was a sense of agreement that holidays were very much viewed as an expensive luxury:

We don't do many things that we used to do before ... We can't even go anywhere on the weekends, before we could go sometimes to the restaurant with the kids and now, we don't go. We don't go because we can't go, we have to reduce these expenses because we know that the electricity, the water, education ... We used to go to the beach every year and we would go on trips. At least three or four trips every year and we would always go to the beach and now we can't do any of those things. ... the closest beach is ten kilometres away and just to pay public transportation for all four of us, to go and to return home, even if you take a snack to eat, that money can be used for something else. (Antonio, 38 yrs, Spain).

Despite the above restrictions, some participants endorsed the more positive outcomes about the economic recession and the accompanying austerity measures in terms of how it made them less materialistic. Here, Filipe concludes that the 'crisis has at least made us realise it, it made us stop to think and probably we were wasting money stupidly' (65 yrs, Portugal). Similarly, Maria explains how her spending has changed in response to austerity:

Before I was much more calm about buying something that wasn't essential ... Our house is a scary thing, the amount of objects that a person accumulates along life. Today I think many times 'so I'm going to spend money just because I want to, another unnecessary object' ... So superficial things are now less a part of my life, because of austerity of course ... Money is precious, that's what we feel. Spending a certain amount of money, we often think how that money could be spent in a more useful way. Austerity taught us that, that's true. (Maria, 49 yrs, Portugal).

She then goes on to describe the normalising impact upon the country as a whole and how everyone will behave differently as a result of austerity:

This is going to stay, I'm almost certain that with my son that's 11 and even with my daughter that's 22, this isn't going to be only a moment thing. They are going to be conscious of the cost of money more than ever and this economic crisis is a school. (Maria, 49 yrs, Portugal).

Building on the notion of the social normalisation (Rettie et al., 2011; 2012) and the evolutionary and temporal nature of practices (Schatzki, 2002), our analysis points to a clearly sustained and collective normalisation of frugality and an enduring adoption of practices in response to austerity. Alongside such rising normalisation of frugality, increased awareness of unsustainable practices and routines for our participants appeared to have also led to more transformative change.

#### 4.3 Normalisation of Frugal-Induced Sustainability

Reflecting on the impact of austerity, there appeared to be a realisation from our participants that being more frugal also contributed to a normalisation of sustainable living practices, as shown by the following comments around car and energy usage:

I have my television sitting on a small table ... you have to get on your hands and knees to switch off the power ... So yes I'm very, very conscious of that and that is something that I wouldn't have gone and thought about, say, five years ago or six years ago ... I suppose we all have in the last ... particularly in the last ten years, become involved and aware of the damage to the environment from different ... It is a dual thing now I do it to save money and save energy. (David, 60 yrs, Ireland);

This 'dual' motivation was also prevalent amongst participants' normalised motivations to be healthier and/or follow a healthier lifestyle, as Eliza spoke of how she tried to cycle more often, as it was 'better for the environment, better with regards to petrol consumption and better for me' (Elisa, 46 yrs, Greece).

Thinking about the long-term considerations around the longevity and circularity of products also became more normalised amongst participants. Thus, house appliances were also kept for longer and house repairs and maintenance evolved into a shared activity within communities:

We try to reuse for other purposes some plastic containers that you would otherwise just recycle. Giving further life to an item you could just discard or send for recycling is an interesting phenomenon; I think it is part of the changes brought about by the crisis. (Yiannis, 38 yrs, Greece);

Whatever I can repair, I do it. I ask the help of people, friends or relatives. For example, my brother is very good with computers and whenever I have a problem with computers, he takes care of it. (Elisa, 46 yrs, Greece).

Compared to conversations around frugality alone, there was a more personal gain of well-being as well as an intergenerational legacy from integrating practices of frugality and sustainability, as reflected below:

We have a lovely warm efficient house now which make us as a family happier, is saving us money and also is more environmentally friendly. It makes me feel good to be part of a change that saves me money and is also good for the planet and ... our children's future. I know it sounds corny, but I think being more conscious of others and things outside of ourselves is a really good thing to come out of the recession. (Robert, 38 yrs, Ireland).

Additionally, participants increasingly spoke of a more collective approach to sustainability, especially when it came to the reuse/redistribution and sharing of goods, for example:

Now people have their own garden, and there is a very interesting phenomenon going on ... someone knocks on my door to share with me things that they planted in their garden. My neighbours are constructing a house and they have a garden, and they live in our building. So they have already brought me cabbages, lettuce, green beans and zucchinis ... it's really spectacular. People are starting to share. I'm also starting to restore a house and I have some fruit trees, for example, and I already gave away lemons and this is very good and interesting. This never had happened in my neighbourhood, it's incredible ... solidarity with one another too ... it's a spectacular social phenomenon that is happening. (Maria, 49 yrs, Portugal).

As argued at the outset of this chapter, the long-term disruption of austerity has brought about transformative changes to the normalisation of sustainable values and behaviour, as evidenced by what Nikolaos termed a 're-evaluation of their value system towards consumption', as well as a sustained commitment to new practices and a significant refocusing of priorities.

The habits that I have with the house savings, with electricity, as I already said, that's always going to remain. It's to maintain because it's a good habit, although it was forced by the

crisis, it's a good habit. ... Probably I will [buy branded products only when they are on promotion] because they're good and if I can save why shouldn't I? (Amelia, 21 yrs, Portugal);

I think that many people learned or relearned certain values ... There is naturally also a lot to lose in many cases that we see around us that are very dramatic, whole families without any type of income, people having to change, I moved from one house to another, but there are people that simply ended up without a house. It could have really changed people's way of seeing things in a different way, this mutual help maybe or the fact that people start to choose healthier things that end up to be better on an environmental level too, because the rest is clearly negative. (Helena, 39 yrs, Portugal);

While initially triggered by austerity and a resultant focus on frugality, it is clear that descriptive social norms (Rimal and Real, 2003) and social normalisation (Rettie et al., 2012) underlie the resultant changes to practices. This is evident not only in the transformative aspect but also the collective and, particularly, enduring nature of the changes to values, commitment and practices with respect to greater sustainability.

## 5 Conclusion

In response to Rettie and Harries' (2013) call for further research into how practices are performed and reproduced in their everyday lives, our study provides clear contributions and implications for consumer research and the adoption of sustainability practices. Firstly, it offers clear insight into the disruption brought about by austerity as well as how complex bundles of sustainability practices are configured and negotiated amongst EU consumers. Secondly, our research sheds light on the nature of the change to practices, which includes, in many cases, a radical, long-term transformation that is integrated within everyday household tasks, work-related duties and personal/family-based leisure activities. Thirdly, our study confirms that the normalisation of sustainability practices is both temporal and evolutionary (Schatzki, 2002), leading to dynamic and enduring changes to practices and values. However, we advance our understanding further by proposing that the social aspect inherent in the normalisation process generates a stronger commitment towards sustainability compared to pressurised mechanisms aimed at enforcing sustainability.

In addition, while largely evidenced within the realm of personal circumstances, our findings go beyond Rettie et al. (2013b) to foreground the influence of social norms at a broader societal level as our participants reflect on and embrace changing attitudes and values due to a shared empathy for the austerity-based experiences of others. Although age (Murray et al., 1984), personality (Carli et al., 1991) and gender, (e.g. White et al., 2002) did not feature as strong influences upon the uptake of sustainability practices, in contrast to Nolan et al. (2012), consciousness of shared/collective conformity to sustainability practices was clearly detected, with many participants discussing the shared meanings at a societal level. Finally, our study builds on the importance of the 'carrier' role (e.g. Shove et al. (2012), whereby we evidence that normalised, frugality-induced sustainability practices are enacted and reproduced within and across EU countries. We further propose that these transformative changes to practices can attract new carriers, given the importance of social norms between family members, with many participants highlighting social influence from parents to their children as part of a collective movement towards sustainability.

## 6 Further recommendations for practitioners

Given the reliance on more cognitive-led behavioural change campaigns, this research supports the position that practitioner campaigns around sustainability are less likely to create a reliable behaviour change tool (McEachern et al., 2020; Shove, 2010). Our study also

highlights the importance for practitioners of NGO/community-led social normalisation processes as opposed to upstream normative or punitive measures (e.g. policy levies and charges such as the plastic bag charge), which may result in resistance to change. Our findings also provide evidence regarding the importance of community-led and intergenerational circuits of communication and subsequent recruitment around sustainable practices. It is recommended therefore that behaviour change practitioners concentrate on allocating regional funding to NGOs and/or local authorities for community-based sustainability programmes around, for example, repair, reuse and recycle. Local and community-level initiatives could be further promoted within youth groups, sports and activity-based clubs, as well as schools and colleges, to support the normalisation of sustainable practices from an early stage. Due to the extensive roles exerting social influence within the home from parents to their children (and vice versa), family-based sustainability-related initiatives that appropriately focus on leveraging intergenerational influence should be prioritised. Hence, an integration of localised, community-led and intergenerational strategies will help to secure and effect change at the grass-roots level as part of a broader societal commitment.

## References

- Aarts, H. and A. Dijksterhuis (2003), 'The silence of the library: environment, situational norm and social behaviour', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(1), 18–28.
- Barnett, C., P. Cloke, N. Clarke and A. Malpass (2011), *Globalizing Responsibility: The Political Rationalities of Ethical Consumption*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Bearden, W. and M. Etzel (1982), 'Reference group influence on product and brand purchase decisions', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 9(September), 183–194.
- Blyth, M. (2013), *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977), *Outline of Theory of Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Braun, V. and V. Clarke (2012), 'Thematic analysis', in H. Cooper (ed.), *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology*, pp. 57–71, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Carli, L., R. Ganley and A. Pierce-Otay (1991), 'Similarity and satisfaction in roommate relationships', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 17(4), 419–426.
- Cialdini, R.B. and N. Goldstein (2004), 'Social influence: compliance and conformity', *Annual Review of Psychology*, 55, 591–622.
- Cialdini, R.B., C.A. Kallgren and R. Reno (1991), 'A focus theory of normative conduct: a theoretical refinement and re-evaluation of the role of norms in human behaviour', *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 24, 201–234.
- Clarke, V. and V. Braun (2013), 'Teaching thematic analysis: overcoming challenges and developing strategies for effective learning', *The Psychologist*, 26(2), 120–123.
- Cohen, M.J. (2020), 'Does the COVID-19 outbreak mark the onset of a sustainable consumption transition?', *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, 16(1), 1–3.
- Denegri-Knott, J., E. Nixon and K. Abraham (2018), 'Politicising the study of sustainable living practices', *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 21(6), 554–573.

- Evans, D. (2011), 'Thrifty, green or frugal: reflections on sustainable consumption in a changing economic climate', *Geoforum*, 42(5), 550–557.
- Foucault, M. (1977), *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan, London: Penguin Books.
- Giddens, A. (1979), *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Goldstein, N., R. Cialdini and V. Griskevicius (2008), 'A room with viewpoint: using social norms to motivate environmental conversation in hotels', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 75(October), 472–482.
- Griskevicius, V., N. Goldstein, R. Mortesen, R. Cialdini and D. Kenrick (2006), 'Going along versus going alone: when fundamental motives facilitate strategic (non)conformity', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91(2), 281–294.
- Halkier, B. and I. Jensen (2011), 'Methodological challenges in using practice theory in consumption research: examples from a study on handling nutritional contestations of food consumption', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 11(1), 101–123.
- Hampson, D.P., A. Grimes, E. Banister and P.J. McGoldrick (2018), 'A typology of consumers based on money attitudes after major recession', *Journal of Business Research*, 91, 159–168.
- Hargreaves, T. (2011), 'Practice-ing behaviour change: applying social practice theory to pro-environmental behaviour change', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 11(1), 79–99.
- Harries, T., R. Rettie and M. Studley (2013a), *The CHARM Research Summary 1:- The Home Energy Study – Quantitative Analysis*, Behaviour and Practice Research Group. Available at: <http://www.projectcharm.info/>
- Harries, T., P. Eslambolchilar and R. Rettie (2013b), *The CHARM Research Summary 4: bActive: Quantitative Analysis*, Behaviour and Practice Research Group, Kingston University. Available at: <http://www.projectcharm.info/>
- Halvorsen, K. (2016), 'Economic, financial, and political crisis and well-being in the PIGS-countries', *Sage Open*, 6(4).
- Holt, D.B. (1995), 'How consumers consume: a typology of consumption practices', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22(June), 1–15.
- Jackson, T. (2005), 'Live better by consuming less? Is there a "double dividend" in sustainable consumption?' *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, 9(1–2), 19–36.
- Krugman P. (2012), *End This Disaster Now*, New York: Norton.
- McEachern, M.G., D. Middleton and T. Cassidy (2020), 'Encouraging sustainable behaviour change via a social practice approach: a focus on apparel consumption practices', *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 43(2), 397–418.
- Moraes, C., M.G. McEachern, A. Gibbons and Scullion, L. (2021), 'Understanding lived experiences of food poverty through a paralimnality lens', *Sociology*, 55(6), 1169–1190.
- Murray, D., R. Luepker, A. Johnson and M. Mittelmark (1984), 'The prevention of cigarette smoking in children: a comparison of four strategies', *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 14(3), 274–288.
- Nolan, J., P. Schultz, R. Cialdini, N. Goldstein and V. Griskevicius (2012), 'Normative social influence is underdetected', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34(7), 913–923.

Orîndaru, A., M.F. Popescu, S.C. Căescu, F. Botezatu, M.S. Florescu and C.C. Runceanu-Albu (2021), 'Leveraging COVID-19 outbreak for shaping a more sustainable consumer behaviour', *Sustainability*, 13(11), 5762.

Parker, H., L. Williams and J. Aldridge (2002), 'The normalization of "sensible" recreational drug use: further evidence from the Northwest England longitudinal study', *Sociology*, 36, 941–964.

Patel, K., T. Harries and R. Rettie, R. (2013), *CHARM Research Summary 3: iGreen: the Social Networking Study*. Behaviour and Practice Research Group, Kingston University, Available at <http://www.projectcharm.info/>

Peattie, K. and S. Peattie (2009), 'Social marketing: a pathway to consumption reduction?', *Journal of Business Research*, 62(2), 260–268.

Princen, T., M. Maniates and K. Conca (2003), 'Confronting consumption', in T. Princen, M. Maniates and K. Conca (eds), *Confronting Consumption*, pp. 1–20, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Reckwitz, A. (2002), 'Towards a theory of social practices: a development in culturalist theorizing', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5(2), 243–263.

Rettie, R. and T. Harries (2013), *CHARM Research Summary 7: Notes on Practice Theory*. Behaviour and Practice Research Group, Kingston University. Available at: <http://www.projectcharm.info/>

Rettie, R., C. Barnham and K. Burchell (2011), *Social Normalisation and Consumer Behaviour: Using Marketing to Make Green Normal*, Working Paper Number 8, Kingston Business School.

Rettie, R., K. Burchell and D. Riley (2012), 'Normalising green behaviours: a new approach to sustainability marketing', *Journal of Marketing Management*, 28(3–4), 420–444.

Rettie, R., T. Harries and I. Bellwood–Howard (2013a), *CHARM Research Summary 2: Home Energy Study: Quantitative Analysis*. Behaviour and Practice Research Group, Kingston University. Available at: <http://www.projectcharm.info/>

Rettie, R., K. Burchell and T. Harries (2013b), *CHARM Research Summary 6: Social Norms Approach*. Behaviour and Practice Research Group, Kingston University, Available at: <http://www.projectcharm.info/>

Rimal, R.N. and K. Real (2003), 'Understanding the influence of perceived norms on behaviour', *Communication Theory*, 13(2), 184–203.

Robertson, T.S. (1967), 'The process of innovation and the diffusion of innovation', *Journal of Marketing*, 31(1), 14–19.

Schatzki, T.R. (1996), *Social Practices: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schatzki, T. (2002), *The Site of the Social: A Philosophical Account of the Constitution of Social Life and Change*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Shove, E. (2003), *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organisation of Normality*, Oxford: Berg.

Shove, E. (2009), 'Everyday practice and the production and consumption of time', in E. Shove, F. Trentmann and R. Wilk (eds), *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture*, pp. 17–34, Oxford: Berg.

- Shove, E. and D. Southerton (2009), 'Defrosting the freezer: from novelty to convenience', *Journal of Material Culture*, 5(3), 301–319.
- Shove, E., F. Trentmann and R. Wilk (2009), 'Introduction', in E. Shove, F. Trentmann and R. Wilk (eds), *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture*, pp. 1–13, Oxford: Berg.
- Shove, E., M. Pantzar and M. Watson (2012), *The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday Life and How It Changes*, London: Sage.
- Social Metrics Commission (2019), *Measuring Poverty 2019: A Report of the Social Metrics Commission*. Available at: [https://socialmetricscommission.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/SMC\\_measuring-poverty-201908\\_full-report.pdf](https://socialmetricscommission.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/SMC_measuring-poverty-201908_full-report.pdf) (accessed: 4 February 2023).
- Szmigin, I.T., D. O'Loughlin, M.G. McEachern, K. Karantinou, B. Barbosa, G. Lamprinakos and M.E. Fernández-Moya (2020), 'Keep calm and carry on: European consumers and the development of persistent resilience in the face of austerity', *European Journal of Marketing*, 54(8), 1883–1907.
- Trentmann, F. (2009), 'Disruption is normal', in E. Shove, F. Trentmann and R. Wilk (eds), *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture*, pp. 67–84, Oxford: Berg.
- Warde, A. (2005), 'Consumption and theories of practice', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 5(2), 131–153.
- White, K., M. Hogg and D. Terry (2002), 'Improving attitude–behaviour correspondence through exposure to normative support from a salient in-group', *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 24(2), 91–103.
- Wilk, R. (2009), 'The edge of agency: routines, habits and volition', in E. Shove, F. Trentmann and R. Wilk (eds), *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture*, pp. 143–155, Oxford: Berg.
- Wolfensberger, W. (1980), 'The definition of normalization. updates, problems, disagreements and misunderstandings', in R. Flynn and K Nitsch (eds), *Normalisation, Social Integration and Community Services*, pp. XX–XX, Baltimore, MD: University Park Press.

---

1. Individuals in persistent poverty are described as people who have earned an income below 60% of the average income for at least two of the last three years (Social Metrics Commission, 2019).