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RECEIVED 03 July 2025  
ACCEPTED 20 November 2025  
PUBLISHED 08 December 2025

CITATION  
Bradley K, Hilliard W and Parekh V (2025) Buy,  
Use, Make—A taxonomy of sustainable  
consumption practices.  
*Front. Sustain.* 6:1659040.  
doi: 10.3389/frsus.2025.1659040

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# Buy, Use, Make—A taxonomy of sustainable consumption practices

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In policy debates around sustainable consumption, the term is often associated with buying products or services that have lower environmental impact when compared with mainstream options. This paper contributes to the growing body of research that seeks to nuance understandings of sustainable consumption by providing a taxonomy structured into three ‘types’ of sustainable consumption practices: (1) buying, (2) using and (3) making. The taxonomy highlights that sustainable consumption concerns not only the decisions made around the acquisition of a product or service, but also how products and resources are maintained, reused, repaired, shared and enabled—while also considering wider socio-environmental aspects such as community empowerment. The relevance for policy lies in the argument that sustainable consumption goes beyond the buying type—enacted through, for example, public procurement or promotion of eco-labeling—to also include the using and making types, i.e. public policy that facilitates sharing, making and repairing beyond market-relations.

## KEYWORDS

sustainable consumption, taxonomy, strong sustainable consumption, social practices, prosumption

## 1 Introduction

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, notably goal number 12 “Responsible Consumption and Production,” which includes the subtitle “Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns” (UN, 2015), has meant that governments and other organisations, from central to local levels, are expected to promote sustainable consumption. This has brought an increasing interest in attempts to understand how the concept of sustainable consumption may be interpreted and operationalised today. There is a plethora of academic and political definitions of the term (e.g., Hobson, 2013; Lorek and Fuchs, 2013; Oslo Roundtable, 1994; Spaargaren, 2003; UN, 2015), though in popular conceptions of sustainable consumption, it is often associated with buying products or services that have lower environmental impacts compared with mainstream options. Several scholars have pointed to the relevance of including dimensions of social justice, power and well-being (e.g. Jackson, 2009; Princen et al., 2002), as well as community empowerment, autonomy and resilience for product-service systems to be dubbed ‘sustainable’ (Jaeger-Erben et al., 2015). Other researchers have argued for a rethink of the consumption-production dichotomy (Cohen and Muñoz, 2016; Hobson, 2013; Ritzer, 2014), instead emphasising a more circular system of *using*, rather than the more linear *consuming* (e.g. Maitre-Ekern and Dalhammar, 2019). Some scholars have pointed to the relevance of sufficiency perspectives in conceptualisations of sustainable consumption (Spangenberg and Lorek, 2019; Speck and Hasselkuss, 2015), while others highlight the relevance of ‘Systems of Provision’ approaches, where products are also acquired through non-market relations (Fine and Bayliss, 2022).

There is a well-spread conceptualisation of consumption structured into three phases: acquisition, use and disposal (also used by Geiger et al., 2018 in the “SC Cube”). However, in line with Maitre-Ekern and Dalhammar (2019), we argue that this largely linear approach to consumption warrants a rethink. If we are to move towards more circular systems of using product and services, conceptualisations of sustainable consumption need to mirror such circular processes. Given the critical perspectives on sustainable consumption mentioned above, there is a need for an updated conceptualisation that incorporates not only a circular perspective but also aspects of strong sustainable consumption: sufficiency, a systems of provision approach, and low-impact practices that may be motivated not by ecological, but other concerns, such as socio-economical concerns for frugality, resilience or community empowerment. In light of these perspectives, the aim of this paper is to contribute to the debates on how sustainable consumption can be understood in a contemporary context, by providing a taxonomy of sustainable consumption practices that is communicative enough to be useful for both academics and practitioners.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 includes an overview of previous theorisations of sustainable consumption, in relation to which the taxonomy is developed. Section 3 describes the empirical methods and materials used to develop the taxonomy: The empirical basis of the taxonomy is a broad mapping of sustainable consumption practices, primarily in the areas of eating, furnishing and vacationing, conducted within a larger research programme on sustainable consumption. Around 700 examples of sustainable consumption practices were gathered through a literature review, a web survey, and workshops with researchers and practitioners active in the domain of sustainable consumption. Section 4 presents and describes the taxonomy using a graphical representation (Figure 1), example usage and reasoning around it in relation to the background provided in section 2. Lastly in section 5, the conclusion summarises contributions, discusses the taxonomy’s policy relevance and points towards future research. The presented taxonomy is structured into three ‘types’ of sustainable consumption practices: (1) buying, (2) using and (3) making. The taxonomy highlights that sustainable consumption concerns not only the decisions being made around the acquisition of a product or service, but also how products and resources are maintained, reused, repaired, shared and, not least, enabled. The policy relevance lies in the argument that public policy needs to go beyond the buying type to also include the using and making types, e.g. policies that facilitate sharing, making and repairing. If integrated into a policy development processes, the taxonomy can aid in conceptualising sustainable consumption with consumers as active participants in socio-environmentally sustainable practices which various societal actors have a shared responsibility to promote and scale up.

## 2 Background: theoretical considerations for a taxonomy of sustainable consumption practices

This section serves as a conceptual background to the taxonomy, by outlining the theoretical considerations that have

gone into its development. Specifically, section 2.1 provides a brief overview of how sustainable consumption (SC) has been conceptualised in previous research. Section 2.2 focuses on how people—as individuals, consumers or otherwise—are conceptualised in SC research and section 2.3 discusses how the introduction of practice theory into SC research has helped broaden this understanding. Lastly, section 2.4 examines previous frameworks and typologies of SC and associated circular economy practices to help identify the potential contribution of a new taxonomy.

### 2.1 Conceptions of sustainable consumption

Sustainable consumption has been conceptualised and compartmentalised in numerous ways and across several different bodies of research (Hobson, 2013; Lorek and Fuchs, 2013; Spaargaren, 2003). The focus ranges from attempts to better understand individual motivations and behaviours (Evans, 2011; Koszewska, 2013; Pepper et al., 2009) to the elucidation of broad social structures that both enable and restrict individual and societal efforts to consume more sustainably (Cohen and Muñoz, 2016; Corsini et al., 2019; Princen, 2003).

Usage of the word ‘sustainable’ has evolved over the years. While sometimes simply referring to a specific and quantifiable reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (West et al., 2015), sustainability, in relation to consumption, often includes socioenvironmental aspects such as social and environmental justice (Agyeman and Evans, 2003). Jaeger-Erben et al. (2015) have pointed to the relevance of also including community empowerment, practical autonomy, and waste avoidance within sustainable production and consumptions systems.

There has also been a turn in the understanding of consumption as separate from production. Toffler’s (1980) portmanteau ‘prosumption’ describes the merging of the consumer and producer roles and has since been increasingly discussed in SC literature. Ritzer (2014) suggests a more fluid spectrum of prosumption, where acts of pure consumption or pure production are seen as unrealisable ideal types. Of the many concepts that run parallel, or indeed overlap, with that of prosumption, ‘collaborative consumption’ is worthy of distinction. In proposing their framework of prosumption, Ertz et al. (2025) acknowledge the conceptual similarities, describing collaborative consumption as a redistribution of access to goods and services, manifesting in inter-consumer provision. These can be via commercial online platforms, such as Airbnb, as well as non-profit platforms (both on and offline) such as peer-to-peer car sharing platforms or community-based tool libraries. Belk (2014), Botsman and Rogers (2010) and others have pointed out that collaborative consumption is about *access* rather than private ownership. However, the collaborative aspect entails users being granted access to other users’ *owned* resources, e.g. private cars. This can be contrasted to access in the form of renting products or services from a commercial company, e.g. a car rental company. Hence in collaborative consumption, relations are typically horizontal rather than vertical (i.e. that between a private company and a consumer), whereas

prosumption encompasses both axes (Ertz et al., 2024). An example of prosumption's verticality can be found in Zafar et al.'s (2018) study on smart energy grids, which describes how 'prosumers' not only consume energy, but produce and sell it as well. These practices of prosumption and collaborative consumption point to an erosion of the dualistic production/consumption narrative.

Digging deeper, Graeber's (2011) analysis of the word consumption critiques the widespread and overly casual application of the word to instances where resources are not 'used up.' Using the word to describe practices that do not destroy what they use, such as referring to reading a book as consuming culture, is one such way this occurs. He states that social life is supplanted by "a gigantic engine of production and destruction" (p. 502) as the fundament of our existence. If researchers have the intent to encourage sharing, swapping, and other largely social practices of SC (see sSC in the following paragraph), they must be particularly vigilant in this instance. Both Ritzer's (2014) and Graeber's (2011) analyses highlight the consideration required in the usage of the word 'consumption' or, indeed, 'sustainable.'

A widely referenced conceptualisation of SC understanding is Fuchs and Lorek's (2005) concept of 'weak' and 'strong' sustainable consumption, which serves to separate the "wheat from the chaff" (see Lorek and Fuchs, 2013, p. 36) in SC practices. Weak sustainable consumption (wSC) encompasses the contemporarily dominant technological and efficiency-based solutions, which while playing a necessary role in sustainable consumption transitions, fail to effect significant enough change, consider 'rebound' effects (Iran and Schrader, 2017) or acknowledge issues of social justice. Strong sustainable consumption (sSC), on the other hand, considers a degrowth perspective that reaches beyond market values to incorporate more radical notions of 'the good life' where the 'social embeddedness' (Lorek and Fuchs, 2013, p. 38) of consumption is acknowledged and highlights the need for more fundamental changes in systems of production and consumption. The conceptualisation of weak and strong SC has been used as both a dichotomy (Lorek and Fuchs, 2013) and a continuum (Hobson, 2013) helping to categorise different strategies or policy measures that attempt to steer towards SC.

Strong sustainable consumption can include alternative systems of provision (Seyfang, 2006) or phenomena such as the circular and sharing economies, which also often further blur the distinction between consumption and production as well as between consumer and producer. While linear consumption practices and traditional notions of the circular economy situate the citizen as a consumer, an sSC circular economy approach more fluidly reframes them as 'users,' active in one or more stages of the production, usage, re-usage, sharing, or repairing of a given product or spatial-temporal locale (Cohen and Muñoz, 2016; Eden, 2017; Hobson, 2016). Hobson (2016, p. 99) proposes a designer-consumer-user-repairer-citizen contract "where roles, competencies and responsibilities are redistributed and reconfigured throughout the lifetime of products and services, recalibrating the social relations and arrangements that currently favour the purchasing-ownership-disposal model of citizen-consumer practices." She critiques examples of wSC in the sharing economy such as carpooling, which she argues ultimately does little to disrupt driving's hegemony over urban mobility, and seeks to re-establish citizen capacity for new sSC assemblages of production and consumption (or indeed, prosumption).

Recent literature on the circular economy (CE) continues to expand and nuance its social particularities, drawing attention to the processes at play beyond the specific object in question. Why we choose to repair and reuse certain objects is often tied up in the meaning they hold for us (Meißner, 2021), with the "sentiment and symbolism associated to objects often brought to life through their continued use" (Holmes, 2019, p. 175). Hui and Yeoh (2025) contribute here by drawing attention to the collaborative labour demands of circular consumption practices. These components lie in broader discussions around why and how we care, an often-undervalued phenomenon within the circular economy (Morrow and Davies, 2022). Consequently, Tölg and Fuentes (2025) list care for the environment, care for others and care for oneself as key relational motivations for the circular economy, allowing them to unearth the barriers and dilemmas involved in sharing, such as caring for others at one's own expense.

## 2.2 Conceptualising people in sustainable consumption research

Research focusing on individual consumers tends to conceptualise them as wilful political actors, albeit with varying degrees of autonomy (Balderjahn et al., 2018; Hobson, 2016; Koszewska, 2013), with Middlemiss (2010) arguing for a less prescriptive approach to individual SC responsibility. Oosterveer and Sonnenfeld (2012, p. 235) argue that "citizenship and consumerism can no longer be considered as only opposing practices and discourses," with which many SC case studies concur (Koszewska, 2013; Prothero et al., 2010). The eco or 'green' labelling of goods and services indicates a market response to the power of the consumer (Oosterveer and Sonnenfeld, 2012) as many seek to remedy the disconnect between their consumption and its impact through their purchasing decisions (Princen, 2003). The shelves of consumer-motivation research are well stocked with socio-psychological studies from the marketing and psychology fields. These typological studies either distinguish between different types of sustainable consumers (e.g., Balderjahn et al., 2018) or take a broader perspective to include both sustainable and unsustainable consumption (e.g., Henninger et al., 2017). One should be cautious of conflating SC practices with SC values, however. Both, Pepper et al. (2009) and Evans (2011) discuss the ostensibly SC practices of frugality and thriftiness, noting neither to necessarily stem from an environmental or social value base.

Anantharaman (2022) has highlighted the class politics involved in sustainable consumption, suggesting that practices described as 'sustainable' or 'green' (such as recycling, urban gardening, organic food consumption or cycling), are defined as such by "high-cultural-capital consumers" of the Global North, primarily of Western Europe. Practices of the Global South, on the other hand, that entail reuse, recycling, local food production and using non-motorised transport (among many others), are generally not recognised as "sustainable." As she puts it: "Dominant Western/Anglo sustainability discourses carry unspoken assumptions about what counts as pro-environmental or sustainable, and thus invisibilise the healthy and sustainable food practices of non-Western marginalized groups..." (2022, p. 125). The invisibilised non-Western groups do not only include the

poor in the global South but also groups and practices of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Bloc. Anantharman argues that this blind eye is connected to “the environmental talk” and scientific concepts that stem from Western education and the discourse of high-cultural-capital groups. With reference to [Baviskar \(2005\)](#), she points to the tendency of depicting the global poor as ‘not caring for the environment,’ whilst turning a blind eye to the problems of over-consumption.

The sufficiency perspectives centred on the Global North do, however, engage with overconsumption and emphasise the ease with which material needs, wellbeing, and notions of the good life can be met. In some of the literature on sufficiency, the concept of ‘sustainable consumption corridors,’ drawing on the work of [Di Giulio and Fuchs \(2014\)](#), helps point to the need for addressing not only basic human rights and needs of consumption, but also contexts and policies for dealing with overconsumption. Unlike efficiency approaches to SC, a sufficiency perspective suggests a lifestyle of overall reduced consumption, albeit in the limited context of the affluent world ([Princen, 2003](#)). [Callmer \(2019\)](#) has highlighted diverse entries to sufficiency and emphasises the different religious, cultural, philosophical and economic motivations for sufficiency across historical and geographical contexts. In a study of low-income groups in Norway, [Korsnes and Solbu \(2024\)](#) distinguish between sufficiency as necessity, sufficiency as opposition (i.e. to the mainstream growth aspirations) and sufficiency as reframing sustainability, whereby people redefine their low resource ways of living in sustainability terms.

Given an sSC perspective and a broadened conceptualisation of people, a commensurate unit of social change needs to go beyond individuals and their SC behaviours and choices and consider the social, material and structurally shaped nature of consumption.

## 2.3 Understanding practice theory in sustainable consumption research

In order to gain a more nuanced understanding of sustainable consumption patterns, drivers and obstacles, the use of different forms of practice theory was introduced, marking a turn in SC conceptualisation ([Jaeger-Erben and Offenberger, 2014](#); [Spaargaren, 2003](#); [Speck and Hasselkuss, 2015](#); [Verain et al., 2012](#); [Warde, 2005](#)), including the circular economy’s place within this ([Meißner, 2021](#); [Rabiu and Jaeger-Erben, 2022](#)). Here, consumption is “usefully understood as an outcome of practice” ([Shove and Spurling, 2013](#), p. 1). A practice can rudimentarily be described as an activity or combination of activities that occur across time ([Schatzki, 2013](#)). The approach promotes an appreciation of both individual agency and structural influence, rather than understanding the two as dichotomous, and provides a socially grounded viewpoint from which to decipher the coevolution of norms, values, and material constraints and enablements ([Brand, 2010](#); [Corsini et al., 2019](#); [Oosterveer and Sonnenfeld, 2012](#); [Shove and Spurling, 2013](#)). Neither the individual nor their inhabited societal structure forms the locus of investigation, but rather it is their everyday practices, shaped by people, knowledge, and materiality ([Jaeger-Erben and Offenberger, 2014](#)) that constitute the basic unit of social enquiry ([Shove and Spurling, 2013](#)).

The practice approach’s ability to conceptualise consumption as a complex mesh of actors, things, and symbols differs from the idea of the autonomous ‘sustainable consumer’ and replaces it with a richer understanding of mutually entangled and structurally constituted everyday practices, of which individuals are ‘carriers’ ([Brand, 2010](#); [Klitkou et al., 2022](#); [Laakso et al., 2021](#); [Speck and Hasselkuss, 2015](#); [Warde, 2005](#)). Contemporary interpretations are diverse and “there is no one theory of practice and no such thing as a “practice approach” ([Shove and Spurling, 2013](#), p. 3).

[Jaeger-Erben and Offenberger’s \(2014\)](#) study into the changes in parental practices brought about by the birth of a first child helps to demonstrate the benefit of the approach. They describe how meals become more structured, organic food gains importance, and specialised baby equipment gets purchased; all communicating an acknowledgement of societal expectations and material demands. This demonstrates the underlying structural influences that make up the body of the consumption iceberg; visible consumption practices form just the tip. The example also demonstrates that the sustainability effect of a given practice has often been formed long before the moment of consumption occurs. It can be found in the messages, structures, and stories that construct the world in which practices underlying the consumption patterns are performed.

## 2.4 Sustainable consumption typologies

Typologies and taxonomies allow us to both integrate and compare existing understandings of sustainability transition (see [Lam et al., 2020](#); [Tukker et al., 2008](#)) as well as different areas of SC research and practice. A taxonomy differs from a typology only in as much as it is formulated empirically, rather than conceptually ([Bailey, 1994](#)), though several researchers use these concepts interchangeably. Somewhat messy empirical data can be translated into basic forms and categories with the help of taxonomies, thereby providing digestible information for both researchers and practitioners alike ([Jaeger-Erben et al., 2015](#)).

Numerous typologies have been developed as a tool for understanding and promoting sustainable consumption (e.g. [Geiger et al., 2018](#); [Tukker et al., 2008](#)). Some typologies are drawn from specific domains of sustainable consumption, such as fashion ([Henninger et al., 2017](#); [Iran and Schrader, 2017](#); [Koszewska, 2013](#)), food ([Verain et al., 2012](#)), social innovation ([Jaeger-Erben et al., 2015](#)), sustainable businesses ([Balderjahn et al., 2018](#)) and sharing practices ([Cohen and Muñoz, 2016](#); [Plewnia and Guenther, 2018](#)). In the research on roles and arrangements in the circular economy, several typologies have also been developed ([Macklin and Kaufman, 2024](#); [Saidani et al., 2019](#); [Selvefors et al., 2019](#); [Wastling et al., 2018](#)). The three previous typologies that we find particularly relevant to build upon are the ones developed by [Geiger et al. \(2018\)](#), [Jaeger-Erben et al. \(2015\)](#) and [Macklin and Kaufman \(2024\)](#). For an overview, see [Table 1](#).

[Geiger et al.’s \(2018\)](#) typology [the Sustainable Consumption Behaviour (SCB) cube] offers specificity as a result of several comparable levels and dimensions. It has four dimensions: the sustainability dimension, divided into the integrated, but here distinct, conditions of ecological and socio-economic; the consumption phase dimension, divided into acquisition, usage, and disposal; the consumption area dimension, here exemplified by

**TABLE 1** Brief comparison of typologies by Jaeger-Erben et al. (2015), Geiger et al. (2018) and Macklin and Kaufman (2024).

Authors	Typology of sustainable consumption
Jaeger-Erben et al. (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community-empowering consumption</li> <li>• Competence-expanding consumption</li> <li>• Resource-light and waste-avoiding consumption</li> <li>• Commonly organized consumption</li> <li>• Need- and utility-oriented consumption</li> <li>... with associated social innovations</li> </ul>
Geiger et al. (2018)	Social and ecological dimensions of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acquisition</li> <li>• Usage</li> <li>• Disposal</li> </ul>
Macklin and Kaufman (2024)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Avoid acquiring item</li> <li>○ Minimize acquisition impact</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Use               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Optimize item use</li> <li>○ Extend working life of item</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Pass on               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Divest for next use</li> <li>○ Dispense with for next life</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

food, housing, mobility, and clothing; and the impact dimension, which rates the sustainability impact of a given SC practice. These dimensions help process the copious SC research available, helping to highlight gaps in SC measurement and conceptualisation. Their division of consumption phases into acquisition, usage, and disposal is typical of SC research (e.g., Kreuzer et al., 2019; Schanes et al., 2016) and draws attention to the options available at different stages of the life cycle of a given product or practice.

However, using a ‘Systems of Provision’ perspective, Geiger et al.’s three phases do not capture how the product/service is produced or made available in the first instance. Moreover, the suitability of a disposal phase, can be questioned, given the developments of more circular arrangements (see Rabiu and Jaeger-Erben, 2022). In other, circular economy frameworks, disposal is replaced by “end-of-use” (Wastling et al., 2018), or “pass on” (Macklin and Kaufman, 2024).

Macklin and Kaufman’s (2024) typology specifically highlights the role of the user in circular economy behaviours and is divided into three phases: get, use and pass on. Each phase entails two subcategories related to the function of the behaviours, which is then divided into types and exemplified with a set of actions (Macklin and Kaufman, 2024, p. 398). They have built an extensive framework centred around the user, which also includes activities by related “up-stream” and “down-stream” actors, such as designers, manufacturers, retailers and recyclers. In this framework, the user has various options to “get” an item, though this does not include participation in any provisioning systems (i.e. in the making of items). They point out that their emphasis on the user “obscures other types of behaviours unrelated to products, such as any ‘civic’ behaviours that may be required of ‘citizens’ in a circular economy” (p. 406), while noting that these behaviours are worthy of future research and framework development. Moreover, their framework is specifically focused on reducing material footprints, whereas broader socio-ecological aspects, such as empowerment or social impacts, are not included.

Jaeger-Erben et al.’s (2015) typology of innovations for sustainable consumption practices does, on the other

hand, consider these broader socio-ecological aspects. They identify five modes of sustainable consumption practices: community-empowering consumption, competence-expanding consumption, resource-light and waste-avoiding consumption and commonly organized consumption. By comparing and relating the four dimensions of SC innovation categorised in their typology (innovativeness, formality, communality and personal engagement), they identify main challenges to SC practices and develop policy recommendations and goals for practitioners.

Taken together, the typologies of Geiger et al. (2018), Jaeger-Erben et al. (2015) and Macklin and Kaufman (2024) offer rich and diverse classification potential for SC (Table 1). With this in mind, as well as acknowledging the knowledge base around alternative systems of provisioning (Fine and Bayliss, 2022; Seyfang, 2006) and sufficiency (Spangenberg and Lorek, 2019; Speck and Hasselkuss, 2015), we see a potential for a modified typology of consumption practices that includes a greater scope for non-market provisioning and user engagements in the “making” phase of products and services. Our intention is to contribute with a taxonomy that moves beyond linear notions of consumption, further incorporates socio-ecological dimensions, and is sufficiently communicative so as to be useful for practitioners and policy makers.

### 3 Methods

As part of a larger research programme on sustainable consumption, we aimed to further unearth what sustainable consumption practices might mean in a contemporary Northern European context. Between 2018 and 2019—recognising the plurality of meanings that might underlie the concept of sustainable consumption—we gathered examples of potentially sustainable consumption practices, with a focus on the domains of food, vacationing and furnishing. The larger research programme and its other studies on scenarios, policy, and life cycle assessments (Carlsson Kanyama et al., 2019; Eggestrand and Svenfelt, 2020; Carlsson Kanyama et al., 2021; Nässén et al., 2022) focused on these three domains of consumption, given that they reflect different temporalities—where choices related to food consumption are made daily, whereas decisions related to vacationing and furnishing are more seldom. Moreover, the latter two domains are less studied and subjected to public policy, particularly when compared with domains such as housing or everyday transport, despite being highly impactful areas of consumption.

The mapping and gathering was conducted in four steps: (1) the initial workshop with the 20 researchers of the programme, working in the field of sustainable consumption; (2) three workshops with the researchers and representatives from the approximately 20 organisations engaged in the programme from public sector organisations, civil society organisations and businesses, all working with sustainable consumption and/or production in different capacities (see workshop instructions in Appendix 1); (3) a literature review on sustainable consumption and examples of this—including academic literature, national and international reports, popular magazines, websites and social media; and (4) the use of a web survey disseminated to fora and NGOs in Scandinavia concerned with sustainable consumption (see survey in Supplementary Data 1). The survey was also shared with a number of Facebook groups dealing with

sustainability transitions in a broader sense and was available in both Scandinavian languages and in English. In the survey, we asked for examples of consumption practices associated with “habits, products, services or other types of initiatives that can be considered more environmentally friendly and/or socially sustainable compared with what is mainstream today.” The intention was to gather ‘potentially’ sustainable consumption practices from a socioenvironmental perspective. The intention was not for survey respondents to be able to assess the actual impact of the practices. Assessing the actual impacts of changed consumption practices is a complex task, which was subsequently done for a selection of practices in other studies within the research programme (Carlsson Kanyama et al., 2019; Eggestrand and Svenfelt, 2020; Carlsson Kanyama et al., 2021; Nässén et al., 2022). In the questionnaire, we further stated that the examples of SC practices could come from different parts of the world and could include both historical and emerging practices.

In total, around 700 examples of potentially sustainable consumption practices were collected with a focus on food, vacationing and furnishing, however examples from other domains were also included. Researchers in the programme sorted the examples, of which several were overlapping, and developed clusters within the three focus areas of vacationing, food and furnishing (see Appendix 2). We did not see reasons to remove examples—however we merged duplicates into one example since multiple examples of a similar practice were often provided. Within the domain of furnishing, the six clusters were ‘buying used instead of new’, ‘using longer and more often’, ‘accessing rather than buy’, ‘supporting sustainable production’, ‘making items usable again’ and ‘low-impact living’, the clusters are then specified with examples (see Appendix 2). In the domain of vacationing, there were four clusters ‘slow’, ‘active’, ‘close’ and ‘sharing’ and in the domain of food there were six clusters: “using leftovers”, ‘eating more plant based’, ‘eating locally produced’, ‘eating and buying less food’, ‘eating more sustainable products’, and ‘growing, processing and storing’ (for details and examples, see Appendix 2). The mapping of the potentially sustainable consumption practices and the thematic clustering has been published in three short reports, directed towards non-academic readers and these reports include lists of the gathered examples, i.e. displaying the empirical data; for furnishing see Lehner et al. (2019, p. 26–29), for vacationing see Thorson et al. (2019, p. 24–27), for eating see Kamb et al. (2019, p. 28–35). The taxonomy of sustainable consumption practices presented in this paper was then developed in an iterative processes, going back and forth between the empirical data and the reading of previous literature and taxonomies, in order to see how we could build on and contribute to previous conceptualisations.

## 4 Results and discussion: a taxonomy of sustainable consumption practices

This section presents our taxonomy of sustainable consumption practices and discusses how it relates to the theoretical considerations reviewed in section 2.

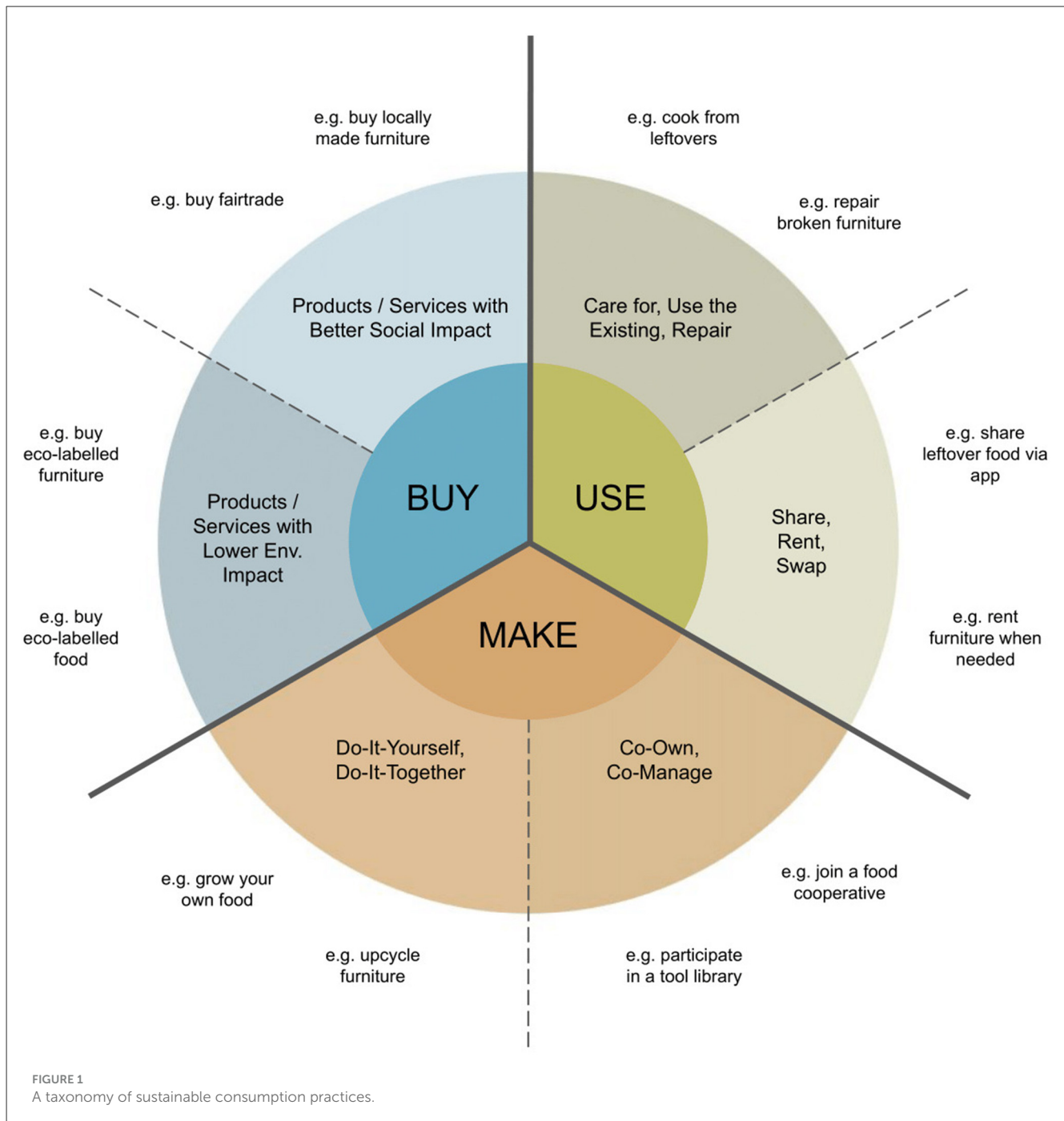
Our taxonomy of sustainable consumption practices is illustrated in Figure 1. It is divided into three types: buying, using, and making. It is assumed - while acknowledging that overlap

is indeed possible - that a potentially sustainable consumption practice can be categorised into at least one of these types. Each type is then divided into two subsections, which highlight different ways in which the practice can be performed. For example, purchasing Fairtrade-certified coffee would fit within the *products/services with better social impact* subsection of the buying type. Similarly, joining a food cooperative can be categorised as a practice of *co-owning/co-managing*, a subsection of the making type. One could also imagine practices that span several types, such as buying Fairtrade and eco-labelled coffee from a food cooperative where one also volunteers. More examples can be added between the outreaching spokes that extend beyond the boundaries of each subsection of the taxonomy. In the illustration we have used a few examples from the areas of furnishing and food, though examples from other areas—clothing, electronics, transport, etc—could equally be substituted. For instance, getting clothes from a swapping event or being lent them from a friend could be placed under the *use* type’s subsection, *share, rent, swap*. Buying a modular, easily repairable phone could be placed under the *buy* type’s subsection of lower environmental impact. The theoretically infinitely expandable space between allows for entire catalogues of practices to be input into the taxonomy, demonstrating the benefit of the taxonomy format (Jaeger-Erben et al., 2015).

### 4.1 An inclusive interpretation of sustainability

Adding to the perspectives offered by previous SC conceptualisations, our taxonomy seeks to further highlight that SC is about more than just acquisition, but rather inclusive of maintenance, reuse, repair, sharing, creation and enablement. It builds on a growing body of research that nuances SC as deriving from more than just a desire for consumer practices that contribute a lower environmental impact (i.e. Holmes, 2019; Tölg and Fuentes, 2025). The taxonomy also highlights that sustainable consumption is not only about lowering the environmental impact of consumption but also about community empowerment, social and ecological resilience, and the expanding of skills, building on Jaeger-Erben et al.’s (2015) inclusive interpretation of sustainable innovations.

Moreover, as well as more traditional notions of environmental and social sustainability, our understanding of the term draws from studies on frugality, thriftiness, and sufficiency (see Korsnes and Solbu, 2024; Evans, 2011; Pepper et al., 2009) to incorporate practices that may not be motivated by a sustainability ethos, but nonetheless have potential for sustainable outcomes. Similarly, our taxonomy accommodates for those practices common in the Global South that, as Anantharaman (2022) highlights, are not traditionally included in conceptualisations of sustainability prominent in the Global North. This allows for a wider span of practices to be understood, compared, and explored than in typologies that focus on specific behavioural, attitudinal, geographical, or motivational realms (cf. Koszewska, 2013; Prothero et al., 2010). The taxonomy also acknowledges both market (buying, renting, selling) and non-market (repairing, sharing, participating) practices.



## 4.2 Types of consumption

Our taxonomy shares some similarities with Geiger et al.'s (2018) SCB-cube in that we have developed it using examples from the domains of furnishing, vacationing and food, and they covered housing, mobility, food, and clothing. However, our taxonomy differs from their typology in several ways, most notably in that we replace the disposal phase with a making type. We do not adopt a linear beginning-middle-end narrative to SC practices but rather see what Geiger et al. (2018) call

phases (or stages, in the terminology of Macklin and Kaufman [2024]) as separate, albeit interlinked, types. In this way, practices do not follow the acquiring-using-disposing linear consumption trajectory but instead are conceived as one or several of the types (i.e., buying, using, or making, see Figure 1). This allows for the analysis of the distribution of a given set of SC practices, drawing attention to underrepresented types of SC practices—such as using the existing or making things together—in lieu of an overemphasis on buying (cf. Persson and Klintman, 2021).

### 4.3 Using and making

Another difference in our replacement of Geiger et al.'s (2018) disposing phase with a making type is our decision to omit disposing as a distinct phase (or type) in its own right. This is rooted in the more radical understanding that truly sustainable disposal is a practice of either creation or exchange, rather than a final endpoint in a linear lifecycle (see Hobson, 2016). For example, disposing of a no longer required item through donation to a second-hand shop may fall into the using type as a practice of sharing, or at a later stage be considered a buying practice when eventually repurchased. Similarly, disposing of food waste into the compost bin can amount to making as it produces compost from which to grow more food: it is the creating rather than the disposing that constitutes the sustainable element of this practice. Drawing better attention to these acts of care (Holmes, 2019; Morrow and Davies, 2022; Tölg and Fuentes, 2025), the taxonomy helps incorporate symbolic and relational motivations into the SC debate. While acknowledging the inevitability of at least some degree of wastage, this circular understanding (and associated removal of a disposal phase) reflects the prevailing developments in SC and circular use (cf. Wastling et al., 2018; Macklin and Kaufman, 2024).

While our inclusive use of 'consumption' betrays Graeber's (2011) argument that the word be reserved for practices that specifically use up or destroy resources, the inclusion of prosumption practices into the SC debate has become increasingly relevant in recent decades (Ertz et al., 2024; Ritzer, 2014; Zafar et al., 2018). We seek to draw attention away from traditional assumptions of product acquisition towards a greater focus on the underrepresented using (including forms of collaborative consumption) and making types (see Persson and Klintman, 2021). In this way, sSC practices (Fuchs and Lorek, 2005) that may previously have been ignored in favour of sustainable procurement, green labelling campaigns or technological fixes, gain greater recognition. This highlights to practitioners that efforts to increase SC arguably need to span all three types of practice and thereby include, for example, practices that reduce overall consumption (e.g., buying less home decor) or that disrupt traditional means of provisioning (collaborative practices as e.g., community supported agriculture).

### 4.4 Buying

Primarily, we have chosen the term *buying* to narrow down the practices that this type can incorporate. Where Geiger et al. (2018, p. 21) include "the co-production of goods and services (...) within the acquisition phase," we redistribute these and similar practices of prosumption into the *using* and *making* types. *Buying*, therefore, fits SC practices that see citizenship enacted through purchase (Balderjahn et al., 2018; Oosterveer and Sonnenfeld, 2012) rather than participation. In this instance, *acquisition* (or *get* in Macklin's and Kaufman's terminology) is too broad of a term to allow for meaningful conclusions to be drawn about where focus is prioritised and where it is lacking. Furthermore, as many of the practices that fall under this type constitute wSC (see Lorek and Fuchs, 2013), it aids in one of the taxonomy's goals of redistributing

attention to the sSC practices found in the *using* and *making* types. That is to say, it becomes clear that *buying*, while having a part to play, is disproportionately represented and that the other types are lacking.

Relating to a sufficiency perspective and associated conceptions of enoughness and 'the good life' (Alexander, 2011; Princen, 2003), it is important to acknowledge that the practice of buying less may constitute an sSC practice appropriate for categorisation under the *buying* type. However, buying less may as well be understood as the result of *using* or *making* practices such as those found in the 'care for/use the existing' and 'do-it-yourself' subtypes.

### 4.5 Emphasis on social practices broadens responsibility

In contrast to the typologies of Geiger et al. (2018) and Macklin and Kaufman (2024), which use the term behaviour, our taxonomy has an emphasis on practices, in line with Shove and Spurling (2013) and Laakso et al. (2021) among others. We argue that a focus on social practices can help the taxonomy to shift responsibility for SC away from individuals' isolated choices and behaviours by instead focusing on the interplay between individuals and the broader restrictive and enabling structures that they inhabit (Brand, 2010; Middlemiss, 2010). The emphasis on practices enables consideration of wider societal influences, as for example Jaeger-Erben and Offenberger (2014) do in their case study on parental practices.

The construct of 'the consumer' in public and academic discourse around sustainable consumption, including where the responsibility for large-scale change may lie, is often taken for granted (Evans et al., 2017). We hold that our taxonomy moves beyond the consumer framing and towards a conceptualisation of the individual as an agent with a broader set of capabilities, in turn recalling more participatory terms such as a citizen (or person, irrespective of citizenship). Buying, for example, which frames the individual as a consumer, constitutes only one of the three types, while the using and making types help reframe the individual as active and engaged citizens. With the taxonomy, one is encouraged to reconsider SC, expanding on the limited purview of more or less discrete consumption choices by consumers restricted to political expression through only product or service purchase, to in turn challenge and broaden this dominant view of what practices sustainable everyday lives might consist of.

More specifically, the taxonomy also draws attention to practices that represent different opportunities for SC promotion and participation. The using and making types create space for alternative systems of provision where forms of consumption that do not represent using-up (Graeber, 2011) are given more room. This expands the focus beyond more resource-efficient behaviours and purchasing of alternative products—often to be accomplished by technological means (Spurling et al., 2013)—with little change to the underlying resource-intensive ways of doing things. These include how these dominant sets of unsustainable practices are organised and entrenched by structural and institutional arrangements (cf. Shove et al., 2012; chap. 7). For example, the elucidation of practices of production and consumption not

enacted for and on the market means that SC governance is not necessarily dictated by “captains of industry” (Graeber, 2011, p. 502). Local, circular practices of presumption, for example, which free citizens from restrictive corporate subscriptions, are more easily included in the discourse. These non-market practices also serve to reduce price exclusion. Whereas ‘green’ or ‘sustainable’ purchases often represent the costlier option (Anantharaman, 2022), using or making practices often serve to reduce living costs, thereby potentially affording a less resource-intensive lifestyle to a broader spectrum of people. However, some using practices may also require additional labour (Hui and Yeoh, 2025), for instance repairing something yourself instead of buying an equivalent service. This can exclude, for example, those unable to forego paid working hours, caring or other activities necessary for everyday life to engage in such practices (Callmer, 2019; Persson et al., 2022).

## 5 Conclusions

The purpose of constructing a taxonomy of sustainable consumption practices was to highlight what SC can mean and how it might be enacted and supported. In this paper we have presented our version of this, structured into three main non-linear types: buying, using and making. The riddance of disposal and the (non-hierarchical) positioning of using and making alongside buying are two of our taxonomy’s most salient and central points and have several implications. We have suggested that, though purchasing practices certainly are relevant to SC, the tendency to primarily consider SC through the lens of acquisition or buying in parts of the SC literature and in most policy (e.g., Eggestrand and Hagbert, 2025) and public discourse, while paying insufficient heed to usage and production practices, hampers progress towards sustainable ends. The three types’ non-linearity further emphasises the ideally circular nature of sustainable consumption, as does the addition of using and making.

Further, the taxonomy can be useful for systematising research on sustainable consumption. By expanding the purview of what types of practices and associated consumption patterns could be considered sustainable, the taxonomy illustrates connections between various approaches to SC, such as between central concepts in the SC literature like strong sustainable consumption, sufficiency, presumption and social practices. This brings up another central contribution of our taxonomy: its promotion of socio-environmental aspects of sustainable consumption through its emphasis on using and making practices associated with community empowerment and social-ecological resilience.

We argue that the taxonomy can also be a helpful part of intervention design processes and thus contribute not only to scholarly discussion and conceptual work on SC and SC interventions, but also to reframe discussions among various practitioners, including policy makers. This may manifest as a complement to frameworks, tools or processes produced by other practice-based work in the SC literature for the purpose of developing interventions (e.g., Vihalemm et al., 2015). For example, the taxonomy could serve as a basis for discussion in participatory workshoping processes that involve co-creating desirable scenarios or visions (cf. Doyle and Davies, 2013),

for identifying sets of practices to adequately replace existing unsustainable practices (cf. Spurling et al., 2013), or for the mapping of everyday practices to identify “change points” (cf. Hoolohan and Browne, 2020). The usefulness of the taxonomy in such contexts arises from its potential to help practitioners systematically consider broader sets of SC practices beyond those conventionally targeted by policy, i.e., to bring making and using into the discussion. However, a necessary part of such a process would also need to be the evaluation of the actual social and ecological impacts of the scaling up of specific practices, since the taxonomy’s practice types do not necessarily equate to a positive impact in the context in question.

The taxonomy could further help policy makers and practitioners to see what forms of SC practices they focus on, and perhaps how their scope may be broadened to also include practices enabling sSC and the creation of alternative non-market systems of provisioning. Municipalities, for example, may find that they place all of their SC endeavours into a single taxonomical subsection, like public procurement of eco-labelled food, whereas, with reference to the taxonomy, they could also include enabling of community gardens or open repair workshops as part of their work towards SDG 12.

In a similar vein, the taxonomy sheds light on underrepresented areas emphasising sSC. These include practices not governed by sustainable intentions, but which nonetheless can have sustainable outcomes, such as frugality and associated minimalist lifestyles. Incorporating these into SC policy may promote broader public participation, particularly from societal groups hesitant to engage with practices marked as green or sustainable, given that these at times are associated with left-leaning urban middle-class groups (Anantharaman, 2022; Head et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the taxonomy’s emphasis on practices can help practitioners and policymakers to see beyond specific moments of consumption to also consider wider societal, structural, and material influences (cf. Spurling et al., 2013). Herein lies another of the taxonomy’s benefits: reconfiguring perceptions of SC responsibility to extend beyond a focus on individual consumer responsibility to also shed light on the responsibility of public authorities and politics. That is, to provide structures that make sustainable ways of living easily available, affordable and socially inclusive.

There are, of course, limitations to the taxonomy. Its development in the context of the fairly affluent and sustainability-savvy Scandinavia must be acknowledged. What is perceived as sustainable may vary in different geographical and sociocultural contexts. The fact that we only posed the question to professionals and groups engaged in SC may rightly be critiqued for reinforcing “the environmental talk” of the global North (Anantharaman, 2022; Sahakian et al., 2022). Anantharaman (2022), Evans (2011) and Pepper et al. (2009) highlight how there is a middle-class Western bias in what gets dubbed as ‘green’ or ‘sustainable’. Though the intention with our mapping was to reach beyond standard Scandinavian conceptions of SC—associated with the acquisition of ‘green’ or ‘sustainable’ products and services, to also include low-impact practices motivated by necessity, or attempts at community building, resilience or the pursuit of wellbeing—a greater number of international participants from different

socio-economic backgrounds at the organised workshops and respondents of the web survey would likely have nuanced the outcome further. Future research taking a similar approach in other sociocultural and geographical contexts could therefore likely contribute with additional and culturally contingent conceptions of SC practices.

It should also be noted that the taxonomy, alongside similar frameworks of this type, as acknowledged by [Cohen and Muñoz \(2016\)](#), is not an exact science. Rather, the categories and types can be open to interpretation and rigid boundaries between types are difficult to draw, with overlap an inevitability. While this interpretative flexibility benefits the taxonomy as an aid in thinking about forms of SC, this is nonetheless an important clarification.

Relatedly, the taxonomy does not claim to say how sustainable consumption practices may be promoted or scaled up—this could be relevant to explore in further research. What does scaling mean in the different ‘types’ of SC practices and how would interventions need to be designed in different contexts? Notably, the selection of promising SC practices should be preceded by evaluations of their scaling’s potential social and ecological impacts (cf. [Carlsson Kanyama et al., 2019](#); [Eggestrand and Svenfelt, 2020](#); [Carlsson Kanyama et al., 2021](#); [Nässén et al., 2022](#)). A related avenue for future research would be the practical testing of the taxonomy’s potential as an aid in policy development. This could be done through visioning workshops with decision makers, for example, to explore what political visions for SC policy and planning the taxonomy could undergird, or through other processes and approaches inspired by the previous research outlined earlier in this section. In summary, for public authorities and organisations working to facilitate sustainable consumption, this paper suggests that measures need to go beyond focusing on the buying type, i.e., measures concerned with making consumers choose ‘better’ products/services through information campaigns, labelling or nudging, to also entail measures that engage with the using and making types of SC, i.e., facilitating for citizen-consumers to care for and maintain resources, repair, repurpose, share, make and increasingly act as prosumers rather than just informed consumers. Since such practices currently are predominantly practiced on a small scale and thus largely lack institutional support, this will require active engagement with structural elements, such as supporting alternative systems of provision as well as non-market arrangements of practices of production and consumption.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Author contributions

KB: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. WH: Writing – original draft, Writing – review

& editing. VP: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Funding

The author(s) declare that financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article. This work was supported by Mistra—The Swedish foundation for strategic environmental research through the research programme Mistra Sustainable Consumption—from niche to mainstream.

## Acknowledgments

This paper is the result of a large collaborative effort. We would like to acknowledge all the valuable input from the researchers and societal partners in the Mistra Sustainable Consumption programme, and not least Anneli Kamb and Miriam Börjesson Rivera, who played central roles in the early phase of the mapping work.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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## Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frsus.2025.1659040/full#supplementary-material>

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