

**EDITORIAL**

# New consumption geographies: Introduction to the special section

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In introducing this special section, we revisit some of the central questions in consumption geographies: what is consumption, where and when does it occur, and how and why is it changing? The contributing authors offer fresh insights into these old questions. As a collection, the special section provides a snapshot of current research in consumption geographies that reflects the concerns of a new generation of researchers, primarily emerging scholars. It offers opportunities to reflect on how the focus and concerns of contemporary consumption geographies might be building on or diverging from past work in the field and to take a fresh look into familiar spaces and places. The articles extend consumption geographies by bringing a range of conceptual lenses and methods and by teasing out differing dimensions of consumption practice as it is articulated in place. Together the articles highlight a range of relational connections among people, things, and places, their authors interrogating the very taken-for-grantedness of consumption and its contemporary manifestations and outcomes.

Consumption geographies have always been concerned with the material and symbolic aspects of consumption, but the focus on specific sites and forms of consumption has changed over time. While earlier cultural geography approaches focused strongly on spectacular retail sites such as shopping malls, theme parks and the representational aspects of consumption spaces (see, for example, Goss, 1993), since the 1990s research has focused strongly on more mundane spaces such as the home. Accompanying this trend away from spectacular to ubiquitous sites and moments of consumption have been emphases on the experiential, material, and embodied aspects of consumption. Greater attention has also been accorded to the role and agency of the material itself in influencing consumer practice (Roe, 2006). Parallel concerns among sociologists about the significance of “inconspicuous” forms of consumption have led to calls for renewed focus on “ordinary consumption” (Gronow & Warde, 2002). That call has been taken up by geographers and sociologists. The interactions between and among material, symbolic, and discursive aspects of

ordinary consumption continue to be a concern for the contributors to this special section.

A series of reports on consumption geographies published in the late 2000s in the journal *Progress in Human Geography* signalled some of the main foci of consumption research (Mansvelt, 2008, 2009, 2010). Geographers began to explore how diverse consumer identities are shaped and assembled via institutional actors, knowledges, and things. Key themes included the neoliberal scripting of consumers as responsible autonomous citizens—with an emphasis on their construction as objects of state and local state governance and regulation. The moral shaping of consumption in and across places centred on particular commodities such as food, drugs, and alcohol and consumption practices such as eating, socialising, shopping, and online activity. The boundaries of inclusion and exclusion and of censure and expression that were expressions of these trends, particularly in urban areas, were also foci of geographical research (Evans, 2006; Jayne et al., 2006). Simultaneously, attention turned to how consumers were connected to the operation and spatiality of commodity chains and networks (including the enrolment of ethical consumers) and to following the journeys of commodities across space (Barnett, Cloke, Clarke, & Malpass, 2005). Initially emphasising how bodies as maps of meaning were reproduced and disciplined through consumption, geographers began to explore the intersectional connections between gender, sexuality, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and age (Colls & Evans, 2008; Katz & Marshall, 2003; Slocum, 2007). Non-representational theories influenced understandings of the emotive, sensorial, and haptic aspects of embodiment and those promulgating them sought to comprehend why these matter for what, how, and why people consume (Carolan, 2007; Cloke, May, & Johnsen, 2008; Colls, 2012; Schillmeier, 2007; Sheller, 2004).

The ordering of matter (Edensor, 2005) and the recognition of agency of the material objects of consumption opened up new possibilities for understanding the effects and affects of consumption (see, for example, Hitchings & Lee, 2008). Concerns about the sustainability of consumption practices (Hobson, 2004), consumerism as a

way of life, and environmental consequences of consumption broadened the scope of geographical work on consumption beyond acquisition and appropriation, to consider practices of valuing, using, and devaluing commodities (Bulkeley & Gregson, 2009; Evans, 2012; Hall, 2011). The emergence of work on geographies and networks of wasting extended research on commodity chains (Gregson, Crang, Ahamed, Akhter, & Ferdous, 2010; Robbins & Sharp, 2003), much of which had previously ended at the shop floor (Cook et al., 2006). While research on consumption practices outside of the Global North had been limited, several studies explicitly examined the interconnection and inequalities between and within nations of varying wealth and economic status, political governance, and cultural identity (Benson & Fischer, 2007; Crewe, 2008; Gregson et al., 2010).

The shift from spectacular and commercial sites of consumption to more mundane and private spaces provided significant insights into the varied form and nature of consumption practice and places by the turn of the 21st century. The 2011 edited volume, *Material Geographies of Household Consumption* (Lane & Gorman-Murray, 2011), signalled a renewed focus on the home as a site of consumption and interrogated how themes of sustainability play out in domestic spaces. Chapter contributions engaged with both the material dimensions of sustainability, in terms of the impacts of household resource use, and the rhetorical aspects that play out in public debates about the need to both limit and adapt to human-induced environmental change. The contributing authors made a conscious effort to move beyond dialectical framings of the object-subject dichotomies in order to interrogate how material and discursive realms are co-produced at the scale of the household. In doing so, they showed how consumption practices within the home are co-constituted with social identities, emotions, meanings, and imaginaries and that initiatives for sustainable consumption will necessarily be mediated through social relations and subjectivities.

Since the mid-2000s, social practice approaches have proliferated in consumption research in both geography and sociology, alongside a strong focus on themes of environmental sustainability. Evans (2019) has argued that the emergence of a policy field centred on sustainable consumption may be distracting attention from the broader and more diverse scholarship on the sociology of consumption. He argues that the dominance of theories of practice in research on sustainable consumption risks narrowing the conceptual horizon of the field and presents the case for reengagement with cultural approaches to consumption and their theoretical and substantive preoccupations, that is, the process and content of consumption (Evans, 2019, p. 512). Social practice approaches

have been critiqued for their focus on mundane and unconscious practices rather than conscious and directed actions. These critiques suggest social practice theory tends to position people as carriers of practices and downplays the agency of individuals as well as collective social and political projects, ideologies, and political discourses in driving change (Welch & Warde, 2015; Welch & Yates, 2018). By contrast, research into ethical consumption has placed much greater significance on the role of consciously directed action in changing consumption practices, sometimes by influencing the character of globalised commodity chains (Barnett et al., 2010; Goodman, 2004).

The loose way in which the term consumption is used has also come under focus. Evans (2019) has argued for a more coherent recognition and understanding of what consumption comprises. He highlights the need to attend to the multiple moments through which consumption occurs, drawing on Warde's (2014) observations that concrete moments of consumption arise within and for the sake of social practices.

Warde identified three such moments: (a) acquisition (the act of accessing, goods, services, or experiences that are then consumed), (b) appropriation (the assumption of meaning or the incorporation of goods, services, or experiences into everyday life), and (c) appreciation (the derivation of pleasure and satisfaction; in Evans, 2019, p. 506). However, to acknowledge the bias that exists in relation to the front end of consumption, and influenced by the consumption geographies of Nicky Gregson and her collaborators, Evans adds to Warde's list another three moments: (d) devaluation (the loss of cultural meaning or economic value), (e) divestment (the undoing of attachments to goods, services, and experiences), and (f) disposal (the counterpart of acquisition, which may occur via multiple conduits, of which some may result in reappropriation into secondary cycles of consumption (Evans, 2019, p. 507).

Evans' conceptualisation of consumption has wider resonance for geography in accommodating both the temporality and the spatiality of these moments. He has criticised the dominance of practice approaches in the field of sustainable consumption. Yet work on practice theory is seen as part of a more expansive field of scholarship about the connections between the material world and the practices and places of everyday life. That scholarship brings performances and human and non-human entities to the fore and considers the cultural logics, relationships, social divisions, aesthetics, and desires that connect practices to wider social and environmental consequences of consumption.

The empirical focus of articles in this special section is mainly on the consumer end of commodity networks.

Each article speaks in differing ways to the dynamics among consumers, commodities, commodity practices, and places. Most draw on commodity practices—but in ways that focus on how such practices are situated in the context of other relations, moments, practices, and places—and attend to matters such as where and how consumption is produced over time and across space.

The articles are strongly grounded in original empirical research primarily based in Australia and New Zealand but also in China. The sites for consumption research extend beyond the home into housing estates, workplaces, and university campuses, and the focus extends to a wide range of human and non-human actors. Cross-cutting themes in the contributions include the discursive, material, and regulatory contexts and scripts that frame consumption choices; the social dynamics that influence practices and capabilities; emerging new practices and sites of consumption; materiality and material flows; the temporal nature of consumption; and the systemic challenge of achieving sustainable consumption.

While most articles are motivated by themes of sustainable consumption, the analyses presented in them show that sustainability is not necessarily what motivates the various moments of consumption examined. These motivations are more strongly aligned with social identities, needs, and feelings of care and responsibility for others. At a disciplinary level, geographers have engaged more extensively with spatialities, subjectivities, and socialities of consumption since Mansvelt's (2005) work, but the special section contributions have a focus on the constitution of these three concepts in terms of practice. They explore consumption practice by reference to diverse contexts and foci and examine matters ranging from sustainability to consumption of built environments, change over the life-course, wasting, and care.

## 2 | WHAT IS CONSUMED?

In this collection, the authors investigate a range of entities that are consumed. All attend to affective and symbolic aspects of consumption of these entities, moving beyond consideration of consumption as simply a material practice. The consumption of food is highlighted in articles by Daly, Middha, and Liu and Chen. Daly examines practices connected with reducing meat consumption, exploring the practical and sensorial aspects that come into play in “making” meal choices. Middha's study focuses on heating and eating practices used in food consumption, demonstrating how university students' food practices depend on connections to other practices such as provision and regulation of microwaves on campus,

and to places—including domestic arrangements in home dwellings. Liu and Chen examine the wasting that results from the consumption of takeaway food in workplaces, examining the different conduits by which food becomes waste. In each case, the materiality of the food is deeply connected to meanings associated with its taste, texture, and the kinds of knowledge and wider practices in which are constituted these knowledges and preferences about food preparation, sharing, eating, storing, and binning.

Smith's and Hunter's articles deal with consumption connected to dwellings. Smith examines the sale and purchase of homes in eco-themed master planned estates and considers the extent to which residents living in these spaces reproduce the discourses of sustainability that were fundamental to the ways in which those places were marketed and created. Hunter studies the acquisition of commodities as part of home renovation. Like Smith, she emphasises the wider discursive constructions that inform home renovation, focusing on the role of the media in influencing consumer choices and practices and, ultimately, the material form of dwellings. Both articles speak to the ways in which discursive scripts inform and influence social practices and spatial configurations, and both highlight the point that while materials, resources, and dwellings may be purchased, the values, ideas, and aspirations associated with them are critical to consumption choices and outcomes. Smith's and Hunter's articles also demonstrate how commodity imaginings and purchases may or may not produce more sustainable outcomes as they become embedded in the mundane practices that constitute everyday life in households.

Articles by Lindsay et al. and Mansvelt et al. exemplify the relationality of consumption practices and the limits to current understandings of consumption of “commodities” as tangible and non-tangible objects of purchase in isolation from other commodity practices. Lindsay et al. investigate the concept of downshifting, examining the complex reasons why households might choose to reduce their working hours and income, and analysing the consequences for their consumption of a range of goods and services. Mansvelt et al. examine how older New Zealanders' acquisition and use of Information and Communication Technologies are embedded in individuals' assessments of their competency and interrogate the material and imagined possibilities and meanings of these technologies in the context of their everyday lives. Both articles indicate how spatialities, socialities, and subjectivities coalesce to frame consumption choices. Forms and practices of consumption and their social and spatial outcomes are shown to be influenced by practices such as connecting with family and friends, caring for significant others in order to meet social, health, and

material needs, and being mobile—bodily, via ICT, or in ways enabled by automobility.

### 3 | TAKING CONSUMPTION BEYOND THE SHOP FLOOR

Collectively, the articles in this special section examine multiple sites of consumption and material flows across time and place. Evans' (2019) ideas about moments of consumption usefully highlight the concerns aired in the different articles around the specific circumstances when decisions are made that may consolidate or alter consumption practices. Rather than focus on commoditised goods and services and sites and spaces of purchase, the emphasis in these articles is on the range of moments which Evans (2019) argues constitute consumption. The majority focus on what happens prior to acquisition to influence consumer practice and on how meaning is made in the context of everyday life in moments of appropriation and appreciation. However, Liu and Chen highlight practices of devaluation, divestment, and disposal and show how these also occur across multiple sites.

The spatiality, relatedness, and temporality of consumption practice with respect to production and other moments of consumption are touched on to varying extents by all the contributors. Hunter and Smith both focus on dwellings, exploring how houses or home renovations are framed as commodities in media representation and materials that promote purchase and investment, then go on to interrogate how subsequent acts of appropriation and appreciation by consumers mediate, resist, or reinterpret these scripts. Middha explores how university eating and food heating spaces connect to students' food practices on and off campus. Lindsay et al. investigate downshifting as a process that has multiple spatial manifestations influenced by workplace and other changes within and outside households and that produced different spatial and mobility patterns as participants reassessed what, when, and where money was spent. Although Daly and Mansvelt et al. both focus on consumption of food and technologies largely within the home, they recognise the ways in which household consumption intersects with existing practices in other places, exploring for example new variation on what "Asian-style" means, or making purchases from international websites. Liu and Chen note how wasting of takeaway food in the workplace is often connected to other practices and systems such as refuse systems and work and care schedules that are produced across other spaces including home and urban neighbourhoods.

Rather than following commodities along commodity chains and networks, the emphasis in the articles is on understanding the relationality of consumer practice, commodities, sites, and moments of consumption. All except Mansvelt et al. have a concern with sustainability, considering how moments and practices of acquisition might be connected to and enabling and constraining the possibility for more sustainable outcomes. The articles both attend to the spatial expression of consumption and look beyond moments of consumption to examine patterns over times of day (Middha) and patterns associated with the life course (Mansvelt et al. and Lindsay et al.) and related to life-style (Liu and Chen, Smith, and Daly).

### 4 | CONSTRUCTING CONSUMERS

The articles in this special section also demonstrate how consumer identities and moralities may be ascribed by wider discourses and scripts extending beyond households. Moments of consumption reproduce and reflect particular consumer identities. In Lindsay et al., for example, we find that practices of downshifting are linked to notions of responsibility, care, frugality, and lifestyle choice rather than the intentional actions of "green consumers," as is so often assumed with downshifting. In different ways the articles speak to the conscious and unconscious shaping of consumer subjectivities and socialities, reflecting differing roles in families, households, social networks, communities, localities, and nations. For example, Mansvelt et al. attend to the ways in which aged subjectivities connected to ICT are shaped in response to neoliberal expectations of appropriate ageing as productive consumer citizens.

Knowledge of sustainability and ethical choices are shown to be connected, although not always in ways that are conscious or predictable. Hunter focuses primarily on renovation practices and her research speaks to how participants saw themselves as knowledgeable consumers engaging in research and making informed decisions with regard to purchases of goods and services. Daly's article also refers to moral constructions of appropriate consumption; here, new forms of mealing and meatless meals emerged—not so much because of consumers' intent to signal particular ethical stances but as a consequence of wider social, multicultural, and transnational food trends and tastes. Similarly, Liu and Chen reveal the multiple actors shaping takeaway food waste and packaging, noting how workplace and time constraints configure the possibilities of reuse versus wasting. Smith finds that consumers' identifications as ecological citizens associated with purchasing properties in eco-themed estates do not necessarily extend to ongoing practices of

consumption. Middha's article shows how the production of spaces of capabilities can generate pathways for more sustainable outcomes and highlights the alignment of regulatory, material, and human interactions in specific places.

The articles account for the ways in which consumption practices provide a means of constructing and positioning oneself as a consumer. The scripts, discourses, and values by which commodities are marketed and sold, and consumers appealed to, may construct an identity and possibilities for consumer action; however, these are not necessarily reproduced through practice. Rather, the articles here illustrate how practices are rescripted, reworked, and re-evaluated in the context of other discourses, narratives, and imperatives—including those produced through other socially scripted roles as parents, students, family and community members, and older citizens. Consumer intentionality and subjectivity are shown to be nuanced in articles that demonstrate how future sustainable outcomes may actually be the unintended consequences of other practical or imaginary work, such as care-giving (Lindsay et al.).

## 5 | AGENCY AND CHANGE PROCESSES

The ways in which change processes are conceptualised is strongly influenced by Social Practice Theory (SPT), and the contributions show how SPT can be applied to illuminate the relationships between human and non-human things that unfold over time to produce consumption geographies. The focus on practices serves to decentre consumers by situating their consumption practices within broader assemblages and flows of materials, meanings, and competencies—the triage that Shove et al. (2012) understand to form the elements of social practices—and different authors describe how changes in practices are prompted by change in one or all of these elements. Mansvelt focuses on the relationship between meanings and competency with ICT while Daley explores how consumers experimenting with low meat diets develop new knowledge and competencies that facilitate their appreciation of meat free food. Middha shows how a new material element—microwave ovens installed in a university dining space—allows consumers to develop their capabilities to achieve meaningful and desirable eating practices while on campus. Drawing inspiration from Amartya Sen (1993), she advances the idea of “spaces of capability” that effectively links the meaning and capacity elements of SPT with notions about goal directed consumption practices that empower the consumer in place. In this study, consumers exercise conscious agency, but

one that is facilitated by newly emerging spaces of capability. While Liu and Chen do not explicitly refer to social practice theory, they do draw on social practice theorists for conceptualising consumption behaviours and moments in terms of broader practices. Despite the critiques levelled at SPT approaches—that they downplay the conscious agency of consumers—in this special section, the varied applications of practice theory show consumers to be active, goal oriented, and engaged in bundles of conscious and unconscious practices. Granted, not all the articles are framed by social practice theory approaches. Instead, Smith, Hunter, and Lindsay et al. all engage with ideas of ethical and sustainable consumption that more explicitly foreground conscious decisions made by consumers.

Returning to the consumption moments described by Evans (2019), the special section contributors examine acquisition, appropriation, appreciation, devaluation, divestment, and disposal in a range of spaces from cities to homes, universities, places of paid work, and planned communities. Despite the familiarity of these spaces, the authors bring fresh perspectives in terms of their conceptual framings, empirical foci, and methodological approaches and help forge collective understandings about how consumption practices and outcomes change in relation to other spatial, social, cultural, and economic practices. Collectively, the articles prompt us to reflect on the character of consumption practice—examining its manifestation and outcomes both for consumers and also recursively for the people and place relationships through which consumption is constituted. They provide new perspectives on how relational geographies emerge from both change and continuity in consumption practice. Moving beyond debates about consumer sovereignty and acquiescence, they examine how consumer practices, their constitutive elements, and their intended and unintended outcomes—particularly in relation to sustainability—must be understood in specific historical, geographical, cultural, and political-economic contexts.

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