Consumer's Justification Towards (Un)Sustainable Consumption: Exploring Attitudes Among Urmia Citizens, Iran

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Consumer's Justification Towards (Un)Sustainable Consumption: Exploring Attitudes Among Urmia Citizens, Iran. This study argues that individuals' consumption patterns should be considered as consequences of the production and reproduction of the public sphere settings that are affected by dominant social, political and cultural structures. Hence, we are aimed to study how a combination of social and individual mechanisms influences (un)sustainable consumption behaviors? The purposive sampling was utilized and data was generated from 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews in Urmia, Iran. Data analyzing revealed 17 subcategories and five main categories including faded trust, deliberate negligence, commoditized human bonding, material self-identification and mental discharge that finally lead to the nuclear category of the study; *reflexive consumption*. Each main extracted category corresponds to one aspect of consumption. By studying socio-individual reasons for the dominant consumption patterns, this study contributes to obtaining a better understanding of the impacts of social mechanisms in creating (un)sustainable consumption patterns among the target sample.

Introduction

Iran as a developing country and rich in the natural environment, underground reserves and climate variation currently is faced with severe environmental degradation. Although its' unsustainable culture of socio-economic development has had a major role in causing current damages (Laylin 2018; LMEI[4] report 2016), however some other socio-political factors such as dramatic population growth, devastating war in 1980, United States-led sanctions, non-sufficient public and academic education and executive mismanagements should also be considered in the evaluation of the current unsustainability.

Tahbaz (2016) argued that the 1980s war caused all the resources of the country to focus on defending the land, therefore this left little space for environmental protection. After the war ended, reconstruction of the country and economic growth was the dominant discourse in the country and once again, environmental and natural resources protection has not been the priority of the state, nor for individuals.

Notwithstanding the Constitution in Article 50 explicitly states environmental protection as a "public obligation" and forbids "all activities, economic or otherwise, which may cause irreversible damage to the environment" (Afrasiabi 2003), in practice, there has not been willingness to do so and its outcomes have been appearing in the last two decades. Laylin (2018) criticizes that while conservation theory is taught at universities, no attention is paid to conservation management in the Iranian political discourse. Drying lakes (for instance Lake Urmia, Hamoun Lake) rivers (the most famous is Zayanderud river) and wetlands (18 wetlands that are completely dried up across the country), polluted water and air (Ebadi et al. 2020) (in 2016, Zabol, a southeast city in Iran was the most polluted city in the world[5]) polluted agricultural land (due to using untreated sewage to agricultural irrigation and excessive use of pesticides), deforestation and desertification, accumulated trash in the suburbs are some major socio-environmental crises and difficulties of the country that have gradually impacted Iranians life socially and individually.

By increasing consumer power, the role of the individual consumer is becoming a pivotal role and numerous studies have confirmed the threats of current consumption patterns of goods and services for future generations (Wang et al. 2014). While we already know that daily consumption patterns are shaped within structural-natural order and represent collective interaction settings (Wilk 1998) the "resource-intensive lifestyle" of people has been recognized as the main cause of environmental degradation (Tirpathi – Singh 2016). As a result, newly, we have witnessed a great emphasis on the consumers' ability to create social changes through consumption choices (Jenner 1994; Keat et al. 1994) and consumers' duty instead of consumer rights (Jacobson – Dulsrud 2007). Hence, ethical or sustainable consumption is mentioned as the duties of responsible consumers (De Pelsmacker et al. 2005).

Ethically-oriented considerations that have gained increasing importance in the consumption sphere refer to a range of actions that support society and the environment (Stolle – Huissond 2019; Gulyas 2008; Shaw – Newholm 2003). It encompasses a range of concerns to protect natural resources, redefine produce regulations in favour of society, nature and labour force as well as is aimed to bring social equality and welfare for a wide range of people. Through

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[5] For more information see https://weather.com/science/environment/news/2017-10-23-pollution-zabol-iran-most-polluted-ambient-air-diseases-deaths.

regulations, responsibilities and values, ethical concerns find a way to influence consumer's decision makings. Buycotting, boycotting, fair-trade movements, discursive and voluntary simplicity lifestyles according to Micheletti et al. (2005) and Boström et al. (2019) and anti-consumerism and relational purchasing according to Harrison et al. (2005) are different aspects of ethically-socially responsible patterns that are taken by conscious consumers to mitigate the effects of damages caused by consumption to society and the environment. In choosing a product a responsible consumer may be affected by political, religious, spiritual, environmental and social motivations and is always concerned about the consequences of his/her decisions not only on the other's social life but also on the planet as a whole. Given the pre-mentioned socio-environmental challenges and their consequences on Iranian lives, this study aims to identify the impacts of non-individual factors that influence consumers' decision making.

Consumption in Theory and Practice

Consumption in literature
Historically, Veblen (1898), Simmel (1957), Weber (1958) and Marx (1992) are classic sociologists who carefully studied and analysed the subject of consumption and its social appearances. For instance, conspicuous consumption, which was coined by Veblen (1898), showed how the upper classes determine their pecuniary and status distinctions by consuming expensive and luxurious goods and services. Based on this idea, Simmel (1957) indicated that middle and low-classes imitate the consumption styles of the upper classes. Similarly, Weber and Marx considered the relationships between consumption as well as personal and social identities, the establishment of social connections, social status, and absurd looks at life. They also conceptualized this relation in a way giving meaning to consumption and in general by postulating "alienation of human being".

Likewise, later social scholars such as Boström et al. (2019) Moor and Balsiger (2018), Micheletti and Stolle (2012), Koos (2012), Micheletti (2003), Jackson (2005), Beck (1992), Bourdieu (1984), Lasch (1979) and Ewen (1976) have also tried to find a relationship between consumption and socio individual representations. Jackson (2005) believes while we are confined by what others think, say and do many social-psychological models define a personal approach to human behavior. Hence, some social theories declare that our behaviors, attitudes and even our comprehension of ourselves are made socially or even these are plunged into a complicated 'social logic' (Baudrillard 1970). Having reviewed the literature, we recognized three main factors in the past, which simultaneously increase the level of consumption in society and lead to

negative socio-environmental consequences. These factors are looking for novelty, identity and symbolism.

Novelty and rapidity are two influential factors in determining consumer motivation in the glamorous world that we are living in now (Boström 2020). Due to the dynamics of modern consumption, novelty plays a central role and broadly influences the economy and business. Hirschman (1980) defines this as "the desire to seek out the new and different". Also, novelty gives us significant information about people's social status through, for instance, having a faster car or a bigger house. Victor Lebow[6] (1955) argues that our productive economy forces us to turn buying and consuming goods into a ritual, to search for spiritual satisfaction in consumption, and to seek self-esteem through various consumption. Since people are always under permanent social comparison, companies have to bring new designs and products and are forced to follow materialistic consumerism to survive in the market. This pressure to survive requires more and more consumers to purchase various and novel goods. Under this social context, economic permanency depends on economic growth, and therefore "Iron cage of consumerism" is a system that does not let anyone free (Jackson 2013).

Ewen (1976) depicted modern consumption as the "dream of identity". In his argument, modern life has become very anonymous and people are fragmented. Hence, they seek objects and goods to fill up their internal emptiness. This means creating some sort of a "commodity self". Jackson (2005) argued there is a consensus in modern society: consumption is severely connected to personal and collective identity and modern consumption theories argue that it is a way to build personal and social identities (Haanpaa 2007). In line with this, Giddens (1991) refers to 'dilemmas of the self' which are caused by the ever-expanding options of choosing consumer goods and Kelly (1992) mentions reflections between the process of ever-restoration of identity and the changeable and impermanent nature of modern goods.

Many researchers have considered symbolic consumption from different points of view since 1980 (Barthes 1973; Dittmar 1992; Lee 2013; Sun et al. 2014). Jackson (2005: 14) argues that "we value goods for what they represent to us and others". Luna-Cortés (2017) categorizes the symbolic role of goods into three categories: sociological, communicational and perception. From the sociological point of view, scholars (e.g. Dittmar 1992) consider that consumers perceive the meanings of products based on other people's opinions. From the communicational point of view, Lee (2013) focuses on the capacity of some products to communicate aspects related to the consumer's identity. He believes that when individuals use consumption and its meaning in

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[6] http://www.ablemesh.co.uk/PDFs/journal-of-retailing1955.pdf

communication, we can see symbolic consumption. And in the perception point of view, for instance, based on Sun et al. (2014), we have a complete definition of symbolic consumption, when considering it as a conceptualization of the consumer's perception of products and brands to acquire, create, preserve and present their identities. The symbolic role of goods means that in social relations shaped in modern societies, people try to express themselves by their possessions.

Since 1990 we have been confronted with a new branch of consumption patterns that have been created to protect society and the environment through alternative innovative ways. This trend has labeled ethical consumption and includes conscious decisions to buy (buycotting) or not to buy (boycotting) specific products or services for ethical, environmental, or social reasons (Graziano – Francesca 2012; Stolle et al. 2005). A wide range of intentions including ecology, nationalistic and religious concerns can lead to this kind of consumerism (Stolle – Huissoud 2019) and according to (Jacobsen – Dulsrud 2007), variation in markets, governance structure and political and cultural histories, regarding this type of consumption, act differently in every country. The prevalent conceptualization of the phenomenon tells us that ethical consumption has been considered mostly as a set of motivations trying to protect society and the environment in the absence of institutional protective arrangements. Accordingly, Strong (1997), recognizes ethical consumption as a form of protest or reaction for those interested in social and environmental issues such as environmental degradation, social justice and labour force in developing societies. A considerable amount of research has usually investigated the impacts of a set of individual factors as significant determinants of ethical consumption (Andorfer 2013) while a few important studies have considered the impact of sociocultural context in providing opportunities for and constraints on ethical consumerism (Summers 2016).

Social scholars such as Giddens (1984), Bourdieu (1984), and Spaargaren (2003), argue that in the agent-structure continuum there is an intermediate level that daily practices occur within this level. They explain how rather than the agency, every practice is affected by the social structure that surrounds it. Similar to this, Jacobson and Dulsrud (2007) indicated that certain characteristics of countries and regions constrain consumption practices and Summers (2016) argued that economic, political and cultural characteristics of social contexts powerfully shape consumption cultures and encourage consumers to create social changes (Giddens 1991; Beck 1997; 2000; Micheletti 2003). The literature on ethical consumption reveals that although the impacts of individual-level factors such as income, age, gender, education and social capital or psychological attributes such as values, norms, attitudes have been investigated on the shaping of ethical consumerism nevertheless, the

influence of social context, political structure and culture as contextual forces is yet underestimated in the mainstream (Summers 2016). This study argues that individuals' consumption patterns should be considered as consequences of the production and reproduction of public sphere settings that are affected by dominant social, political and cultural dominant structures. One Analytical framework to investigate this issue in the Iranian context according to Cherrier (2007) is a dualistic approach. In her classification, Cherrie argues every ethical consumption decision is affected by both individual characteristics and social constraints and determinants. By studying social reasons for dominant consumption patterns, this study contributes to obtaining a better understanding of the impacts of society in creating (un)sustainable consumption patterns.

Consumption profile in Iran
Food and energy are the two sectors that impose the most waste on Iranian society. Twenty-five million tons of wasted or lost food in Iran every year, is sufficient to overcome the malnutrition problem across the country (Fami Hosseini et al. 2019). Iranians also produce more than 5,000 tons of wastes per day (Tahbaz, 2016) while between the years 2016 to 2018, GDP growth declined from 13.4 percent to 3.8 percent[7]. The energy consumption rate is another critical issue. Regarding energy issue, per capita, energy consumption is three times higher than the global level (Iranian Student News Agency 2017) and despite the limited resources, by 3,707 liters per person, Iran is ranked as the eighth-most water consuming country in the world[8]. The country is also located in the list of the top 10 countries that consume the highest amount of simple-use plastics in the world.

Existence literature on Iranians' pro-environmental behaviors has focused on the impacts of relevant variables such as attitudes, values, knowledge, concern, demographic variables, social capital as well as social and institutional trust (Salehi 2009; Karimzadeh 2010; Maleki – Karimzadeh 2011; Salehi et al. 2015). A bulk of previous research generally emphasized the role of an individual's decisions and applied a psychological approach to explain Iranians' consumption profile. As a result, social factors that through individual mechanisms might be led to unethical or unsustainable consumption are not yet clear from a sociological point of view. Hence, this study criticizes previous reductionism and tries to provide a socio-structural argument to explain consumers' decision makings rather than psycho-individual explanations. Among the very few studies, Zokaie (2012), from a sociological perspective, analyzed the motivations of Iranian youth's lifestyle and consumption patterns

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[7] World Bank Group report, 2018, http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/676781543436287317/pdf/Iran Economic Monitor-Weathering-Economic-Challenges.pdf
[8] https://www.worldometers.info/water/

and argued that consumption acts as an instrument of recreating the social distinction and simultaneously changing the old rules. In his argument, consumption applies to time killing, sharing experience, self-expression and distinction for the Iranian youth. He concludes that there is no trace of social responsibility or sustainability in this way of consumption.

In the other study, Karimzadeh et al. (2019) argued that this kind of consumption among Iranian citizens is influenced by some specific incentives and inhibitors. Incentives usually originate from health-oriented motivations while inhibitors stem from individuals' dissatisfaction with institutional and social structures. They indicated that being sustainable in real life is not a core concern for consumers. Rather than environmental motivations, their consumption is more affected by social, cultural and financial determinants. They explain that Iranians are stuck in the paradoxical way of consumption. When it comes to their health, they try to be conscious consumers but when it comes to social, environmental, or collective issues, the priority has been given to personal vested interests.

Afrasiabi (2003), in the other survey that is specifically related to the environmental movements and activists in Iran, indicates that Iranian green activists implied that environmentally-oriented behaviors in Iran are influenced by political issues, human rights, democracy, crisis management and peace issues. The main focus of the study was the evaluation of the role of the environmental movements in environmental protection activities.

Given the existing literature investigating individuals' daily consumption practices that are influenced by social structure is central to this research. In other words, we explore which external factors influence consumers' decisions to apply ethical considerations or overlook these. Hence, we are faced with a pivotal question: Through which social mechanism consumers are encouraged to consume (un)ethical or (un)sustainable?

Research Methodology

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative approach was able to reveal consumers' hidden reasons and justifications (Eberhart – Naderer 2017) which navigate them in a certain direction of consumption. Purposive sampling was utilized to select a cross-section of male and female informants, with a variety of education types and socioeconomic status.

Sampling Design. Participants were chosen with diverse demographic backgrounds, consumption patterns and habits. Initially, the first informant was selected through pre-screening interviews to evaluate who is a consciously sustainable or unsustainable consumer or has a critical idea about the current consumption patterns. The first participant who had one of these features was

selected as the first interviewee. For the rest, the selection process was based on snowballing. This means that interviewees were asked if they know any other consumer with a certain level of sensitivity to consumption practices for the next interview. In positive cases, the next interview was done with the recommended person and when they could not introduce a new person, the initial method was repeated. Data was generated using an in-depth semi-structured interview protocol and respondents aged over 64 and less than 18-year-old were excluded from interviewing due to some financial dependencies out of this age range. Interviews were applied until data saturation (Glaser – Holton 2004) and it was obtained after 20 interviews. 17 out of 20 interviews were carried out at their house, and the rest were held at public places or any specific space in which the interviewee was willing to be interviewed. Except for one interview that was carried out via Skype, the remainder of the interviews were conducted face-to-face. All interviews lasted between 45 and 65 minutes. Interviewees' statements were transcribed after each interview. The demographic profile of the interviewees is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: **Demographic profile of informants**

Code	Gender	Age	Job	Minute	Education
1	Female	40	IT engineer	57	Bachelor
2	Male	40	Management	40	Associate degree
3	Female	47	Housewife	65	Diploma
4	Male	60	Military	45	Diploma
5	Male	64	manufacturer	45	Master
6	Male	30	Self-employed	45	Diploma
7	Male	29	Employee	30	Diploma
8	Female	24	Salesperson	80	Bachelor
9	Female	51	Employee	65	Associate degree
10	Female	29	Teacher	30	Bachelor
11	Male	54	Military	60	Diploma
12	Female	27	housewife	65	Diploma
13	Female	50	hairdresser	45	Bachelor
14	Female	47	Teacher	55	Bachelor
15	Female	44	Housewife	55	Bachelor
16	Male	45	Salesperson	60	Bachelor
17	Male	25	architect	35	Bachelor
18	Female	28	salesperson	30	diploma
19	Female	41	architect	27	High school
20	Male	30	Not-answered	57	High school

Place of Research. The interviews took place in Urmia. There were three main reasons for this selection. First, since the authors' group had previously conducted other research in this city and were familiar with the community and also aimed to complete the profile of the local consumers, therefore, a supplementary study over there was easier for them. Second, due to the drying Lake Urmia, the city is one of the most environmentally damaged cities in Iran. In the late 1990s, when started to shrink, Lake Urmia was the biggest lake in the Middle East. The locals blame inefficient environmental policies for the drying out and authorities accuse citizens that waste water in their private gardens and recreations. An extensive discussion on this issue is still ongoing and the research team was intended to go deeper into the impacts of this mutual accusation on the inhabitants' consumption justifications. Third, Urmia, in comparison to many other cities, has a relatively higher average score of ecological footprint in Iran. The high amount of food lost in this city is one of the main reasons for this score (Agahayari et al. 2017). For instance, per capita, waste production in this city is 710 grams that is higher than the country average of 700 grams per day.

These features persuaded the research team to launch their study in this part of the country.

Interview Guidance. The guidelines for semi-structured in-depth interviews were prepared based on both general and more specific related questions. It worths mentioning that consumption practices in this study refer to the consumers' daily or weekly shopping decisions especially food and textiles as well as their household energy (including water, power and gas) consumption patterns and recycling. Before starting each discussion, a short introduction on the subject and the purpose of the meeting was given to the participants. They were advised that there is no right or wrong answer to the questions and they could express their ideas openly and honestly.

The interview guide had 4 axes including purchasing and consumption patterns of the informants (behavior); justified reasons of informants for their routine patterns of consumption (attitudes); the role of the other people such as family, friends and peer groups (social life aspect) and the role of the environmental issues in their (environmental concerns).

Data analyzing and extracted categories

A deductive and interpretative grounded approach was implemented to assess existing prevalent patterns among studied informants (Gilgun 2011; Edmondson – McManus 2007). In doing so, conversations were recorded and transcribed completely after each interview. This stage was followed by coding, comparing, categorizing, abstracting and integration (Eberhart –

Naderer 2017). The initial stage of coding was entirely open coded and we coded the text similar to *a priori* codes of the sociology of consumption. Interviews were transcribed, categorized and abstracted at this level. Then comparison processes were applied to identify themes (open coding). In this stage, concepts converted into categories. In the second stage (axial coding) further, analyze applied to group the extracted categories from open coding in the first stage. Extracted codes linked together to identify emerging themes and how these related to pre-existing themes within the literature. The final stage was a content analysis of the emerging dimensions to identify the sum of different categories and how they linked to other categories through the laddering processes (selection coding).

Drawing on Burnard (1994) to assess the credibility of the data, researchers returned to the informants and showed them the analysis. The method of categorization was talked through and opinions upon the degree to which the category system did or did not fairly represent the informants' intentions were sought.

Table 2: **Extracted categories and subcategories**

Subcategories	Main categories	Nuclear category
Declining of religious charisma Administrative corruption Social deep gap Social dissatisfaction	**Faded trust**	**Reflexive Consumption**
Prevalence of unsustainable policies Formal disregarding of the current situation Diminished moral commitment in society	**Deliberate negligence**	
Disembodied human bonding Alienated relationships Commodity Fetishism	**Commoditized human bondings**	
Material culture The feeling of identity vacuum Seeking meaning through goods Filling up the inner vacuum with goods Pursuing social popularity through goods	**Material self-identification**	
Calming of the old suppressed knots through consumption Searching temporary release	**Mental discharge**	

Consistent with the literature of the sociology of consumption, we found support for *a priori* themes of consumption motivations. The content analysis has produced 17 sub-categories. Table 2 demonstrates categories and sub-categories. In the next stage, these sub-categories have been allocated to main categories in such a way that each of them relatively covers one aspect of consumption. In other words, data revealed that consumption behavior among informants has constructed by different aspects such as socio-political, cultural,

emotional, social and psychological and each of these aspects represent one of the a priori dimension of consumption practice. The main categories were labeled as follows:

- *Faded trust (*socio-political aspect*)*
- *Deliberate negligence (*cultural aspect*)*
- *Commoditized human bonding (*emotional aspect*)*
- *Material self-identification (*social aspect*)*
- *Mental discharge through consumption (*psychological aspect*)*

In the following, we indicate how these sub-categories and categories have been extracted from informants 'explanations and then argue how the nuclear category covers these categories under one label.

Faded Trust (Socio-political aspect)
Trust considers as a contextual concept (Durante 2011) and is required to manage the social environment. The less trust between agents, organizations and structures, the less social collaboration and integration create within a community or society. The finding of Neilson and Paxton (2010) indicates that generalized social trust is positively associated with ethical consumerism. There are two versions of Trust; Vertical or institutional, horizontal or interpersonal (Ahnquist et al. 2006). Informants claimed that there is a huge gap between individuals and officials. Quotations declared that this gap may have a significant impact on the shaping of unsustainable and irresponsible consumption patterns among individuals as consumers. Regarding institutional trust, Ali, a 30-year-old man mentioned *"...In our society, the root of all our social problems relates to the lack of such trust…"* (Diploma and self-employed).

Sajjad, a 54-year-old regarding institutional trust said *"...religious charisma that we used to rely upon and respected them now many of them have a luxury life while they tell us to eat less and consume domestic products. Well, why should people respect someone whose words and deeds are not the same? Through formal media, they invite us to things that they don't do themselves"* (Diploma, retired army member).

Besides institutional trust, part of the remarks was related to the lack of interpersonal trust. One of the informants argued that: *"most Iranians prefer foreign goods because they don't trust domestic producers, but I think producers are not responsible. Everyone wants to sell and make a profit. I remember a period when the quality of raw materials was not good at all, but the cycle of the economy continued to produce, hence the consumer lost his trust. To fix this, it takes time and money"* (Ramin, 45, Bachelor, Salesperson).

These quotations declare that the existing distrust between the structure and agency is much more than that to encourage the people to consume as a responsible citizen just in favor of society, the common good, or the environment. In contrary to Micheletti et al. (2003) that argue individuals, in the lack of structural efforts, independently adopt a kind of agency-oriented alternative-innovative actions to protect society, labor force, resources and the environment, in the studied society, distrust of structure and society has not led to sustainable behavior. This result is also contrary to the known political or ethical consumption that originates from the consumers' mistrust of conventional political institutions (Summers 2016).

Deliberate negligence (cultural aspect)

The other common trend that was observed among informants' quotations was their detachment from social responsibilities. The informants stated that as long as social and environmental issues don't receive urgent heed from officials and even there is a deliberate inattention from the relevant institutions, so why citizens should make efforts to behave responsibly or ethically. This point of view is becoming a culture among citizens.

Karim, a 61 year- old retired man tells: *"I'm not at all worried about the environment [...] because nobody worries about people and the environment. My house is near the hospital and we are always coughing. The weather and the environment are polluted around us. This is not the priority of the municipality, then why environmental protection should be important to us?"*

Soheila, a hairdresser, 54 years old indicates that *"The authorities are responsible for the widespread irresponsibility of the people. People just act like them. Irresponsibility is contagious and spreads to society. Besides, there is no cultural or financial investment to aware people of the importance of these issues. There is no investment because there is no concern…"*

Another informant points out that: *"… It is the authorities' responsibility to protect the environment. First, it must be strictly prevented from being damaged by industries and products. The only reason for the disorganized situation is that the government doesn't think about the long-term interests of the people and the country. People just reflect on them like a mirror. As a producer, I tell you that nobody considers morality in production. Everyone thinks about how to increase profit."* (Man, 64, industrial manufacturer).

Quotations indicate the newly expanded form of irresponsible culture among people is severely defensive. This forces them to easily neglect their social duties regarding society, others and the environment. The feeling of the lack of social cohesion to protect society and people's health induces them to behave irresponsibly in turn. In contrary to the findings of ethical consumption literature this feeling of dissatisfaction has not transformed, at least among

studied interviewees, into some constructive or responsible practices like boycotting /buycotting some social services or any effort to improve the status-quo (Micheletti 2003; Koos 2012), however, has brought a kind of retaliatory reaction as a way of civil defy.

The commodification of relationships (emotional aspect)
Marx argued when the labour force turns into a commodity all things find monetary value and all aspects of life become commoditized (Wilk 2001). The more people get alienated from their products, the more they try to get back what they have lost through consumer goods. This idea reinforces in Lasch (1979) when he talks that things have become a substitute for relationships (see Wilk 2001). The responses of interviewees confirm this a priori concept from existing literature.

Shabnam, a 44-year-old woman mentioned; "*I think, nowadays human emotions are not so much pure, commodities have been replaced humanity, goods are more important than humans are*". In Shabnam's opinion, individuals are inevitably opening their arms to unnecessary consumption to mitigate the pain of loneliness when she indicated that "*Individuals seek peace outside of human relations. Environment, nature or others' right are not taken into consideration in our buying or not buying decisions*".

In this regard, Parvaneh, a 28-year-old saleswoman said; "*Commodity defines the type of human relationships. What to use and what not to use, it seems that it is the basis of the relationship between humans, especially the youth. Values are demolished in society and money has become a criterion. How should we show our richness? Obviously by consumption and lavishness. Values and beliefs in our society have died. We try to compensate for our complexes and weaknesses by consumption. Our criteria to communicate with others now are clothes, cars, and their appearances. We communicate with people through what they have.*"

Another interviewee, a teacher who had 29-years-old said, "*goods have gained more value and importance than humanity itself. Everything makes meaning for itself and transfers some special messages… and people communicate with others through their possessions (watches, cars or clothes). Most of us have grown up in an unfair economic situation. We just care about appearance and do not see humanity inside. It means we consume in a way to present ourselves to others.*"

These findings are according to Ewen's (1976) argument that modern life is very anonymous and people have become rootless. He argues that they are looking for some objects to fill in their inner vacuum and struggle to manipulate a type of "commodity self" (Ewen 1976).

Material identification (social aspect)

The social meaning of identity has changed over time. People used to define themselves by their jobs or maybe by their gender, age, or financial position. Bauman (2007) believes that in a modern society answering the question "how is he/she?" is more like answering a question about the lifestyle or the way of connecting to a group than noticing personal virtues or personality traits. Similarly, Cushman (1990) believes that we are in the age of an "empty self" in which alienation and lack of collectivism are dominant. The solution to this absence is to construct a "self" by buying, especially buying things from advertisements. Statements of the informants imply that they are completely aware of identity formation through consumption symbols. However, simultaneously, criticize this.

A 35-year-old woman, Maryam, who was an information technology engineer expressed; *"Human beings shouldn't find herself/himself in consumption. Goods cannot give meaning to us. But we are women; we have to wear on appearances and makeup."* Maryam also linked mal-consumerism to incomplete identity formed: *"Unemployment may have negative consequences. If a person can gain his/her identity from a productive activity he/she wouldn't be preoccupied with showing off material stuff."*

An army 56-year-old man believed that; *"High level of consumption could be a consequence of the loneliness. A lonely person recourses to consumption to fill up his/her mental and psychological lacks."* In his opinion "*cooperation makes identity and increases self-confidence*" and in the lack of such collective and community-based activities, people are forced to seek pleasure in goods.

The following remark from Shervin, a 30-year-old saleswoman, could be a perfect sample of interviewees' statements about the seeking of identity through consumption: "*Ostentation has made an uneasy life. Now everybody seeks a new way to show off. Maybe they think they can compensate for their weaknesses in this way. This is caused by the absence of emotion and thought among people. Self-confidence is lower among women. Its roots are inside of families and upbringings. While we expect girls to be pretty, so we push them unconsciously to seek this from outside and nowadays, goods help you to look beautiful. A kind of fake identity buying. As women have more limitations to express themselves in our society so, most of them that are affordable put their all concentrations to represent themselves with materials they have."*

Statements indicate that the identity construct is an important subject, which is formed through consumption. Recognizing how consumers choose some goods and services is determinative in describing the relationship between identity and consumption. A wide range of goods and consumption practices prepares a means to construct individual identities and express collective identities and statuses. Shankar et al. (2009) have detected the role of

consumerism in forming an identity based on Bleck's "extended self" (1988) concept which argued on the importance of the consumer's activities in the creation of the self-identity. In line with this, Giddens also argues that consumer's daily choices in today's world are not decisions only about how we should do, but also more about how should we be (Soron 2010).

Mental discharge (psychological aspect)

The literature indicates that psychology, as well as sociology and economics, have talked about consumption. For instance, Freud claimed that during the Child's efforts to resolve the contradiction between love and authority, objects are invested with meanings. Stabilization on an object, which Freud called *fixation,* happens when a child tries to get something from objects instead of things that no longer come from parents (Wilk 2001).

Soheila, a hairdresser, said: *... "Do you know why women like to consume a lot? They discharge their deficiencies in consumption."* These statements according to Lasch (1979) and Wilk (1998), indicate that individuals' desire for goods could be a symptom of previous failures to cope with external pressure.

A retired 60-year-old man said: *"In our society, diversity is very low and this has caused a lack of general merriment, hence some people feel frustrated. This causes loneliness that can lead to the kind of irrational consumptions."* He indicated that *"people unload their old knots via consumption".*

Fereshteh, a 24-year-old young woman, had a similar experience. She said; *"I have even seen people while are mad about a thing or a person do shopping to get rid of anger. By purchasing new things they keep condolence in goods."*

The following opinion of a 50-year-old woman could be useful in concluding all ideas: *"most of the women do 'shopping therapy'. They relieve their mental pains at the moment. This vicious circle continues every day."*

From a psychological point of view, theorists believe that in contrast to the insatiability of desires, "real" human needs are finite, few and universal (Max-Neef 1992). Interviewer's statements indicate that most of the things they consume don't satisfy their physical needs, but act as a temporary peace and relief to their inner emotions and feelings. According to Fromm (1976) and Illich (1978) a wide range of false needs in modern capitalized society just alienate individuals from their life and threaten the environment. People seek solace in goods however as Boström (2020) argues that a full satisfaction through consumption never happens.

Discussion

Before discussing, it is important to acknowledge that the examined sample of respondents is not a representative sample and the study doesn't claim to generalize the findings. Similar to other qualitative research designs the aim

was to provide deep and rich insight into the experienced life of a number of people that due to some specific justifications have (un)sustainable consumption patterns. It was an explorative study to go deeper into consumers' insights that are relinquished in the previous quantitative surveys. Therefore, the *reflexive consumption* presented in the study just represents consumption patterns of a small group of residents in the city of Urmia.

Despite these limitations, given the dualistic approach of Klintman and Boström (2015) and Cherrier (2007), it was supposed that how far socio-political arrangement along with psycho-individual factors determine daily consumers' patterns. The results indicated that in the studied community consumption is perceived as a means to reflect socio-political dissatisfactions and psycho-individual tendencies. *Reflexive consumption* was labelled to present a core category that narrates the consumers' story on the and at the same time covers different extracted sub-categories from data. This concept tries to explain that consumers' decisions that reflect their thoughts regarding the existing reality of society. *Reflexive consumption* is combined from five various aspects that each of them reflects one dimension of the existing structure.

One determining factor of (un)sustainable or (un)ethical consumption among the informants was the political aspect. Koos (2012) argued that the institutional characteristics of the state encourage responsible consumption among consumers. Informants' complained about the lack of such institutional willingness to encourage them to be sustainable. In a society that instead of policies, policymakers, producers and formal organizations just consumers' are addressed in the formal media to act responsibly, therefore expecting them to consume responsibly, ethically or sustainably is a very ambitious expectation. This result is contrary to the ethical consumption literature (Micheletti 2003; Koos 2011, 2012; Stollet et al. 2005; Summers 2016) that implies people recall their political, ethical or moral beliefs in their consumption decisions to protect society and nature in the absence of sufficient institutional and formal efforts.

In terms of the emotional aspect, the main declaration was about the commodification of human relations and bonding as well as a type of fetishism of the commodity. The emotional aspect of consumption refers to consumers' rely on goods to fill up the vacuum of human ties in their life. Unnecessary consumption which appearances in *reflexive consumption* does not necessarily satisfy livelihood needs but is a way to escape from loneliness and quell emotional vacuums. This idea was previously approved by Lasch (1979) that while there is a deeper sickness in the soul, things act as an alternative way for damaged relationships.

Regarding the psychological aspect, the mental discharge was a way to mitigate the residuals of old knots through consumption. More precisely,

mental discharge suggests that desire to have something could be caused by repressed and frustrated feelings and emotions of the past times (e.g. childhood period) or by immediate thrills and excitement in the current era of life. Jackson (2005) indicates that in categorizing human needs, there is a distinguished line between material needs (such as protection) and social-psychological needs such as self-esteem, autonomy and a sense of belongingness. However, in our study, the excessive desire of the reflexive consumer to purchase and consume more and more, rather than to be a means to satisfy urgent needs is a temporary relief for the past gaps.

In the social aspect, goods had been mentioned as a way of creating a particular identity in the society or social group. Douglas and Isherwood ([1979] 1996) consider commodities as a nonverbal medium to communicate and even are good for thinking. Identity building through consumption originates from the argument that in modern society goods are not rated based on the function they may perform, but based on the meaning, they could transfer to others and ourselves. Identity construction through goods and their meanings that convey through symbols is nested in every cultural context (Jackson 2005) and there is a cultural obligation in this process. The results of the study indicate that goods and ways of consumption relatively play a symbolic role in shaping the ideal identity of contemporary social humans. One main reason that studied informants mentioned that identity construction through symbolic goods is common in society is related to some limitations that society and state have imposed on people. The social pathology of the top-to-bottom limitations in the public sphere that people are confronted in their social life can more clarify the reasons for the identity-related excessive tendency of consumption among individual consumers.

Conclusion

The mechanisms that are reflected in the *reflexive consumption*, operate through structural factors and individual priorities.

Structural factors include three mechanisms; the more people consider themselves as a victim in social structure, the less they pay attention to pro-environmental or pro-social behaviors. Second, consumers' deliberate negligence towards the environment and society, at least in their opinion, is a conscious reaction that reflects the bigger systematic negligence that occurs at the higher level. And third, citizens overlook ethical and sustainable considerations because they feel alienated from their society. For them, reflexive consumption is the most available means to express their incuriosity to the current situation. Similar to Boström (2020) that argues excess consumption is often a means for achieving other social goals, *reflexive consumption* is a means to achieve a kind of social expression. In terms of individual mecha-

nisms, data declared that personal unsustainable consumption motivations include self-constructing through purchasing habits and rebuilding socially accepted identity by relying on unnecessary consumption practices; supplementing empty self by resorting to commodities; and depleting old psychological knots with the sense of freedom in increasingly and irregular purchasing and consuming.

In sum, to provide an argument on *reflexive consumption* it is necessary to refer to Beck (1992) who calls "reflexivity" a type of self-confrontation that as a consequence of unintended side effects occurs in modern society and changes social settings (Boström et al. 2016). Similar to Beck, Lades (2014) also indicates that reflexive thought allows individuals to think about the consequences of every type of behavior, therefore facilitates self-focused attention and self-evaluation ability. Reflexivity means that society's attributes are reflected in consumers' decisions. The selective concept explains that as responsible oriented consumption debates have not been created in the formal discourse, therefore the emergence of sustainable consumer that is known as green, political, ethical or responsible consumer in the literature (Magnus et al. 2018; More – Balsiger 2018; Koos 2011; Gulyas 2008; Shaw et al. 2006 and Micheletti et al. 2003) doesn't seem logical in the studied context. This study argues when the government, society and collective conscience do not consider themselves committed to pro-social, ethical, or pro-environmental activities and even relinquish these responsibilities, expecting individuals to be sustainable or ethical consumers is an unattainable expectation. *Reflexive consumption* emphasizes the determining role of the social, political and cultural structure creating sustainable consumer. This finding is in line with Boström (2020) that argues social life and institutions along with individual/personal motivations create specific consumption patterns. He indicates that to force, incentivize or encourage people to engage in sustainable behaviors, top-down regulations and governance are certainly necessary.

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