

Introducing Phenomenological Research Methodology in Sustainable Consumption Literature: Illustrations From India

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ijq**Soumyajit Bhar^{1,2}****Abstract**

In this age of rising consumerism, it is evident that we need to move toward a more environmentally sustainable and socially just form of consumption patterns by surpassing the impasse currently faced by various sustainable consumption policies. Without any further delay, we need to embrace an apt methodological orientation to gain a better socioculturally situated conceptual understanding of consumers and a means to obtain empirical insights into drivers of socioenvironmentally impactful consumption patterns to be able to proceed toward efficacious sustainable consumption policies. This article proposes a phenomenological research methodology-based conceptual framing and a step-by-step methodological approach based on that framing to gain an in-depth understanding of how consumers being socioculturally situated identity projects—driven subjects embed consumer goods as integral parts of their life narratives and how that in turn acts as the drivers of their consumption. The elaborated steps of interpreting collected consumer narratives are presented with examples from an empirical research conducted in a few Indian cities. Critical reflections on diverse issues that may arise while employing this methodology in similar contexts like India are then discussed. The conclusion highlights how this understanding of consumer could make a novel contribution to sustainable consumption literature.

Keywords

sustainable consumption, conceptualizing consumer, phenomenological research methodology, good life, life narrative

Introduction

In this era of the Anthropocene, with mounting environmental issues, it is high time that we pay due attention to the increasingly materialistic- and energy-dominated consumption patterns. A growing body of literature already exists that seeks to understand the causes of overconsumption and the ways to achieve sustainable consumption¹ (Jackson, 2005). This literature primarily focuses on inducing behavioral changes for embracing sustainable consumption choices, and thus it is geared toward devising appropriate consumer policies. However, considering the real-world situation where consumerism still prevails almost at every nook and corner of the society, it can be rightfully stated that these scholarly attempts fail to bring any significant changes in the society at large. Soron (2010) says these widespread failures in establishing avenues for inducing changes toward adopting sustainable consumption behavior is partly owing to the “in-built limits of the prevailing rational choice model within the sphere of consumer policy” (Soron, 2010, p. 174, cited in Jackson, 2006). Dobers and Strannegård (2005) attribute these failures to the fact that

studies on sustainable consumption fail to pay due importance to the identity-oriented, expressive, and aesthetic dimensions of prevailing consumption patterns. These drivers of consumption need to be duly taken into considerations as these act as impediments in the path of achieving sustainable consumption goals (Dobers & Strannegård, 2005; Soron, 2010).

Not only drivers, in the existing literature on sustainable consumption, the underlying model of consumer seems simplified. This model ignores how everyday consumption practices are embedded within a nexus of values, noninstrumental motivations, emotions, self-conception/life narrative, and cultural associations (Soron, 2010). The presence of this simplified

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model also explains why sustainable consumption practices are not adopted widely (Soron, 2010). Thereby, it is high time when we duly acknowledge that “a contextualized understanding of self-identity can sharpen our awareness of the impasse at which the sustainable consumption agenda now finds itself” (Soron, 2010, p. 174). Moreover, Soron (2010) notes “to be successful, efforts to encourage ‘sustainable behavior change’ must address the legitimate psycho-social anxieties, desires and identity needs that, however counterproductively, have been channeled into consumer culture” (p. 179). He further adds that this literature needs to accept the fact that the prevailing consumer culture is having such an overwhelming reach in this present world because “it does, in some ways, resonate with powerful collective desires and identity needs” (Soron, 2010, p. 174).

At this juncture, it is evident that this literature needs a more nuanced understanding of a consumer as being a socioculturally situated identity projects–driven subject. This understanding should acknowledge that individuals are always already enmeshed in various sociocultural as well as political–economic discourses and continually draw beliefs, constructs from these to delineate their actions and at the same time exercise agency to structure those actions in idiosyncratic manners. The actions of each individual again feed into those discourses giving rise to a dialectical process in motion. Although each and every individual appropriates a world in idiosyncratic manner, it needs to be acknowledged that there are indeed cultural commonalities that include, for instance, the very desire to be seen or perceived as successful, healthy, unique, desirable, and so on (Churchill & Wertz, 1985). So a renewed understanding of consumers should prioritize neither the structural forces acting on individuals nor the power of agency of an individual; rather, it should attempt toward an understanding that conceptualizes individuals as being situated at the interplay between structural forces and individual agency.

In this article, I argue that to attain a more *situated* understanding of consumers, we need to adopt an appropriate methodology. This can give us a way to contribute novel empirical insights into consumer behaviors in the sustainable consumption literature. Here I propose that embracing a research approach based on the philosophy of phenomenology in terms of both conceptual framing and methodological orientation could significantly help us arrive at such a *situated* understanding of consumers that this literature seems to be lacking at present. Phenomenology, especially the hermeneutic tradition which I am going to employ, conceptualizes humans as socially situated beings (Thompson, 1997). This, I see, would go very well with the sociopsychological understanding, particularly required to meet the objective of this article. On that same vein, this methodology enables a researcher to go beyond the agency/structure divide, as through phenomenological interviews, one could get at how an individual being influenced by the interplay between various sociocultural and individualistic factors makes sense of a particular phenomenon (Thompson, 1997). It is like meanings are socioculturally constructed, but how far those meanings will get appropriated in one’s life-world depends on that individual’s life project and on the basis

of that appropriation, the individual would make sense of a phenomenon. So basically, if the phenomenon is decided carefully, then this exploration could very well provide a nuanced understanding of the socioculturally shaped consumer motivations that eventuate a certain consumer behavior.

For introducing this methodology to this literature, I will present an apt methodological stream within the phenomenological tradition in the following literature review section. Employing phenomenological approaches in studying consumer behavior is not unprecedented. Rather, there exists an extensive literature that employs this methodology to understand consumer behavior from the disciplinary angle of consumer and marketing research. Obviously, the adaptation of this methodology to the sustainable consumption literature, as far as my knowledge goes, is a novel contribution that this article offers. The methodological orientation, approach, and a basic conceptual framing would be drawn from the aforementioned literature of consumer and marketing research. Nevertheless, to arrive at a more comprehensive conceptual framing that offers a situated understanding of consumers, I will add other dimensions by drawing concepts from an emerging stream of sustainable consumption literature that attempts to understand how one’s worldview and values have bearings on that individual’s ability to embrace proenvironmental consumer behaviors. Then, I will discuss other nitty-gritties of conducting an empirical research to understand drivers of consumption choices based on the proposed conceptual framing. To illustrate how this conceptual framing and methodological orientation helps in analyzing the collected narratives of individuals and how that in turn could provide a nuanced understanding of what drives individuals to choose various consumption patterns over others, I will draw from an empirical research that I carried out on well-to-do individuals from a few cities of India for understanding the drivers of certain high-value consumption choices. I will then present some critical reflections particularly pertaining to the empirical part of this research. Finally, I will conclude by highlighting how this understanding could make a novel contribution to the sustainable consumption literature.

Introducing Phenomenology and Phenomenological Research Methodology

In academic consumer research, phenomenological approaches are widely employed in order to develop a deeper understanding of various complex issues that are not readily evident in immediate responses (Cova & Elliot, 2008; Goulding, 2005). The novelty of these approaches is the underlying holistic psychological understanding of human beings as being situated in the social–cultural milieu. This leads to a nuanced understanding of the experiences of individuals, which in turn is capable of elucidating deeper issues relating to consumer motivations and experiences (Thompson, William, & Howard, 1989). These approaches attempt to study a specific phenomenon related to consumer situation or experiences by inquiring the lifeworld experiences of the consumers as being situated in a

social-cultural space molded by language, social belief systems, and values.

In phenomenological research, there exists two distinct streams: existential phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology (Van Manen, 2014). In the following, let me elaborate the background of both of these, albeit I see the latter would be more appropriate to gain an embedded understanding of consumer that this article envisages to offer. I will present the rationale behind this choice as I go along. The genealogy of hermeneutic phenomenology is complex, and one can trace its origin to several streams of continental philosophy (Ihde, 1971; Van Manen, 2014). Over time, this stream has incorporated theoretical understanding and insights from streams such as Husserlian phenomenology, Gestalt psychology, existential philosophy, structural semiotics, and clinical theory (Thompson, 1996). A detailed description of its origin by tracing these very diverse streams is obviously outside the scope of this article. The following discussion will touch upon the major streams that are particularly relevant to the context of this article.

The work of Wilhelm Dilthey (1977), a 19th-century philosopher, must be mentioned as he argues that hermeneutics beyond its usual application in interpreting religious texts could serve as a general methodology for researchers in human sciences to understand the nature and realities of other's lived experience. Dilthey also puts forth that lived experience is always dependent and shaped by the particular sociohistorical contexts within which it is acquired (Thompson, 1996). So it is like, to understand the lived experience of another person, one has to place the "life experience" of that person in the sociohistorical condition within which that individual is situated or as Heidegger (1962) would say is "thrown" into. In this tradition, the fundamental tension, like the widely-discussed structure and agency debate, is how far situatedness shapes one's lived experience and how far individuals manage to mold their own lived experience. Existential-phenomenological tradition emphasizes the latter, whereas the hermeneutic approach hints toward the former.

Existential-phenomenological stream emerges in the philosophical thought as a reaction to the increasing subject-object dualism (Thompson, 1996). It attempts to bridge this dualism by focusing on how the intentionality of an individual (i.e., the meaning one ascribes to the world of experiences) works as an intersubjective foundation that shapes lived experiences (Giorgi, 1986). This stream can be seen as following the same trajectories of phenomenological critiques of romanticism, which advocates a conception of individuals as encapsulated in an entirely subjective and private realm of experience, and empiricism, which dismisses the constructivism and meaning-ascribing capacities that human consciousness possesses (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989). Theorists such as Merleau-Ponty and Sarte, who can be seen as proponents of this existential stream, argue that the existential challenges that all human beings face in their everyday lives should be seen as the intersubjective foundation that this stream searches for (Thompson, 1997).

Geared with this objective, the research outcome of this stream focusses on offering rigorous descriptions of how individuals in their own way deal with various existential questions and challenges (Dillon, 1988; Romanyshyn, 1982; Thompson et al., 1989; van den Berg, 1970; Van Kaam, 1966). This stream also holds that these existential elements on their own cannot fully explain the nature of lived meanings. Rather, individuals are seen as having the interpretive freedom to take up their own life projects and, in the course, ascribe idiosyncratic meaning to their daily activities (Thompson, 1996). The underlying assumption as per Merleau-Ponty (1962) is that the meanings imputed by individuals on life experiences and their existence need not correspond to the cultural conceptions or categories. In a nutshell, for this stream, lifeworld of the individuals is given the primacy. However, it acknowledges that these lived meanings exist in a culturally constituted realm of established social understanding, language, and interpersonal relationships. In this manner, the interpretation in this stream can be seen as being largely aligned with a psychological approach focused on explicating the symbolic associations and personal meanings that individuals construct in their lifeworld (Giorgi, 1970; Valle et al., 1989; Van Kaam, 1966).

With the emergence of social constructivism in psychological theorization, scholars begin to embrace hermeneutic approach to understand how sociohistorical situatedness impacts psychological processes (e.g., Gergen, 1991). Thompson, William, and Howard (1989) note that existential-phenomenological stream even through broadly borrows its constructs from the contemporary hermeneutic philosophy, its interpretive approach does not incorporate a hermeneutic understanding that emphasizes on the sociohistorical situatedness. Owing to this, existential-phenomenological method receives criticism that it fails to illuminate much of the social and historical contexts that not only shape the lifeworld of individuals but also act as a frame of reference from where a socially situated individual makes sense of her experiences.

As a response to the above critique, hermeneutic approaches are adopted by researchers to transcend the ahistorical nature and expand the theoretical scope of existential-phenomenological approach. Being a phenomenological method, hermeneutic phenomenology also sheds light on various conflicts, paradoxes, and symbolic meanings that emerge in an individual's lifeworld (Thompson, 1996; Wilson, 2012). On that same vein, the primary analytic questions, explored in this methodology, are as follows: "What is the unique personal meaning of a particular event to an individual?" and "In what manner that meaning related to several other lived meanings and experiences in her lifeworld?" This approach of situating one's personalized life narrative in the larger sociohistorical contexts clearly highlights the way cultural background delineates diverse possibilities in which personalized meanings can be shaped (Thompson, 1996). Hermeneutic phenomenology extensively draws from the existing literature to comprehend the sociohistorical meanings, beliefs, and values that directly influence one's phenomenological experiences (Wilson, 2012). So eventually, it is like seeing these highly personalized

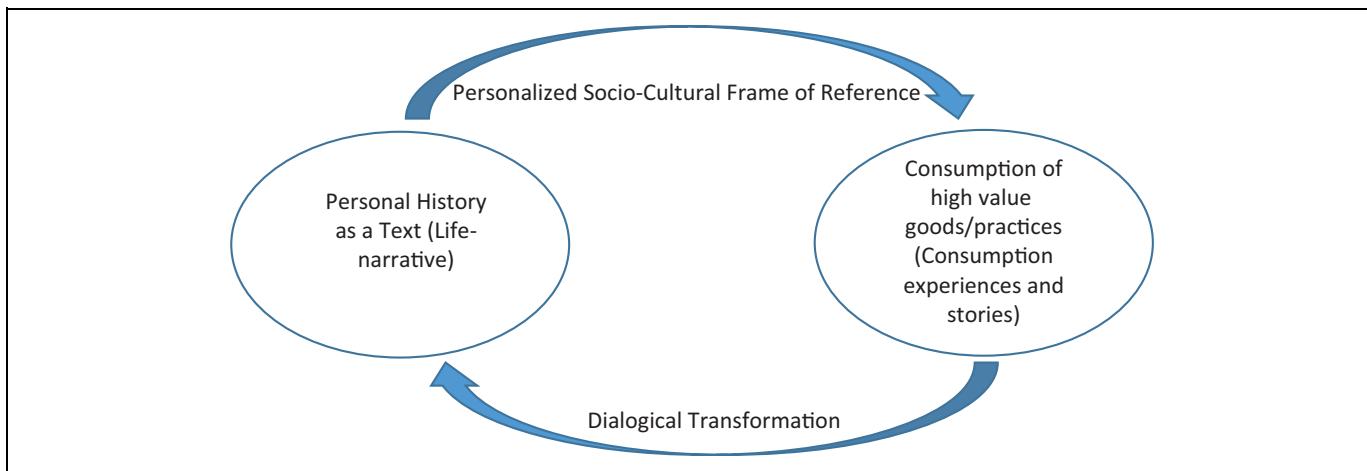


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework adapted from Thompson (1997).

narratives of lived experiences as manifestation of the socio-cultural meanings, beliefs, and conflicts that are embedded within such sociocultural structure. In other words, it can be seen as reading and interpreting the personalized narratives in the light of the background of sociocultural narratives (Packer, 1985, 1989; Widdershoven, 1993). With this broad approach, this method seeks to put forth a theoretical understanding of the interplay between the sociohistorical structure and the meanings and symbolic associations in an individual's lifeworld.

Conceptual Framework

In this section, let me present the conceptual framing that will guide us to incorporate hermeneutic phenomenological method to the literature on sustainable consumption, for empirically arriving at a *situated* understanding of consumers. I will present the conceptual framework and, borrowing from the respective literature, will define concepts such as life narrative, worldviews, and values in the context of this study.

In hermeneutic phenomenology, the concept of life narrative plays a central role to arrive at a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of narrators. McAdams (1996) states that "identity is a life story." The construction and narration of life narratives help individuals situate themselves in the socio-cultural milieu (Guerrero, 2011; McAdams, 2008). In this regard, Singer (2004) notes that the construction of one's life narrative is an act that is situated in interpretative knowledge, where individuals based on their experiences create the stories of their life and also make sense of the world (Solja, 2017). One's life narrative also acts as a string that connects her past, present, and anticipated or envisioned future. Bruner (1987) comments, "...the self-telling of life-narratives achieve the power to structure personal experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very 'events' of a life" (p. 15). Eventually, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we "tell about" our lives. It is like while making sense of our own lives through our life narratives, we construct our own realities (Shankar, Elliott, & Goulding, 2001). Thus,

Singer (2004) rightly highlights "[e]ach addition to the ongoing life-narrative offers another opportunity for individuals to understand where they belong in the world and to determine what takes them closer or further away from the goals to which they aspire" (p. 445). One of important features of this narrative perspective and particularly relevant in the context of this research is that it provides researchers the ontological position from where they can see "reality" as individually constructed but at the same time "shaped, modified or consensualized" (Guba & Lincoln, 1998) by the social and cultural world within which the individual is situated (Murray & Ozanne, 1991; Shankar et al., 2001). In this context, Shankar, Elliott, and Goulding (2001) note that even though it is found that socio-culturally constructed metanarratives get increasingly replaced by individually constructed narratives, everyone in this world does not manage or even never attempt to author their life narratives.

Thompson (1997) presents the following conceptual framework (Figure 1) which captures how personal history of an individual interacts with sociocultural frame of reference to propel that individual to consume various consumer goods and services. I am adapting that as the basic framework and onto which will add other dimensions to arrive at an appropriate framework for the sustainable consumption literature. As per the left-hand box in Figure 1, each and every event in one's life always gets contextualized under the broader narrative of self-identity or life narrative (Thompson, 1997). Although there are internal inconsistencies and contradictions, a life narrative enables the individual a sense of continuity and coherence throughout the stream of life experiences (Crites, 1986; Gergen, 1991). Then, the important concept of personalized socio-cultural frame of reference is defined as the cultural background that offers the social categories, common sense beliefs and knowledge, and available interpretive frames of reference from which conceptions of self-identity and personalized meanings gets constructed (Faber & O'Guinn, 1988; Holt, 1997; Thompson, Howard, & William, 1994). Here, Thompson (1997) notes that this cultural knowledge should never be

considered as a static, monolithic, and internally consistent system. Rather, he brings our attention to the fact that cultural knowledge “is a heterogeneous network that offers a multitude of interpretive positions and endless opportunities for context-specific combinations, juxtapositions, and personalized transformations of established cultural meanings” (Thompson, 1997, p. 441). Based on this definition of personalized cultural frame of reference, the personalized meanings of consumption depict the presence of a dialectical relationship that a consumer’s identity construction possesses with the sociocultural conditions he/she is thrown into (Thompson, 1997). Also being limited by the available historical frames of reference, these individual choices are not entirely subjective or idiosyncratic constructions (Thompson, 1997). This personalized frame of reference gets derived first by situating the study within a context of available historical frames of reference that the researcher brings to bear through her background knowledge of the research context (Thompson, 1997).

Then, based on the life narrative and personalized cultural frame of reference one is propelled toward the consumption of various goods/practices (in the empirical study that I will be using as an illustration, I am focusing exclusively on consumption of high-value goods and practices). The consumption of various high-value good/practices generates certain experiences and stories, which the consumers as “self-narrators” carefully incorporate in their broad life narratives. Thus, in turn, these stories and experiences have a dialogical bearing on the overall life narratives of consumers (Hermans, 1996).

At this juncture, there is a need to add the dimension of worldview and values to this conceptual understanding. Worldview and values can be seen as factors that are individualized conceptions but originate from the society at large. These seem to also have strong bearings on individuals’ actions and behaviors. Incorporating the role that these play in this conceptual framework, I see, would help us to proceed toward a more socio-culturally embedded understanding of consumers. This would also shed light on the observation that Shankar et al. (2001) make regarding how far consumers exercise agency in terms of constructing their life narratives or whether these are overwhelmingly determined by structural factors. I am adding the layer of how worldview and values play a role in this regard by borrowing from the literature that examines the contributions of these factors in inducing proenvironmental consumer behaviors.

Worldview is considered as an overarching and inescapable framework of meaning and meaning making that profoundly informs our very understanding and enactment of reality. Hedlund-de Witt (2012) presents an integrative worldview framework to capture how one’s worldview and values have bearings on her proenvironmental consumer behaviors. As per that framework, five different components—ontology, epistemology, axiology, anthropology, and societal vision—are seen to be constituting one’s worldview. Among these components, I find the axiological dimension is particularly salient in the context appropriating phenomenological methodology in sustainable consumption literature. I will present the rationale behind this choice in the following.

Hedlund-de Witt (2012) defines axiology as one’s beliefs or ideas about what a good life looks like. This includes what one values in life, both in terms of moral (ethics) and in terms of quality of life (aesthetics). She also notes that these axiological questions have been widely addressed in philosophical literature, and many philosophers consider these ethical and aesthetical standpoints or ideas on individuals’ part play a significant role in defining who they are and how they view the world. In words of Taylor (1989),

[t]o know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance to you and what is trivial and secondary. (p. 28)

The rationale behind choosing this dimension over other dimensions of the worldview framework is that firstly, considering this is thought to have impact on one’s self-identity, it should also have bearings on one’s life narrative and how one would like to see herself in future. In contrast, other dimensions of that framework as per their definitions do not seem to have an impact on one’s life narratives to that extent. Secondly, Churchill and Wertz (1985) and Berger (1972) note how advertisers employ an image of a “desired life” or good life to pursue consumers in buying goods. So it is empirically established that a notion of desired life or good life indeed have strong bearings on one’s consumption choices. Thirdly, although all these dimensions do play a role in motivating a consumer toward adopting proenvironmental consumer behaviors, that might not be relevant for this study as it investigates consumption patterns that do not entail any explicit normativity on the part of consumers and at the same time chooses to do so through the lens of life narrative, which is again directly influenced by the axiological dimension or one’s notion about a desired or good life. Thus, the axiological dimension becomes an obvious choice over the other four in the context of this study.

As shown in the modified framework in Figure 2, values are defined as axiological beliefs or standpoints which are slowly acquired over time by an individual owing to the sociocultural disposition and conditioning in which the person has born and brought up. This is considered as a deeply seated understanding and does not necessarily come in the realm of contemplation or reflection. So in other words, values or axiological beliefs can be seen as something which is given for an individual and formed over time by various factors which can be considered beyond the purview of that individual’s agency. Whereas, the personalized sociocultural frame of reference is that which gets personalized, and thus there is a degree of agency that is involved here on the part of the concerned individual or consumer. One’s values directly determine one’s life narrative, and both, that is, life narrative and values, in tandem predispose an individual in a certain manner that determines how one is going to personalize various frames of reference available out there in the sociocultural milieu.

Now, it is important to delve further into how this conceptual framing can be employed to have an empirically driven in-

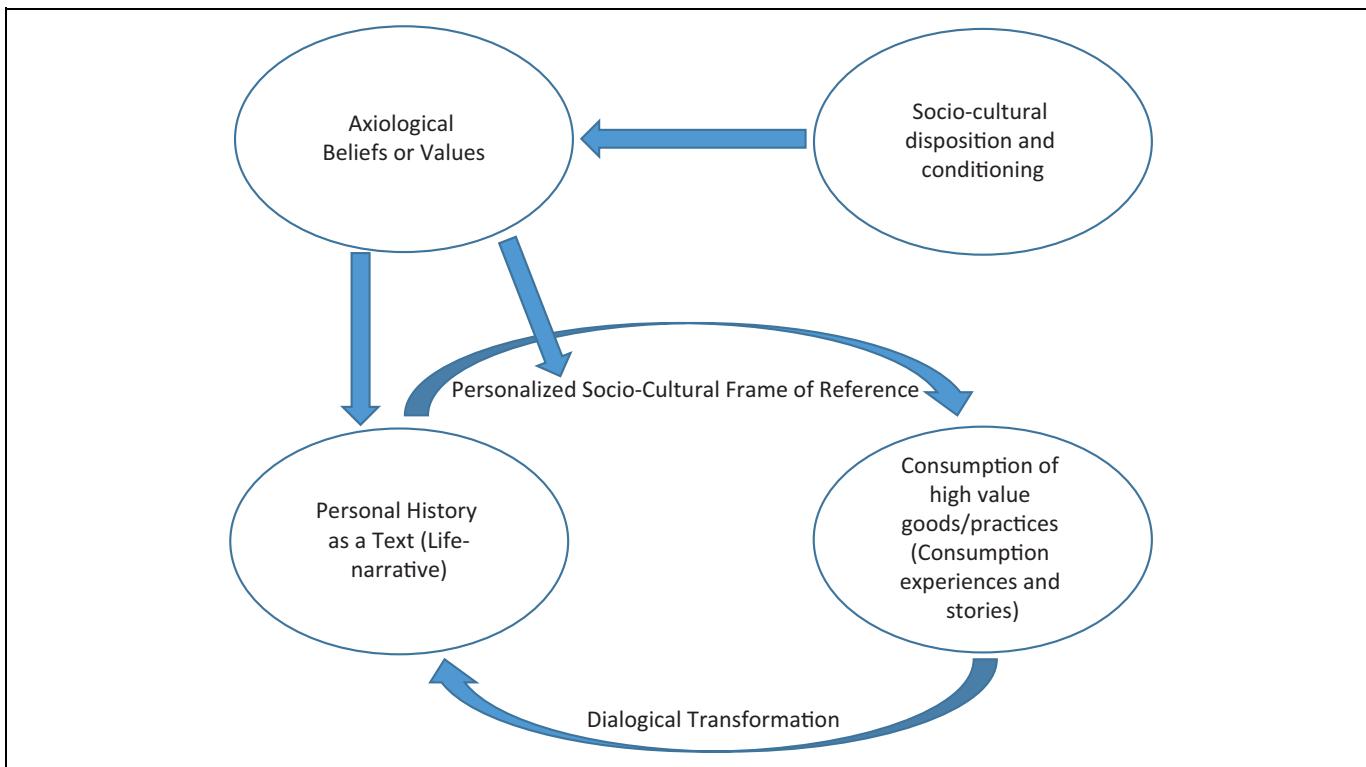


Figure 2. Conceptual framework for this study.

depth understanding of consumers. In the following, I will present first different steps that one needs to follow to successfully carry out such an empirical study starting from deciding the phenomenon, to how to carry out phenomenological interviews, to different steps involved in the analysis of collected consumer narratives.

What Is a Phenomenon and How to Decide on a Phenomenon?

The basic purpose of phenomenological interviews is to get a first-person description or lived experiences of a specified phenomenon. The essence of a phenomenon guides us to go beyond the specificity and sheds light on the matter of investigation by articulating what these experiences are and what are the fundamental insights that these experiences could provide or reveal (Wertz, 2015). The very first step for employing phenomenological research methodology is to decide the phenomenon, and the basic criterion for choosing a phenomenon is what gets manifested in the field of experience of the interviewees/coresearchers. Now, considering the objective of sustainable consumption literature is to understand the drivers of environmentally impactful consumption practices and how individuals can be refrained from indulging in such practices, one needs to decide a phenomenon pertaining to some of these impactful practices, or the phenomenon should be geared toward exploring some of the facets of various environmentally impactful consumer behaviors through consumer's life experiences. For example, in the empirical research, the phenomenon

is how individuals experience the consumption of various high-value and environmentally impactful consumer goods and services (car, house, and vacation mainly traveling to abroad) in the present India.

Interview Process

McCracken (1988) and Thompson et al. (1989) advise that for taking phenomenological interviews, the researcher should first create a context within which the participants feel the ease of discussing their experiences. For that, generally it is recommended to start with obtaining background information of the participants (e.g., their hometown, parents' occupations, college majors, personal interests, career goals, and future plans). After the initial setting of context, the discussion in the rest of the interview should revolve around three major themes: "What has an individual experienced in terms of the phenomenon?" "What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected one's experience of the phenomenon?" and "How has it influenced the narrator?" (cf. Englander, 2012; Groenewald, 2004; Kornhaber, 2009).

Moustakas (1994) suggests that the interviews should be conducted at the site of the experience. This serves two purposes: First, it ensures the researcher is completely immersed in the context within which the experience is generated. Second, being in a comfortable place, the participants feel at ease and can describe their experiences in the best possible manner. Phenomenological interviews generally last for 30 min to 2 hr. The "why" questions are consciously avoided as seen to be urging the interviewees to rationalize their experiences (Thompson

et al., 1989; Thompson, William, & Howard, 1990). This rationalization hinders the free-flowing description of lived experience. Even abstract questions, such as what this product symbolizes for your life, are avoided to keep the focus strictly on experiences. In phenomenological interviews, the main objective of the interviewer is to initiate phenomenological dialogues—where short descriptive questions or clarifying comments of the interviewer lead the interviewee to describe her experience at length (Høffding & Martiny, 2015; Thompson et al., 1989, 1990). Generally, these interviews are completely unstructured, and the interviewer's role is often just to provide a context for the interviewee to express as much as she wants (Thompson et al., 1989, 1990). A particularly salient aspect of phenomenological interviews is that the interviewer and respondent remain in positions of equality (Høffding & Martiny, 2015; Kvale, 1983). The interviewees are thus seen as coressearchers in this methodology and are given complete freedom to take the discussion in whatever direction they want to, obviously, under the broad context set by the researcher (Høffding & Martiny, 2015). In other words, the discussion should be allowed to be driven by the coressearchers as far as possible to obtain good quality phenomenological narratives (Laverty, 2003).

Keeping these points in mind, in the context of the aforementioned phenomenon, the interview process is structured around three broad subsections: ice-breaking or conversation starters, getting to the topic, and discussing their experiences of a few intangible issues concerning their life (whether one considers oneself happy and successful, what is one's experience of lifestyle, etc.). The discussed topics in this ice-breaking phase are experience and perception concerning shopping malls and the West, changes in the current city or the city one has born and brought up, how leisure is spent, and so on. Then in the next step, the discussion moves toward one's present work, how much the person is involved/happy with or takes pride in her work, the social circle she belongs to, frequency of socialization, whether she is part of any committees in the professional as well as personal sphere, whether she goes for vacation abroad, recent experiences of such visits, the experience of first car, the experience of current car, their current home, and the comparison between bungalows and apartments in her mind, and so on. In the last step, their perceptions/experiences of success, happiness, lifestyle, and values are discussed in as much as free-flowing manner as possible. A researcher should carefully plan these subsections in such a way that the discussion can move from tangible/directly experienceable topics toward comparatively intangible ones. Here, I would like to highlight that the broad structure entailing different steps should primarily remain same, but the particular topics discussed under each step and their order should be decided as per the phenomenon under consideration.

Details About the Participants or Coressearchers

I interviewed individuals from well-to-do households belonging to a high-income bracket, that is, more than or equal to 30

lakhs INR (around USD 50,000) family income per annum.² A total of 17 in-depth interviews have been completed as saturations in different categories of narratives were observed. The participants are based out of three cities: Bangalore (seven participants), Mumbai (six participants), and Pune (four participants). Four of the participants are entrepreneurs or businesspersons, and the rest are employed in corporate or government jobs. Out of those in corporate jobs (12 participants), 4 of them are working in the software or related industry and the rest are employed in diverse industries/sectors such as banking, construction, manufacturing, automobiles, media, and law. All the participants are between the age of 28 and 65, with six of them under 40.

Analysis

The key feature of analysis in hermeneutic phenomenological stream is that instead of following a method to conduct the analysis, a framework is followed (Thompson, 1997). There are some pragmatic considerations at the very beginning of the framework. The first is the approach of part-to-whole. Thompson (1996, 1997, 1998) succinctly demonstrates how in hermeneutic phenomenological methodology the interpretation of interview texts is done with an iterative process where the part of the interview gets interpreted and then the connection of that with the whole is discerned to generate a holistic understanding of the interview. Then, the next layer of part-to-whole interpretation is carried out across interview texts where the understanding of each interview helps the researcher to generate a comprehensive understanding of the concerned phenomenon. The perceptual totality that emerges at this stage is a dynamic perceptual relationship that represents multiple configurations of part-to-whole relations (Kohler, 1947). These patterns of commonalities emerging across interview texts are referred to as global themes (Kvale, 1983; Wertz, 1983). In this regard, Thompson (1997) provides a detailed framework to illustrate how the interpretation can begin with an emic approach which borrows nomenclature of meanings from interviewees and then can move toward a more abstract etic approach where the researcher draws heavily from the sociohistorical contexts to arrive at a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon.

The second pragmatic consideration highlights that as the main aim of this approach is to generate a holistic understanding of the interview texts, the focus should be always on interpreting some portion of an individual's narrative in the context of her entire life narrative (Thompson, 1997). So it is like situating different facets of the interpretation of a narrative in the overall sense emerged from interpreting the entire life narrative to ensure that each and every interpretation is absolutely true to the interviewee's border narrative of personal history (Thompson, 1997).

The next consideration concerns the role a researcher is supposed to play while interpreting an interview text. The key tenet here is the fusion of horizons. Hermeneutic stream always stresses on the fact that while interpreting, the researcher's frame of references needs to get infused with the concerned

texts leading to a fusion of horizons (Gadamer, 1960/1993; Holbrook & O'Shaughnessy, 1988; Settembre-Blundo, Fernández del Hoyo, & García-Muiña, 2018; Thompson et al., 1994). This implies that the researcher's background knowledge, interpretive orientation, underlying questions, and assumptions enable him or her to get attuned to the text and the unique patterns it holds. For interpretive researchers, social reality is considered to be intersubjectively composed, so that epistemologically, knowledge is not approached from the standpoint of an external, objective position, but from the lived experience of the co-participant (Cova & Elliot, 2008; Tadajewski, 2006). However, as Thompson (1997) rightly notes that does not mean that the researcher is imposing her prefigurative understanding on the interpretation of a text. Rather, a hermeneutic approach keeps the researcher open to other possibilities that the text, in relation to the prefigurative understanding of the researcher, has to offer (Gadamer, 1960/1993; Ricoeur, 1981). Extending the concept of fusion of horizons, the next step of this framework requires the researcher to be explicit in choosing a priori context of investigation.

A Priori Context of Investigation. The concept of hermeneutic circle, which proposes that understanding always proceeds in a circular fashion starting from prefiguration to configuration to finally refiguration, requires that the interpretation process begins with a clearly defined background understanding (Lavery, 2003; Settembre-Blundo et al., 2018). Hence, the first stage of any hermeneutic research necessitates a background research of the sociohistorical condition within which the concerned research can be situated (Thompson, 1997). This naturally puts a lot of onus on the researcher and owing to that there is a metaphor in hermeneutic research that "researcher-as-instrument" (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Sherry, 1991). This indicates that the quality of research findings would closely correlate to how well the researcher manages to situate the analysis and how effectively she manages to draw insightful connections between the set context and the text at hand. The approach of situating the entire analysis in the sociohistorical contexts to draw interpretations from the text can be seen as the most critical contribution of the hermeneutical approach (Thompson, 1997).

Interpreting Consumer Narratives as Consumer Stories

The main aim of the interpretation that Thompson (1997) notes is that of situating the interpretation of every action of the consumer in the "spatial-temporal" trajectories of the entire life narrative. The transcribed interviews serve as the text from which the subsequent interpretation ensues (Kvale, 1983). The stories that consumers narrate create temporal trajectories in which they relive their past life events in relation to their present concerns and that in turn help them project toward an envisioned future. These temporal trajectories situate the consumer's present understanding and personal history within the sociohistorically constructed frame of meanings (Kvale, 1983). This idiosyncratic ordering of

experiences by the consumer eventually presents a glimpse of her underlying life narrative. As Churchill and Wertz (1985) rightly note, the meanings emerging in this highly reflective portion of the analysis may not necessarily correspond with the actual descriptions of the narrators. However, that is completely permitted considering Giorgi (1970) indicates the process of analysis to be an "explication" (Churchill & Wertz, 1985). In this regard, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) present the critical questions that a researcher should always contemplate on:

What is the person trying to achieve here? Is anything meaningful being said here, which was not intended? Do I have a sense of something going on here that the person himself or herself is perhaps less aware of? (p. 8)

These questions would definitely help a researcher to generate deeper level insights about the phenomenon at stake (Paul, 2017).

To proceed further in the direction of interpreting consumer texts, Thompson (1997) presents a few more steps. Without going into the nitty-gritties of those steps, it is important to understand the overall approach so that it can be effectively adapted in the context of this article. The interpretation goes in layers from being conceptually closer to the actual text to further abstract interpretation. In this way, the interpretation in each step can rightfully be grounded on the interpretation made in the steps before. Thus, the entire process of interpretation becomes more rigorous and true to the narrator. I will follow this approach for delineating steps of reading narratives as consumer stories, particularly suited for the sustainable consumption literature.

Reading Narratives as Consumer Stories

For this step, as already highlighted, the pivotal objective is to interpret the narratives in layers. Keeping in mind the conceptual framework and the chosen phenomenon, the interpretation is carried out as per the following steps:

1. **Life-narrative and consumption stories:** The verbatim transcript of each interview should be read several times and then in the first layer, the focus should be on to write down the life trajectory or the life narrative of the concerned individual and how various consumption stories become part of it. So, this step entails organizing life events in a chronological manner centering the concerned phenomenon. The direct quotes from the transcripts should be used whenever deemed necessary to substantiate the trajectory. The focus should be on presenting a coherent flow of life trajectory which the narrator may not have explicitly stated in the same order or manner. Generally, it would be observed that a narrative is like a jumbled-up jigsaw puzzle where the narrator might have discussed about or described the same thing

like a consumption choice or a career choice or some personal preference in different parts of the narratives. At the same time, descriptions of rather unrelated things or issues can very well be found adjacent to each other. In this step, the focus should be on organizing this puzzle in a manner so that a coherent life narrative could emerge.

Close attention should be paid on to any reference that the narrator has made to his/her upbringing and social disposition to particularly capture the sociocultural embeddedness of his/her life narrative. In narratives concerning upbringing, the person's educational trajectory, the places in which the person is born and brought up, the influence of parents' choices, expectations, as well as values and worldview on his/her life, and so on should be duly taken into consideration. In social disposition, attention should be vested on the kind of social circle the person belonged or still belongs, the kind of socioeconomic status (along with economic status, the person's caste, religion, and race should also be paid attention to) as a family they possess, the person's cultural roots, and so on. These should be carefully embedded within this depiction of life narrative to provide a holistic sense of the person's entire life trajectory. As being the first step, the description in this should largely be close to the direct experiences or based on what a narrator has exactly said (Churchill & Wertz, 1985). So basically, in this step, the extent of interpretation or abstraction should be restricted to as minimal as possible. The objective of this layer is to present the life trajectories in a reoriented sequential manner adhering to the phenomenon, so that it could help us to see the life narratives of individuals as socioculturally embedded beings. This would enable the analysis in the next two steps.

2. *Good/desired/ideal life and frame of reference:* In the next layer, the focus is more on interpreting what are one's axiological beliefs or what is the idea of good/desired/ideal life that a narrator is upholding and what are the frame of references influencing the narrator in this context. These conceptions are interpreted from the narratives and those interpretations are substantiated through direct quotes. The focus should also be on interpreting the sociocultural disposition and conditioning within which the narrator is born and brought up. In the following, how all these components can be teased out from the narratives is illustrated.
 - a. *Good/desired/ideal life:* As already discussed in the conceptual framework, this is like a goal toward which a person is driving his/her life. For interpreting this, one needs to pay attention to the sense of priority that emerges from a narrator's various consumption choices. For example, as emerged in my research, one narrator who as per the analysis

possesses "a materialistically driven life" as the definition of good life says:

Other dealers of this company are from rich families and that is why their choices are different. Their wish could be different, they might feel that everyday they should make a fixed deposit of 1 lakh... but for me 1 crore as fixed deposit is enough but tomorrow if I want to drive an Audi then I should have that liberty to do so... people have different desires and different happiness definitions.

Here, we can see how he prioritizes having a fancy car over savings. This can be interpreted as an indicator of his conception of good life. It is just one instance that I have stated here; one should pay attention to such instances or examples which would usually appear more than once in a particular narrative. Let me provide another illustration. Here, the narrator, as per my interpretation, seems to have a definition of good life as "living a life of materialistic leisure in future" and he says:

I don't have any plan to get a high end car right now. These (one entry level sedan and an entry level hatchback) are going pretty well. Obviously I would love to own such cars (high end cars) one day, but that is not on the priority list. For me making investments are very important, I regularly check them to ensure everything is in order.

For him as the priority is to retire comparatively early to live a life of leisure, he doesn't want to buy an expensive car now as that might not help him achieve his long-term goal of materializing a good life toward which he is driving his life. Just to flag, the priorities may not always be relating to consumption choices, it might varies from the career path one has chosen, to the type of localities one wants to live or lives, to the kind of schools one chooses for his/her kids, and so on.

After the priorities, one should also pay attention to how the person in his/her life defines success, happiness, and lifestyle. I have delved into these notions while discussing their experiences of a few intangible issues concerning their lives. These helped me get a better sense of the underlying basis for a particular narrator's priorities and in turn guided me to grasp her conception of good life. Considering the notion good life is deeply seated, as discussed in the conceptual framing, one should simultaneously pay attention to a narrator social-cultural disposition and conditioning. Moreover, as this notion seems to remain implicit, it is also important to always carry out a meta-analysis of the trajectory of one's life narrative which emerged in the last step. This meta-analysis of the trajectory would reveal how one has driven his/her life so far

and that understanding would help a researcher to interpretively extrapolate the definition of good life toward which the narrator is actually driving his/her life.

- b. Frame of reference: If good life definition is considered as the goal, then frame of reference can be considered as the way or path through which one thinks one could reach or realize that envisioned goal. For interpreting this, one should pay attention to a narrator's sociocultural embeddedness and disposition. Any reference to social comparison, effect of peer choices, or the narrator presenting something as the norm or normal should be paid particular attention to. The researcher should also keep in mind the concerned narrator's notion of good life while interpreting his/her frame of reference. Getting a clear sense of frame of reference, the researcher should get a grasp of the peer group that the narrator belongs to. Like the following quote shows how the narrator always tends to compare himself with individuals who are above him in the socioeconomic status quo.

We are minimalistic people, may not be frugal, but we don't splurge, we are not flamboyant. I would never buy a shirt for 2,000 USD, but I know many people who would do that. For me that is flamboyance, but I am not flamboyant, I don't aspire to be flamboyant. I think this is because of the value inculcated by my parents, both of them were professors in Pune University.

The definition of or rather the benchmark for flamboyance for him seemed clearly skewed at least in the context of a developing economy like India. However, while comparing with his peer groups, he feels choosing to avoid such indulgence marks a morally appropriate nonflamboyant living.

- c. Social disposition and conditioning: In the last step, different facets of one's upbringing should be interpreted critically to understand how these have led to the social conditioning concerning what is a good life, how to live such a life, and so on. Here, I am not posing social conditioning with a negative connotation; it could also play a rather positive role in inducing a person to choose a less commonly found and less materialistically driven notion of good life. Parents' worldview and outlook could significantly play a role here. For example,

Partly it is family as well, my father was in BARC, and his three brothers were in the US, they kept calling him but he didn't go to the US, he said I have everything here to live a comfortable life, why I need to go to the West. Now you are asking that is why I am thinking about it...he used to say, I can do whatever I want to do from staying here, I get to read, I can do what I wanted to do. Good schools

and hospitals are here. Why should I move to abroad for money, this is a smart way to live. This may be has seeped into me...you define what you want, and don't let others to decide that for you. Don't let the locus of control be outside you, this is agency. If you don't let financial things influence you, you have the power...the only way the world can influence you through money, right?

Coming to social disposition, the points emerged in the last step should be critically engaged with to tease out how that disposition has enabled or disabled the person to have different types of exposure in life. It could be an exposure to different peer groups or different types of hobbies or personal persuasions, or it could be an exposure to the society at large or to different ways of living, and so on. This critical engagement will shed more light on how these dispositions have shaped a person's notion of good life and frame of reference and in turn are shaping the person's consumption choices.

- 3. *How all these components in tandem influence consumption decisions:* After capturing how all the different components of the conceptual framework applies to each of the narrative, in this step, the focus should be on understanding how all these work in tandem for each of the narrator and make an individual a certain type of consumer. So, the underlying process through which these components influence the concerned consumption decisions of a consumer will be at the center of attention. The insights obtained in this step may not always be substantiated through direct quotes, however, the focus should be on presenting quotes to demonstrate how the process does play out in real life. Once a researcher manages to go through the earlier two steps, he/she would get a reasonable amount of clarity about how the different components of the conceptual framework are constituted for the concerned narrator. Now with that understanding, the researcher needs to approach other consumption choices made by the narrator; mostly, these choices would fit that understanding and make it more robust. However, one needs to keep in mind some choices might not fit entirely. In that case, it is important to pay attention to those; it is also advised to go back and see if these can really alter the interpretations emerged in the last step. In this context, one needs to acknowledge that an individual can have multiple definitions/notions of good life and frame of references. As a researcher, we should focus on the ones that seem dominant or that spontaneously emerge from the interpretation. So, the focus should not be on to arrive at a grand understanding which will explain or justify each and every action of an individual, rather, one should pay importance to the fact that we are here looking for a socioculturally embedded conceptualization of an individual and thus many factors might be at work in

tandem along with the agency of the individual, behind each and every choice of his/her. For example, in my study, the presence of “family dynamics” emerged as a critical insight. This indicates how a concerned narrator’s definitions of good life and frame of reference may not entirely explain his/her consumption choices as mostly these choices are family decisions and everyone in the family may not necessarily adhere to the same definitions. I will further explain this in the following.

Critical Reflections

In the following, I will list some of the issues that were faced while conducting field research in India. Some of these issues are pertaining to India, while some are about phenomenological research methodology being applied in this research context.

Family dynamics: I have already highlighted this point in the last step of analyzing narratives. The kinds of consumption categories or practices (car, house, and vacation) I have concentrated in this study are more of shared consumer goods and services at a family scale. Naturally, these consumption decisions are taken at a family level, and thus getting a phenomenological view of a narrator’s conceptions of good life and frame of reference may not always shed light on the rationale behind a consumption decision of the narrator. This caveat always needs to be kept in mind while drawing any larger implications from the findings of such a study.

Challenge regarding woman narrators: In India, women are predominantly considered as an integral part of the family and are not given the liberty to take her own independent decisions, particularly concerning financial matters. For this reason, whenever I took interview of a woman, there were references of her husband’s choices and family preferences. This in a way hindered a phenomenological narration of her choices or preferences. One alternative could be of taking couple interview, which I have tried in two instances. However, in this case as well, one of the two, happens to be the men in both the cases, tends to dominate the other. So, it is a challenge involving any individual-centered research methodology like phenomenological research methodology, which may not entirely be done away with.

Being mindful about one’s normative inclination: As a researcher in this type of a study, I feel, one needs to be extra cautious that one is not bringing or imposing his/her own normative view while a narrator is discussing about a consumption choice or broadly his/her definition of good life. It is paramount that as far as possible, the researcher should maintain a normatively neutral position about various types of consumption choices and should strictly avoid posing any question

relating to that like “Whether you think this consumption choice is just?” “Is it ethical to consume at the level you are consuming?” and so on.

Time requirement: These types of interview have to be long enough to guide a narrator to reach a state of self-talk. For the empirical study, the average duration of interviews was 90–100 min, but some went well over 150 min. I see around 100 min of uninterrupted time is essential for a reflective, insightful interview. However, it often becomes a challenge to first of all convince a participant to invest this much of time and secondly for her to be able to actually provide such an uninterrupted time slot. I have made it a point to highlight this requirement at the very initial stages of contacting a prospective participant so that I ensure that this necessary condition of getting a reflective narrative is met and mutually agreed upon.

Conclusion

This phenomenological approach driven conceptual framing of consumers as being socioculturally situated identity project–driven subjects as presented in this article, I propose, makes a novel contribution to the literature that attempts to delineate paths to attain a sustainable consumption regime. Not only capturing how the process of consumer goods and practices becoming part of one’s life narrative drives one to consume, this article successfully embeds the construct of axiological beliefs or the notion of good life in the above dynamic. Phenomenological methodology enables us to tease out the notion of good life for each individual which I vouch is paramount for sustainable consumption literature to pay more attention to. On the one hand, this notion seems to have a strong bearing on one’s consumption choices, on the other, this is a deeply seated notion which generally does not come in the realm of reflection and gets formed over time mostly owing to one’s social disposition and conditioning.

Employment of phenomenological interviews based on the conceptual framing and the described three steps of analyzing consumer narratives as texts, I see, could help researchers to actualize the objective that Guba and Lincoln (1998) accentuate, that is, reaching the ontological position from where it is possible to see “reality” as individually constructed as well as “shaped, modified or consensualized.” This at first will provide a socioculturally embedded understanding of the drivers of consumption, and at the same time, this will help us to delineate paths through which any sustained change in the prevailing consumption patterns can be invoked for a sustainable future. This understanding, I also vouch, will enable us to shed light on how far consumers manage to author their life narratives, or as noted by Shankar et al. (2001), life narratives are overwhelmingly authored for consumers by various sociocultural and political–economic discourses. Further insights on this line would clarify how much agency consumers realistically possess to bring changes in their consumption patterns or is it like

they are largely helpless dupes falling prey to the prevailing grand social narratives and discourses which at present mostly coerce individuals to adopt consumeristic outlooks toward life in general.

The notion of good life should come into the purview of sustainable consumption literature as something which intrinsically directs consumption choices. The way forward for a sustainable approach toward consumption seems to be about encouraging individuals to have more meaningful personal persuasions which are intangible in nature, but are capable of providing them a superior sense of living a good or fulfilled life, rather than just mindlessly following the path of material persuasions. Informing consumers about the larger socioenvironmental impacts of consumption choices is the prevalent strategy adopted so far to induce changes in consumption patterns toward sustainable forms. However, the phenomenological research methodology–driven approach offers us a way to see how various goods act like extended selves of consumers; understandably, it is not always feasible for a person to be critical of the utility or necessity of her material possessions, when the entire meaning of life as well as self-concept is derived from those possessions. Self-concept is an important feature of consumption experiences since it represents our subjective beliefs about our own attributes that are formed from and played out in our experiential reality (Hackley & Tiwsakul, 2006; Solomon, Bamossy, & Askegaard, 2002).

The negligence in acknowledging and in turn effectively incorporating these aforementioned aspects in policy formulation is precisely the reason why, I see, Soron (2010) argues that we encounter an impasse regarding consumer policies failing to make any substantial impact in altering consumption patterns toward socioenvironmentally desired forms. So, it is about invoking a slow process where individuals will be encouraged to conceptualize, in Kasser's (2004) words, a good life beyond being just "goods" life as it is overwhelmingly the case in this consumeristic world. This methodological inquiry also sheds light on why realizing this change is difficult and often needs to be invoked at a stage when individuals are young and are going through social conditioning. As scholars highlight that parents or immediate family members play a pivotal role in shaping one's worldview and values in these early years (Thompson, Meyer, & McGinley, 2006; Uzefovsky, Doring, & Knafo-Noam, 2016), the change has to be a gradual one in the overall social consciousness and priorities. How much ever difficult it might seem, I do not see that there can be any shortcut for bringing sustained changes in consumption patterns which will not only be environmentally sustainable and socially just but at the same time would offer higher well-being to individuals. For getting the double-dividend of ensuring environmental sustainability along with attaining higher well-being as Jackson (2005) rightly highlights, we as a society needs to travel the most difficult and challenging path so that Earth remains inhabitable for future generations to come and live a fulfilled life.

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Notes

1. Sustainable consumption is broadly defined as the practice of using products and consumer goods that have minimal impacts on the environment so that the future generations can meet their needs. So, sustainable consumption entails conscious choice of a consumption pattern which will help us move toward an environmentally sustainable future.
2. As per Singhi, Jain, and Singhi (2017), the elite of India who were only 6.5 million or 2% of the total population in 2016 earn more than 2 million INR per annum, whereas all the narrators I have interviewed earn more than 2.5–3 million INR per annum. So definitely, they are within the top 2–3% in 2018.

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