



Disrupting emerging consumer cultures: The role of 'avalanche events' in uprooting and reorganising (un)sustainable consumption practices in Brazil

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Abstract

Amidst the environmental breakdown fuelled by unsustainable consumption practices, attempts to introduce the necessary change have been both slow and insufficient. Providing a potential opportunity to revise existing consumption practices, crises caused by significant events can disrupt existing lifestyles and practices, forcing people to re-organise their daily routines. Drawing on mixed-methods data collected in Brazil at two points during the COVID-19 lockdowns, we interrogate how the pandemic functioned as a disruptive 'avalanche' event that uprooted existing consumption practices and prompted shifts towards more sustainable consumption. Our findings show an increased awareness of environmental issues and motivations to change existing practices. However, initial shifts in consumer practices following the breaking and (re-)making of consumption practices were absorbed by emerging online systems of provision that stalled a shift towards lasting, sustainable consumption patterns. We examine how individual agency interacts with new online consumption opportunities, reflecting on the extent to which disruptive events can reshape consumption patterns. Finally, we highlight the need for

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active structural support from societal actors—such as businesses and legislators—to create the enabling systems required to translate motivation into lasting change.

Keywords

sustainable consumption, global south, Brazil, Covid-19, sustainable transition, system of provisions

Introduction

Unsustainable levels of consumption and production in the Global North and, increasingly, in emerging economies in the Global South such as Brazil (Barbosa and Veloso, 2014) gradually push natural support systems beyond planetary boundaries (IPCC, 2021; Rockström et al., 2025). Crucially, global consumption and production practices already have detrimental effects on environmental and social wellbeing, generating over two billion tonnes of solid waste annually, which is expected to rise to 3.4 billion tonnes by 2050 (Kaza et al., 2018), disproportionately affecting people in the Global South.

Despite growing awareness of the impacts of climate change, attempts to drive sustainability transitions have fallen short of achieving a shift away from material-intensive consumer cultures (Lorek and Fuchs, 2019). While many sustainability programmes and policies are making a step in the right direction, most countries and sectors continue to fall short of achieving meaningful carbon reductions (IPCC, 2021). Major disruptive, ‘avalanche’ events (Suarez and Oliva, 2005), however, can potentially catalyse systemic change, such as sustainability transitions. In this paper, we position the COVID-19 pandemic as such event that brought a major global disruption, temporally causing unprecedented change through the commotion of existing structures with far-reaching social and economic implications (Agarwal et al., 2021; Greene et al., 2022; Holmes et al., 2022). For instance, global supply chains experienced major turmoil, resulting in shortages of consumer goods that, in theory, provided opportunities to downsize consumer cultures (Cohen, 2020) – especially among upper- and middle-income households.

Situating the disruption as possible catalysts for positive change, the UN (2020) argued that “the COVID-19 pandemic offers countries an opportunity to build recovery plans that will reverse current trends and change our consumption and production patterns towards a more sustainable future”. As such, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the question arose whether shocks to existing systems of provision prompted a shift towards sustainable consumer practices (Cohen, 2020; Leal Filho et al., 2022).

In this paper, we examine whether the COVID-19 pandemic as an ‘avalanche’ event (Suarez and Oliva, 2005), affected consumption patterns in the short and longer-term. Avalanche events “occur very infrequently but is of high intensity, of high speed, and simultaneously affects multiple dimensions of the environment” (Suarez and Oliva, 2005: 1023). Drawing on the Systems of Provision (SoP) framework (Spaargaren and Van Vliet, 2000), we propose that avalanche events disrupt SoP, temporarily unsettling established routines, which may manifest in a shift in more sustainable social practices. Consumers with high purchasing power may redirect their currently unsustainable consumption

practices toward more sustainable alternatives. One such group is the emerging Brazilian middle class, whose unsustainable consumption patterns are rapidly developing alongside economic growth, making this group particularly relevant to investigate.

In our work, we draw on two interrelated, yet distinct literatures, offering insights into sustainable consumer culture transitions: (1) SoP as the structuring mechanism linking production, distribution, consumption practices (Spaargaren and Van Vliet, 2000) as well as individual agency (Pekkanen, 2021; Spaargaren, 2013), and (2) motivation for sustainable consumption (Steg and Vlek, 2009). Empirically, the paper draws on data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic and specifically a period during which all Brazilian states imposed a lockdown. In our analysis, we examine changes to existing consumption practices in Brazil. By doing so, we shed light on the potential of a disruptive event to initiate a sustainability transition (Suarez and Oliva, 2005). In addition, we contribute to research in the Global South, following calls for research in non-OECD countries that have not received enough attention thus addressing the existing Western Bias (Marotti De Mello et al., 2021).

An avalanche event: The COVID-19 pandemic as a catalyst for a sustainable consumption transition?

Past decades have seen an unprecedented rise in global consumption and an intensification of global consumer culture. Facilitated by manufactured wants and needs (Mont et al., 2025), and nurtured through the abundance of products and services to satisfy the former, unsustainable consumption practices have forged their way into consumer societies (Mont et al., 2026).

Some remark that this transition towards materialistic consumer societies started in the 1960s (Baudrillard, 1995), eroding social capital (Putnam, 1995) and paving the way to increasingly fast-paced consumer cultures and conspicuous consumption (Jaikumar et al., 2018; Veblen, 1899). Whereas excessive consumption has long been embedded in the Global North, the emergence of a rapidly expanding consumer culture is a comparatively recent phenomenon in countries such as Brazil (Barbosa and Veloso, 2014). Attempts to break with this unsustainable trajectory have, so far, shown to be insufficient.

The COVID-19 pandemic thus afforded a unique opportunity to study societal responses to a significant disruption of everyday practices, including (temporary) transformations in consumption practices (Searle et al., 2021). This disruption constrained and uprooted many intertwined everyday consumption practices underpinning resource-intensive and unsustainable lifestyles and practices of modern consumer cultures; thus paving the way for a potential sustainability transition.

A central argument within the transition literature posits that grand societal challenges are inherently systemic, necessitating profound transformations of societal regimes through disruptive processes to effectively address them (Freeman and Perez, 1988). Notably, existing societal regimes are often understood as incumbent, and change as typically slow, requiring incremental processes over long time periods through gradual reorientations (Loorbach et al., 2017). Here, change is usually achieved through a period of nonlinear disruptive change to material and social elements (Geels, 2019) that, together, constitute societal systems in the form of socio-technical configurations, which fulfil

different, yet corresponding functions (Rosenbloom, 2017). While these types of transitions can be, arguably, initiated and driven through individual and structural factors (Geels, 2019), more severe disruptions at a societal level can initiate more rapid change processes (Chiu et al., 2020). Offering a typology of socio-environmental changes, Suarez and Oliva (2005, 1022) distinguish between regular, hyperturbulence, specific shock, disruptive and avalanche change (Figure 1).

According to the typology, the COVID-19 pandemic – providing the context for our enquiry – can be understood as disruption in the form of an ‘avalanche’ change event (Suarez and Oliva, 2005). The disruption uprooted existing practices on multiple dimensions in an abrupt and extensive manner, and, consequently, provided an opportunity to reflect and reconfigure practices that, potentially, can facilitate more permanent structural changes and lifestyles that align with CO₂ reduction targets (IPCC, 2021; Sikarwar et al., 2021).

Agency and motivation for sustainable consumption practices

Agency and motivation are important factors when it comes to understanding peoples’ lifestyles. Agency can be understood as the capability or power to initiate and shape action (Pekkanen, 2021). In the SoP framework (Spaargaren and Van Vliet, 2000), agency plays a crucial role in understanding the dynamic interplay between individual actors and the respective SoP, which, together, shape social practices. Rather than viewing consumers as passive recipients of provision systems, the SoP framework recognises their reflexive capacity to organise and, to some extent, transform their lifestyles within the structural and material constraints of these systems. This focus on agency is particularly important in the context of sustainable consumption, where it captures how individuals exercise capacity for action, even within limiting structures, through meaningful everyday choices (Pekkanen, 2021). Thus, examining people’s agency allows for a more nuanced understanding of how consumer transitions may emerge from the interaction between systems and individual practices.

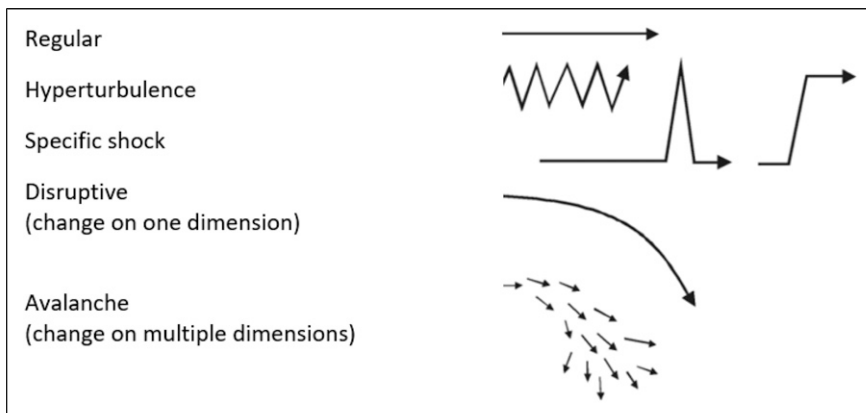


Figure 1. Types of socio-environmental change. Based on Suarez and Oliva (2005).

We argue that an important component of an actor's reflexive capacity is motivation, as it shapes how individuals interpret and respond to SoP. In the context of sustainable consumption, environmental motivation is typically conceptualised as an individuals' willingness or intention to act pro-environmentally and is considered to be preceding actions (Steg and Vlek, 2009). This is emphasised in a study by Masson and Otto (2021), which shows that motivation is a strong predictor of pro-environmental actions. Thus, motivation serves as a link between internal drivers of action and broader processes of social change, highlighting the central role in understanding reflexive agency.

Transitioning to (un)sustainable consumption practices

Despite the persistence of current global unsustainable consumption patterns (cf. Akenji et al., 2021), survey research conducted by GlobeScan (2025) indicates widespread public support for a broader transition towards the adoption of environmental practices, that is, actions that reduce resource intensity or support local, low-impact consumption (Akenji et al., 2021; Prothero et al., 2011), and low-carbon lifestyles (Isham et al., 2024) more broadly. In addition, research examining the effects of the COVID-19 disruption provide fresh evidence for potentially positive outcomes. For instance, Aboelenien et al. (2021) provide insights into the emergence of responsabilisation, which is characterised by a heightened sense of care for oneself and others. The increase in responsabilisation could be a reaction to the risks posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected areas of society differently. Other scholars suggest that the pandemic offered a period of reflection and reduced external stimuli, which may have contributed to a de-alignment and re-making of lifestyles and their underlying practices (e.g., Greene et al., 2022).

Particularly relevant to our work, several studies point to potential changes in consumption culture during the COVID-19 pandemic. Kwon et al. (2022) observed a trend in which individuals sought marketplace offerings that fostered connections with others, signalling a potential shift towards more socially oriented consumption patterns. Similarly, Mehta et al. (2020) suggest the possibility of a longer-term trend wherein there is an increased emphasis on 'life and living', moving away from the pre-pandemic focus on accumulating material possessions. In Brazil, Severo et al. (2021) found an increasing environmental consciousness among Brazilian citizens and shifts in their current consumption patterns, offering support for the potential of disruptions to induce changes to 'the more, the better' lifestyle as previously observed by Barbosa and Veloso (2014).

Notably, change dynamics are unlikely to be captured and explained through singular theoretical perspectives and conceptual lenses (Zolfagharian et al., 2019). Indeed, Turnheim et al. (2015: 246) emphasise that "it is only by connecting insights from different approaches and cross-examining transitions through their combined perspectives that we may reach a more robust understanding of sustainability transitions". Acknowledging that our approach does not (nor can) fall squarely into any existing disciplinary perspective, we apply a mixed-methods, interdisciplinary approach to examine the change processes that incurred both during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, and to better understand the role of individual and contextual structural changes. We thus apply a multi-layered approach allowing us to identify patterns in the change processes.

Systems of provision (SoP)

By linking consumption practices to structures, this paper examines the interplay between practices and structures in the context of a disrupted system. A social system's cyclical and reinforcing relationship gives way to what [Spaargaren and Van Vliet \(2000\)](#) call the 'duality of structure', which permits certain practices and lifestyles and inhibits others. *Lifestyles* here refer to the form of integration during the process of actors' binding (sets of) social practices into a reasonably coherent unit, and are informed by discursive and practical consciousness, that is, the ability to express knowledge and enact knowledgeability in everyday life ([Giddens, 1991](#)). Acknowledging the forces of existing structures, [Spaargaren and Van Vliet \(2000, 63\)](#) posit that perceived agency determines the "transformative capacity... and could explain the dynamics of systems of provision".

More generally, SoP underpin consumption practices, situating them in relation to production and distribution practices ([Bayliss and Fine, 2020: 29](#)), which are relevant to this paper. Following [Fine and Bayliss \(2020\)](#) and [Fine et al. \(2018\)](#), we understand SoP as the structuring mechanism linking production, distribution, and consumption practices. Providing a sufficiently broad concept that views economic activities as embedded within broader social systems, SoP recognise the social and economic organisation of consumption opportunities ([Fine et al., 2018](#)). We further highlight the dialectic relationship between context specific determinants (e.g. consumption opportunities) and lifestyles informed by practical consciousness (e.g. environmental motivation) embedded within a complex system that, together, informs practices ([Spaargaren and Van Vliet, 2000](#)).

Existing structures reinforce and perpetuate unsustainable consumption practices, which remain locked into prevailing path dependencies ([Boström and Klintman, 2019](#)). As argued previously, changing these patterns and structures requires significant efforts at multiple levels ([Markard et al., 2020](#)), if the goal is to ensure long-term, sustainable change. For instance, at the micro-level, consumer practices are influenced by peoples' lifestyle choices (e.g. aspirations to follow fashion trends), which are tied to wider structures including existing barriers and enablers ([Röpke, 2009](#)). At the meso-level, a multitude of actors, consumer environments, and other factors similarly and simultaneously influence consumption practices (cf. [Spaargaren and Van Vliet, 2000](#)). At the macro-level, policies and regulation can produce a context in which social life not only unfolds but that changes the structure within which the practices are embedded ([Giddens, 1984](#)). Our integrative approach is therefore intentionally synthetic, combining interdisciplinary perspectives to bridge micro-level agency and macro-level structures.

We follow the notion that the COVID-19 pandemic induced a significant shock to everyday structures. Interested in the interplay between SoP and agency, we examine whether this 'avalanche' event to the system uprooted or 'unlocked' sustainable consumption practices in the short- and longer term. We chose Brazil's middle-class as our context for its fast growing (over)consumption practices and to address the Global North bias in the literature.

Methods and study objectives

Study design and data collection

Our research followed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design to data collection and analysis (Elf, 2023; Ivankova et al., 2006), consisting of two stages with a quantitative stage preceding a qualitative stage as illustrated in Figure 2. The analytical approach consists of a number of sequential, systematic steps. Quantitative data were collected through surveys during April 2020 covering the only period during which all Brazilian states introduced confinement measures¹.

For the first leg of data, collected during the lockdown in April 2020 (Study 1.1 and 1.2), we recruited participants following a snowball sampling method, that is, a non-probability sampling technique where existing study participants assisted in identifying additional participants (Moniruzzaman and AL-Muaalemi, 2022) with survey questions examining consumption practices resulting from the disruption of everyday practices². Participants had to be 18 or older and were offered no financial incentive. The survey included open-ended questions to allow further exploration of disruption to people’s everyday lives and, in particular, consumption practices caused by the pandemic and the confinement measures during the initial lockdown period. Responses were short but provided complementary insights.

Following a first data screening and removal of incomplete questionnaires, the final sample consisted of 947 responses from five geographical regions in Brazil. We targeted our data collection at metropolitan regions, typically comprising more people with greater purchasing power and wealth accumulation and greater consumption opportunities (Euromonitor, 2023). Around two-third of the respondents were female ($n = 624$, 65.8%), one third male ($n = 322$, 34%), and 0.2% ($n = 2$) preferred not to state their gender. The mean age was 40.72 (SD = 12.65) and the median monthly income category after taxes was between R\$5000.00 and R\$7000.00 (approx. £770 and £1077), which is above the national average (Statista, 2023; see also Góes and Karpowicz, 2017). Educational levels were higher than the national average with the vast majority either having already obtained or currently in the process of obtaining post-graduate degrees ($n = 656$, 69.2%). The

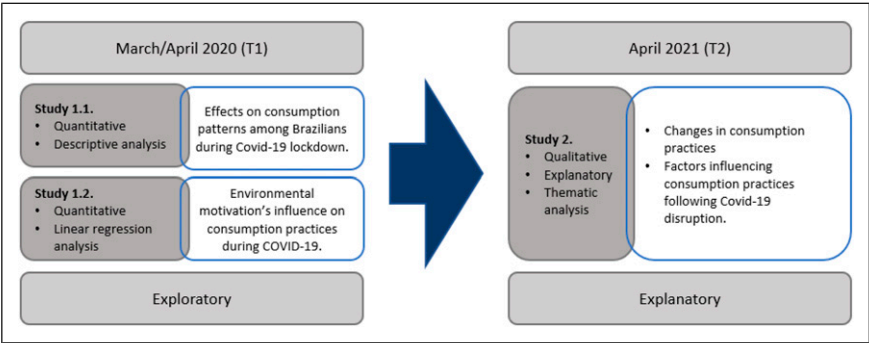


Figure 2. Sequential explanatory mixed-methods design to data collection and analysis.

survey questions asked about lifestyles, including consumption practices, discursive and practical consciousness as well as motivations informing practice change, people’s intentions and questions related to structural factors.

Survey respondents who indicated their willingness to be recontacted were invited to take part in a second survey during April 2021³ that comprised open-ended questions which allowed us to further explore changes in consumption practices 1 year into the pandemic. This time, participants completing the survey were offered the opportunity to take part in a price draw to win one of eight vouchers worth R\$200 (approx. £30).⁴

Measures

The dependent variable (pro-environmental practices) during quarantine was measured with eight self-reported practices (e.g. “During the pandemic, I gave preference to locally produced food.”) with Cronbach’s alpha = .826. The independent variable, ‘environmental motivation’, was measured with three items on a five-point Likert scale where participants were asked to indicate their agreement (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree; example item: ‘We need to consume less to preserve the environment to maintain a balance between humanity and nature to ensure the future of species including ours’) with Cronbach’s alpha = .690.

Analytical approach

First, we calculated descriptive statistics of the dependent and independent variables (Table 1), followed by a multiple linear regression using the stepwise model (Table 2) (Field, 2013) to analyse relationships between self-reported environmental practices, age, education level, and income.

For the second leg in April 2021 (Study 2), we followed a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2021) to provide greater depth to our analysis and to corroborate data (Saldaña, 2015). Qualitative follow-up data were analysed following Braun and Clarke’s (2021) original six phases thematic analysis approach, providing a multifaceted account of data analysis aimed to uncover patterns and regularities. Following an iterative process, the data were eventually grouped into themes.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of dependent and independent variables.

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Pro-environmental practices	3.0554	.922	946
Environmental motivation	4.3601	.640	946
Monthly income after taxes	4.82	2.101	946
Education level	6.12	1.232	946
Age	40.72	12.652	946

Table 2. Multiple step-wise regression results explaining variance in pro-environmental practices during quarantine.

	β	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence interval for β	
(Constant)		.251	.802	-.348	.450
Environmental motivation	.372	12.719	.000**	.454	.619
Age	.224	7.655	.000**	.012	.021

**Significant with $p < .000$.

Findings

The uprooting and reorganising of consumption practices during intense periods of change

Effects on consumption patterns among Brazilians during COVID-19 lockdown. In Study 1.1., we observed two main changes. Firstly, respondents reported significant shifts from shopping practices in physical locations such as department stores, shopping centres and restaurants (Figure 3) to purchasing products online using applications such as WhatsApp or other messaging services due to social distancing measures during the lockdown period (Figure 4). The majority of respondents indicated that they worked from home either ‘always’ (52.1%) or ‘most of the time’ (17.9%) during the initial lockdown period.

Secondly, and linked to earlier insights, online purchases from supermarkets and home delivery increased drastically (+419%), providing fertile ground for digital alternatives to

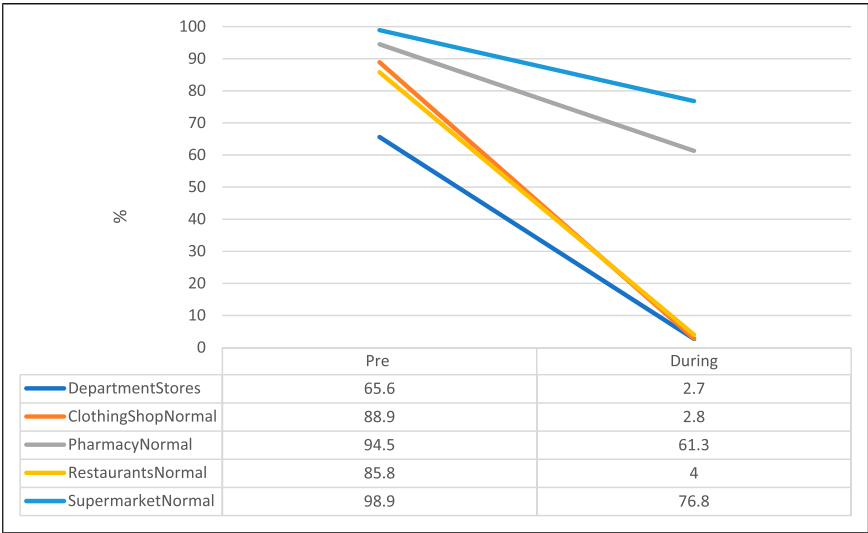


Figure 3. Changes in consumption practices in physical locations.

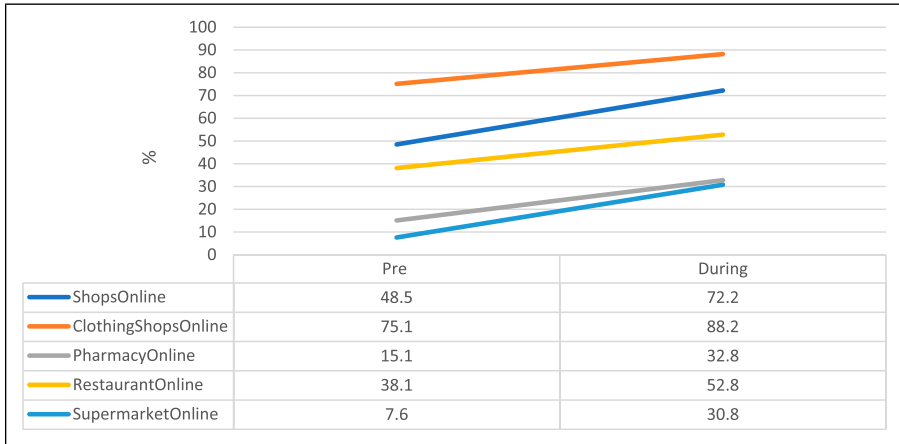


Figure 4. Changes in online consumption practices.

gain importance as part of people's consumption practices and replacing physical SoP. This is in line with findings from [Chiu et al. \(2020\)](#), [Guthrie et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Wethal et al. \(2022\)](#) who all highlight the role of digital platforms in maintaining socio-economic activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, we also observed a reduction of consumption in the areas of buying clothes (−62.9%) and buying meals out (−81.8%), indicating a disruption of purchasing habits in the respective area.

Our analysis shows that the vast majority of respondents (94.3%) believed that the lockdown would help to rethink existing consumption practices. In addition, participants 'agreed' (23.5%) or 'strongly agreed' (70.4%) that they need to consume less to preserve the environment, underlining a potential rethinking of consumption practices ([Severo et al., 2021](#)).

Conversely, they showed a strong willingness to reduce their impact on the environment (agree = 20.2%, strongly agree = 74.1%), pointing towards changes in practical consciousness ([Spaargaren and Van Vliet, 2000](#)). The majority of respondents also indicated their willingness to pay more for brands and products that are committed to social and environmental wellbeing (agree = 45.5%, strongly agree = 26.8%). Relevant here, [Severo et al. \(2021\)](#) previously found an increase in environmental awareness among Brazilian citizens and changes in existing consumption habits, providing evidence for the disruption's potential to trigger environmental concern and awareness that can lead to lifestyle changes.

Taken together, the disruption of the SoP seemingly caused an uprooting of existing practices, initially opening-up a reflective space (cf. [Aboelenien et al., 2021](#)) that, in theory, provided fertile ground for wider, potentially long-term shifts towards more sustainable consumption practices.

Environmental motivations influence sustainable practices during the avalanche event. In Study 1.2., we analysed how environmental motivation influenced environmental practices during the COVID-19 restrictions using a multiple linear regression and the stepwise model ([Field, 2013](#)). All assumptions for a stepwise regression were met. The final model

was significant with $F(2, 943) = 112.39, p < .001$, with an $R^2 = .191$. That is, 19.1% of the pro-environmental practices during the quarantine are predicted by motivation for pro-environmental practices and age during the quarantine. This supports the notion that the shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic as an avalanche event *can* operate as means to wider changes in practices and lifestyles during the period of disruption. However, as stressed by Rosenbloom (2017), these changes might be transient and depend on the prevailing societal regime, representing incumbent technologies, institutions, and actors during sustainability transitions. Further, while we found a link between motivation and self-reported practices, these relationships may not always translate into consistent change in practices, highlighting an attitude-action gap (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002) that adds important nuance to the interpretation of our findings.

Factors influencing (un)sustainable consumption following disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

To gain a deeper understanding of the long-term changes to practices and wider lifestyles, we collected qualitative data from the survey respondents 1 year later in April 2021 (Study 2). We identified two key themes in the thematic analysis: (1) the role of online shopping and (2) the role of individuals' agency to change during disruption-induced shifts in consumption practices. In the following, we provide an overview of the findings using text extracts representative of the wider sample.

The role of emerging online SoP. Findings show that besides a societal disruption at scale, existing and emerging SoP facilitated the expansion of online shopping among Brazilian middle-class consumers, allowing them to sustain established consumption routines:

I started to buy a lot more via online delivery, even clothes and other things that are not food items, because before only food was purchased by delivery by me. (female, Alagoas)

The reported increase in online purchases could be explained by experiences of wellbeing and comfort associated with digital consumption, especially at times of precarity (Frid et al., 2024). Moreover, and related to the notion of wellbeing, respondents consumed for hedonic reasons to experience both pleasurable and meaningful feelings induced through purchases (Molesworth et al., 2024):

Staying longer indoors and, with so much bad news, I decided to invest in things for myself. (male, Minas Gerais)

Following the disruption, the newly emerging everyday life and its consumption *decisions* were influenced by available consumption *opportunities* within the context offered by structural factors (Spaargaren and Van Vliet, 2000), which are often dominated by incumbent actors and existing societal regimes (Rosenbloom, 2017). Here, the increased availability of online marketplaces, as emerging SoP, and digital offerings thus provided both a 'path of least resistance' and, potentially, a source of inertia. This allowed consumers to quickly revert back to and potentially even perpetuate unsustainable socio-

technical systems via reconfiguring of the meaning and material as well as competences to accommodate new settings (Spaargaren and Van Vliet, 2000):

The main change with regard to my consumption practices was making purchases over the internet. There was a significant increase due to greater convenience and lower prices. (female, Minas Gerais)

Driven by frictionless shopping experiences and cost implications, initial motivations to consume more sustainably, as observed in Study 1 1 year prior, were abandoned and/or replaced by online and digital offerings.

The role of agency during disruption-induced shifts in consumption practices. In contrast to the dynamics that debilitated or outright restricted certain practices during the pandemic, the COVID-19 lockdowns and associated disruptions were experienced by some respondents as supportive in changing their consumption practices. For instance, some reported that the disruptions helped them to act more in line with their environmental motivation reported at the beginning of the pandemic (Study 1.2):

We greatly reduced consumption in our home due to the family's budget constraints. This is also reflected in the reorganisation of the family space and the donation and selling of stuff that we did not use or needed. We started to consciously consume better between what is essential and what is a desire based on pure consumption. My impulse purchases have decreased dramatically. (...) We give priority to consume locally and from smaller businesses. (male, Alagoas)

The restrictions imposed on people's lives offered a moment to pause. This reflective space permitted to reorganise their everyday lives and, as stated, consciously consume better in an attempt to avoid unsustainable purchasing as demonstrated by the above text extract.

Moreover, respondents engaged in agentic reconfigurations of consumption practices for reasons of compassion with the aim to help smaller businesses:

I bought items without the need for immediate consumption, just to help. (male, Pernambuco)

This can be interpreted as an attempt to enact and experience agency, and to act on motivations to do good. Notably, during moments of intense change, actors experience agency as often unstable and fluctuating (cf. Hébert et al., 2016). While disruptions can foster reflective practices as observed previously, which practices are eventually executed by and large depends on the existing SoP and support offered by other individuals (i.e. bottom-up change processes) and other societal agents on meso and meta-levels (i.e. top-down change processes) (Spaargaren and Van Vliet, 2000).

Discussion

In this paper, we set out to explore if and how the COVID-19 pandemic as disruptive avalanche event (Suarez and Oliva, 2005) acted as a catalyst for a shift towards more

sustainable consumption practices in the Brazilian context. Indeed, recent research has suggested that COVID-19-related lockdown measures may have altered consumption patterns and people's attitudes toward consumption (Aboelenien et al., 2021; Greene et al., 2022; Kwon et al., 2022). Having caused rapid and drastic change on multiple dimensions (Chiu et al., 2020), data from a lockdown period and follow-up data 1 year later were employed to explore whether the large-scale, societal disruption facilitated a transition towards more sustainable consumption practices in Brazil.

Going beyond most studies of disruptive events, we were interested in the *durability* of shifts in consumption practices among Brazilian middle-class consumers. While acknowledging the role of individual agency, we resist reducing our analysis to the level of individual practices alone. Instead, we examine how systems and individuals interact during the interregnum and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 disruption—processes through which existing consumer practices were either reinforced or reorganised.

By using a mixed-methods approach to assess the potential of the COVID-19 pandemic as disruptive event to change unsustainable consumption patterns in Brazil as Global South context, we employ an integrative approach that is intentionally synthetic, combining perspectives from disciplines to bridge micro-level agency and macro-level structures. Our findings make a novel contribution to the wider sustainable consumption literature (Hayward and Roy, 2019). In Study 1, we explored changes in consumption practices during the initial COVID-19 lockdowns in April 2020, surveying 947 respondents from across Brazil. Our findings demonstrate that the extensive lockdown and quarantine measures *temporarily* disrupted existing consumption practices through an uprooting from the existing mash of parts that constitute the wider practice. This can be explained by changes in the existing SoP in the form of shifts from physical consumer contexts (i.e. stores) to online consumer environments and the initial opening-up of a reflective space (cf. Aboelenien et al., 2021). The reflective space facilitated a broader consumer engagement in pro-environmental practices linked to their reported pro-environmental motivations. In line with Spaargaren and Van Vliet (2000), this indicated changes or reifications (Giddens, 1991) in the interplay between structure and action (i.e. a 'duality of structure') with consumers rejecting unsustainable consumption opportunities.

The findings suggest that the COVID-19 lockdowns provided a significant disruption and made pro-environmental motivation more salient. As discussed previously, this could be explained by the opportunity for reflection that the COVID-19 disruption provided, allowing consumers to contemplate and reorganise their existing consumption patterns (Aboelenien et al., 2021). Linked to this insight, our findings also contribute to growing evidence suggesting that disruptive events like the COVID-19 pandemic *can* lead to changes in consumption practices (Severo et al., 2021). This may be through an increase in environmental awareness and the opportunity to reflect and, eventually, consider adjustments to unsustainable practices.

While it might be tempting to interpret some respondents' accounts as indicative of a moral awakening (cf. Molesworth et al., 2024), and thereby overstate the transformative potential of such moments, our evidence instead highlights the transient nature of this disruption. Indeed, whereas the COVID-19 pandemic "has revealed a need for and an opportunity to create system transformations that many people were unaware of before the

pandemic” (Waddock, 2025), structures continue to pose significant barriers to far reaching changes.

Differing from most existing research, our longitudinal approach permitted an examination of longer-term changes through a second, qualitative data collection and analysis. Conducted 1 year later, the study drew on data from a sub-sample of the same participants. Adding to the emergent insights, findings demonstrate that Brazilian consumers were able to widely maintain intensive consumer practices through an emerging online marketplace and digital offerings. Here, the observed shift to preferring locally produced food provides an example (cf. Forno et al., 2022). Moreover, whereas we found a strong motivation to minimise environmental impacts among respondents as well as a heightened awareness to consume differently, our research allowed for a more nuanced understanding of change processes through the inclusion of qualitative data as part of the sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. The initial increase in environmental motivation seemingly faded rapidly due to the emergence of digital SoP that allowed consumers to engage in (unsustainable) consumption practices similar to consumers’ pre-pandemic lifestyles. Similarly, earlier work by Spaargaren and Van Vliet (2000) – conducted in a non-disruptive context – showed that, once connected to digital services, consumers often become ‘captive consumers’ which can cause potentially far-reaching implications for *additional*, unsustainable consumption through the greater access to products and services (Guthrie et al., 2021).

Notably, findings from our quantitative study (Study 1.2) suggest that much of the pro-environmental actions observed during the lockdown stemmed from pre-existing environmental motivations that were activated through the disruption of previously dominant, habitual practices. Qualitative findings provided complementary insights, showing that not all the respondents maintained their *unsustainable* consumption practices. Instead, newly adopted sustainable consumption practices remained active beyond the initial lockdown, and even 1 year later in some instances.

Overall, findings are therefore mixed, and, in our sample, we did not observe a clear tendency towards either sustainable or unsustainable consumption. Importantly, our insights point to the importance of structures *and* people’s agency over practices and lifestyles (cf. Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014), demonstrating the complexity and often challenging nature of (un)sustainable consumption practices as well as the multitude of factors influencing them. Hence, whereas disruptions can uproot existing practices, a permanent shift towards sustainable consumption *at scale* demands joint action across sectors and transformational system change, including governmental interventions (Prothero et al., 2011), pro-active engagement of non-state environmental authorities (Spaargaren and Mol, 2008) and businesses (Elf et al., 2020, 2025). These insights align with existing research that stresses the importance of interactions between societal actors (e.g. Macário et al., 2021). Such interactions are essential for enabling strong sustainable consumption practices and for actively involving consumers in transitions to co-create change across societal levels. This approach helps to disrupt endogenous economic path dependencies (Wilson, 2013). This, in turn, requires transition pathways that combine top-down (e.g. state-led) and bottom-up (e.g. civil society-led) transformations (Scoones et al., 2015) towards a low-carbon future, which is grounded in visions for less resource intensive lifestyles (Isham et al., 2024).

Besides the mixed results, emerging markets in the Global South such as Brazil have large consumer segments that change more rapidly than in the Global North. Hence, whereas the lack of progress with regards to a lasting shift towards more sustainable consumption practices can partly be explained by the dominant cultural norms of intense and intensifying consumption practices as demonstrated by previous empirical work (Barbosa and Veloso, 2014; Schäfer et al., 2011), there is also potential to pro-actively drive change. Indeed, our results point to the potential of bottom-up change at the micro level, demonstrating that individuals and households hold agency that can change relationships between structures and actors, besides dominating consumer cultures. Furthermore, building on the assumption that human systems can never return to their original state after disturbance due to social learning processes and social memory (Magis, 2010), there is hope that these processes are *not* temporary but can be understood as symptoms of deeper processes of change.

Limitations and future research

This research has multiple limitations. First, the data was collected from a convenience sample rather than a representative sample, limiting the generalisability of the findings. Second, the data only includes self-reported practices and motivation. This also means that reported environmental motivation may not fully align with actual practices, highlighting a potential attitude-action gap (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002) that future research could explore more critically. Furthermore, a limitation *and* strength of our research is that it looks at a growing middle-class that represents a population segment that has shown to emit more carbon (e.g. Wiedenhofer et al., 2017). That is, whereas it is not representative of the overall population in Brazil, it provides crucial insights into consumption practices of those that hold the financial means to consume (un)sustainably. Second, the qualitative data was taken from a subset of the sample that responded during the initial, quantitative survey research, which might have introduced a self-selection bias and underrepresent other perspectives including people who are less interested in sustainable consumption practices.

Lastly, whereas we looked at sustainable consumption practices as just one example, research has shown that changes in one area can spill over into other behavioural domains *if the necessary support is given* (e.g., Elf et al., 2019; Henn et al., 2025; Verfuëth and Gregory-Smith, 2018). To allow more sustainable consumption practices to enter the mainstream, a greater focus on a socio-cultural and socio-political transition seems urgently required that challenges materialism (Isham et al., 2022) and capitalist hegemony more widely. We encourage future research to explore these dynamics in more detail and challenge the often taken-for-granted assumption of capitalist consumerism as both driving force and foundation for current and future economic systems, in an attempt to articulate visions of social, economic and environmental prosperity (cf. Jackson, 2017).

Conclusion

Whereas the COVID-19 pandemic caused significant disruptions to existing lifestyles and consumption practices, this did *not* automatically lead to a shift to more lasting,

sustainable consumption practices among Brazilians over time. Instead, long-term change will depend on support mechanisms that can cement more sustainable practices. As such, SoP that enable longer-term change must be critically assessed and carefully managed to facilitate a sustainability transition commensurate with the urgency of the challenge. Above all, our study calls for far-reaching and immediate action, requiring sustained commitment across all levels of society.

Our findings show that successfully implementing and maintaining sustainable consumption practices demands more than temporary disruptions through e.g. avalanche effects, reflective spaces, or individuals' motivation to change. Rather, it highlights the necessity for systemic transformations and structural change. A commitment to individual *and* systemic transformational change is required to establish and maintain levels of sustainable consumption needed to stay within planetary boundaries. Our results therefore hint towards a seemingly insufficient disruption – especially to political and business logics and practices. Consequently, the urgently needed transition towards more sustainable consumption and lifestyles is only possible if people's motivation and agency are enabled through systemic change supported by both private and public sector actors, reflecting a genuine commitment to addressing unsustainable consumer cultures.

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Ethical considerations

We herewith declare that the research received Ethics Approval (Project ID 14734) from the Middlesex University Ethics Committee and adhere to ethical guidelines promoting integrity in research and its publication.

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Declaration of conflicting interests

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Data Availability Statement

All data will be made available upon request.

Notes

1. During the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, social distancing measures were introduced through a decentralised system allowing each state and municipality to follow different approaches (De Moraes, 2020). Whereas governmental responses between states and the level of compliance by Brazilians citizens have varied significantly, the majority of all states and municipalities adopted

far-reaching measures during the second half of March and early April 2020 including quarantine guidelines, the closure of most businesses, and additional health guidelines (e.g. wearing of facial masks, frequent cleaning of hands) (De Moraes, 2020).

2. NB: To provide a high level of homogeneity across the data, we stopped the data collection with the resignation of the then former Minister of Justice and Public Security Sergio Moro, which led to a shift in media attention and potentially could have influenced the results.
3. Please note that some Brazilian states ordered shorter lockdowns during April. To avoid differences in experiences among the possible respondents, we waited until the social distancing measures were removed.
4. Upon completion, participants had to indicate if they either want to receive a voucher from Mercado Livre (an online platform similar to Amazon; i.e., the unsustainable consumption option), donate their voucher to WWF Brazil to help stop deforestation (i.e., the environmentally sustainable consumption option), or to 'Habitat para a Humanidade Brasil' ('Habitat for Humanity Brazil'; i.e., the socially sustainable consumption option). Overall, 68 out of 226 (30.09%) recontacted participants responded with 53 of them indicating that they want to take part in the prize draw. 24.53% chose the environmentally sustainable option, while 32.07% opted for the socially sustainable option. The remaining 43.4% decided to receive a voucher for Mercado Livre.

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