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Transformative Consumer Research to Support the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals: Lessons from and for Social and Consumer Psychologists

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Abstract

In 2006, the Transformative Consumer Research movement launched, shifting consumer researchers to focus more on how to address large societal issues. In addition, the United Nations, an intergovernmental global organization, developed 17 goals for helping people and the planet to prosper. Throughout this chapter, we use the lens of the United Nations goals to discuss the scale and scope of global problems. We also present several key papers in the transformative consumer research area that have used social psychology theories and approaches to tackle societal problems including unhealthy consumption, irresponsible maladaptive consumption, poverty, hunger, inequality, and marginalization of groups. We highlight various psychological theories, e.g., related to emotions, self-regulation, and perceptions of control, which have been pivotal in providing consumer researchers with insights on how to address global issues. We conclude by encouraging researchers to join the transformative consumer research movement and produce impactful research that addresses pressing global issues.

Keywords: poverty, hunger, inequality, health, addiction, maladaptive consumption

Layperson Summary

Our world faces a multitude of challenges, including remarkably widespread poverty, hunger, addiction, poor health, inequality, and marginalization of groups. As a society, numerous organizations and people have been working to address these issues, including national and international advocacy groups as well as academic researchers worldwide. In this chapter, we discuss the work that has been done by a subset of marketing researchers known as transformative consumer researchers. We illustrate how transformative consumer researchers have used theories and approaches from social psychology to provide insights into global problems, both causes and potential solutions. We focus on the 17 goals that the United Nations, a global intergovernmental organization, has set forth to address our global society's most pressing challenges, and we describe the scope of each challenge. In addition, we discuss papers about transformative consumer research that address many of the United Nations' goals aimed at reshaping society and improving well-being. These transformative consumer researchers have been aided by theories in social psychology, but they have also modified and expanded these theories and developed new theories that are more attuned to societal and global challenges. Overall, this chapter sheds light on how transformative consumer researchers are seeking to have more profound impact with their work.

Transformative Consumer Research to Combat Societal Problems

The Association for Consumer Research, founded in 1969, is the largest consumer research society globally and the sponsor of two premier academic journals, *Journal of Consumer Research* and *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* (Association for Consumer Research, 2024). Initially, many of its researchers addressed societal problems but, over time, theoretical and methodological advancements were prioritized (Mick et al., 2012). The transformative consumer research movement was born in 2006 to redirect more attention to societal issues (Mick et al., 2012). Its stated mission is “to encourage, support, and disseminate research that contributes to the well-being of consumers, environments, and societies across the world” (Transformative Consumer Research, 2024). Transformative consumer researchers also commit to rigorous theory and methods, paradigm diversity, consumer and stakeholder partnerships, and sociocultural and situational sensitivity (Mick et al., 2012).

Much transformative consumer research is conducted at the micro level, e.g., by studying individual experiences of hunger (Bublitz et al., 2019) or parenting (Moore et al., 2017). Additional research is at the meso level, e.g., examinations of community-level disaster relief (Baker & Hill, 2013), nonprofit scale-ups (Nardini et al., 2022) or youth social-impact initiatives (Bublitz et al., 2020). It is mostly the micro-level research that draws from, and seeks to impact, social psychology, and thus will be our focus. See Table 1 for a list of theories we used.

Transformative consumer researchers increasingly seek to address global issues, not solely domestic ones, such as those embodied in the current United Nations goals (United Nations, 2015). Current United Nations goals for 2030 are ending poverty, hunger, inequality, and non-sustainable consumption; improving health and education; providing water, sanitation, energy, infrastructure, economic growth and safety; and preserving the planet. Our chapter will focus on research related to the goals of unhealthy behaviors, irresponsible maladaptive consumption, poverty, hunger, inequality, and marginalization of groups. The environment and sustainability will not be discussed here, as they are covered in other chapters of this book.

Unhealthy Behaviors

Problem scope: Prevalence and impact of unhealthy behaviors.

A 2030 United Nations goal is health and well-being (United Nations, 2015), with unhealthy behaviors defined here as those that increase the risk of disease or death, immediately or over time. For example, unhealthy behaviors like poor diet and insufficient exercise contribute to obesity, afflicting 16% of the global adult population (World Health Organization, 2024b). Poor diet, insufficient exercise, and obesity cause type 2 diabetes, suffered by 9% of adults globally (World Health Organization, 2023a). Diabetes causes half the deaths before age 70; and, moreover, the death rate from diabetes is rising, offsetting rate drops for other top noncommunicable diseases like cancer (World Health Organization, 2023a).

There are numerous examples of unhealthy consumer behaviors, such as noncompliance with healthcare-related guidance or regimens, hazardous driving, unsafe gun use, violence, and illicit or risky drug use. Transformative consumer researchers have sought to reduce these and other unhealthy behaviors, and relatedly irresponsible consumption (discussed next), by studying causes, prevention methods, and policy interventions. Researchers have been influenced by a

range of social psychology theories from those pertaining to beliefs and traits to social norms, media influences and situational factors.

Consumer research to address the inadequate understanding of self-regulation.

Research overview. Arguing there is insufficient understanding of how different consumers struggle to attain health and other goals and, thus, how to assist them, Koo and Fishbach (2008) build on original theories of self-regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Carver, 2004) to propose a new dynamic theory. The theory posits it is important to understand whether consumers are highly committed to the goal or less committed. Then, messaging can be used to optimally alter consumers' focus with respect to their goal progress, namely, whether they should focus on their progress to-date or distance to-go. Ensuring a match between consumers' level of goal commitment and their goal progress focus is theorized to improve goal attainment.

Psychology theory predictions and findings. If consumers are committed to a goal, a to-go message about the remaining work to attain the goal conveys lack of progress which motivates this consumer segment to work harder, improving outcomes (Koo & Fishbach, 2008). But, if consumers lack goal commitment, a to-date message about goal accomplishments already realized conveys positive progress which motivates harder work and better outcomes for this quite different less-committed consumer segment. This theory has been supported in studies of fundraising goals and academic goals, but researchers argue it is more universally applicable.

Research implications. Koo and Fishbach (2008) recommend that consumers motivate themselves to attain goals by concentrating either on their distance to-go or progress to-date, depending on whether they are, respectively, highly goal-committed, or not. The researchers also note that their theory could be used to help policy officials attain major societal health goals. For instance, policy officials could conduct research to understand the target population's goal commitment and then choose to-go or to-date messaging that matches their commitment level.

Consumer research to address the problem of poor diets.

Research overview. Researchers Mai and Hoffman (2015) were motivated by the global problem of poor diets, contributing to 2 billion obese people, many with type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, or other health issues. Diabetes alone accounts for 11% of global healthcare costs (Mai & Hoffmann, 2015). As diabetes rates climb, fast food restaurants proliferate, selling items high in fat, cholesterol, sugar, and calories (Grier & Davis, 2013). Consumer researchers have been able to identify a major cause of unhealthy diets, related to people's naïve beliefs. Naïve beliefs are informal beliefs people use in everyday life to make sense of the world, that may reflect some experiences they have had, but diverge from current scientific knowledge (Deval et al., 2013; Faro, McGill, & Hastie 2010). A problematic naïve belief is that unhealthy foods are tasty, and healthy foods are not (Raghunathan et al., 2006). Mai and Hoffman (2015) asked if consumer education might help to correct this naïve belief.

Psychology theory predictions and findings. Mai and Hoffman (2015) sought to determine if it might be possible to improve consumers' food choices by teaching them to question the unhealthy-equals-tasty belief, where people assume energy dense foods with fat and carbohydrates are tastier. The researchers employed the Implicit Association Test which uses response times to detect the strength of subconscious word associations. The findings indicate that a weaker "unhealthy-equals-tasty" belief improves the perceived taste of foods labeled

healthy, but only marginally, as that belief operates both implicitly and explicitly. So, even consumers who do not explicitly endorse the unhealthy-equals-tasty belief are implicitly affected. Compared to a food labeled unhealthy, the identical food labeled healthy (e.g., low fat) is perceived as worse tasting and less enjoyable and, thus, less likely to be chosen, leading to poor diets and health problems. People react this way even when they report knowing that unhealthy-equals-tasty and healthy-equals-untasty are untruthful oversimplifications.

Research implications. The researchers conclude it is insufficient to try to persuade consumers that healthy foods taste good, as they will still tend to rely on their implicit assessments or intuition that healthy-equals-untasty. Instead, manufacturers could try to reformulate healthier foods to be good tasting or good-tasting foods to be healthier. Government incentives and regulations could be required for these reformulations. Otherwise, well-intentioned nutritional food labels will continue to backfire and cause consumers to avoid choosing foods that are labeled healthy (e.g., low fat) due to perceived poor taste.

Consumer research to address the problem of media exposure and childhood development.

Research overview. Obesity afflicts 8% of youth globally (World Health Organization, 2024b), and 20% of U.S. youth (Davis & Pechmann, 2023). Obesity is caused by poor diet and exercise and poses health risks even in childhood, including high blood pressure and cholesterol, sleep apnea, orthopedic problems, low self-esteem, and depression (Boston Children's Hospital, 2024). Connell et al. (2014) asked if childhood exposure to media advertising for unhealthy foods might contribute to poor diets that perpetuate in adulthood.

Psychology theory predictions and findings. The researchers applied theories of child development (Ellis & Ralph 2000; Ellis, Holmes, & Wright 2010; John, 1999) and persuasion knowledge (Friestad & Wright 1994) to understand how ads for unhealthy foods may affect children. Developmental theories in psychology tell us what is learned early in life is learned well due to semantic memory embedding and neural network shaping (Connell et al., 2014). Additional developmental theories in consumer psychology tell us children under age 13 lack persuasion knowledge about advertiser motives and tactics increasing their inherent susceptibility to advertising (John, 1999). Based on this theorizing, if children see ads for unhealthy foods (e.g., sugared cereal or fast food), they will associate those brands with positive affect and, accordingly, positive cognitions like healthiness. Comparing consumers across generations, Connell et al. (2014) find that adults who initially see ads for unhealthy foods as children (< age 13) rate these foods higher on positive affect and healthfulness, compared to adults who see the same ads later in life ($\geq$ age 13).

Research implications. The findings suggest that the positive halo surrounding unhealthy food, originating in childhood, may contribute to the naïve belief that unhealthy-equals-tasty (Deval et al., 2013; Faro, McGill, & Hastie 2010), which has been strongly linked to poor adult diets (Mai & Hoffmann, 2015; Raghunathan et al., 2006). While U.S. has strong commercial free speech protections, firms could voluntarily agree to forgo advertising unhealthy foods to children or, if firms are hesitant, the government could incentivize them to stop advertising to children. The European Union asks firms to agree voluntarily to restrict unhealthy food ads to children, and Norway plans to ban unhealthy food ads aimed at youth through age 18 (Galvin, 2024).

Consumer research to address the problems of vaccine scarcity and use hesitancy.

Research overview. The scarcity of lifesaving vaccines is another global health concern (United Nations, 2022). Often, the prices of crucial vaccines are too high, or delivery is too challenging, especially in worse torn or developing nations. For instance, supply of the human papillomavirus vaccine (HPV) covers only half the need in developing nations (United Nations, 2022). Also, vaccine manufacturing is highly concentrated geographically which further threatens supply. Globally, there are just ten suppliers of the major human vaccines, and just two suppliers of the pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (PCV) for pneumonia, the human papillomavirus vaccine (HPV) for cervical cancer, and the measles and rubella vaccines (United Nations, 2022). Pereira et al. (2021) study the effects of vaccine scarcity on vaccine hesitancy.

Psychology theory predictions and findings. To understand consumer response to low vaccine access, Pereira et al. (2021) initially turn to scarcity theory (Hamilton et al, 2019). Scarcity theory posits that low access to a product or service generally increases consumer demand (Lynn, 1991). Thus, firms sometimes seek to create scarcity or its appearance to generate more consumer interest and/or higher willingness to pay (Hamilton et al., 2019). However, Pereira et al. (2021) find that scarcity theory does not explain consumer response in the case of all vaccines; in fact, specific to the COVID-19 vaccine studied, the dominant consumer response to its scarcity was to deprioritize and reduce intent to vaccinate. This deprioritization was driven, in large part, by low perceived vulnerability and/or side effect concerns; it was most evident among those lacking trust in doctors. Regardless, the main finding is that when the COVID-19 vaccine was scarce, demand dropped rather than rising.

Research implications. The Pereira et al. (2021) findings add to concerns about vaccine scarcity. When a vaccine is scarce, we already know that prices rise, and at-risk consumers go without. However, this research indicates that vaccine de-prioritization may occur as well; people may simply decide not to get vaccinated. Given that vaccine hesitancy is already a problem, seeing evidence of yet another source of hesitancy or low prioritization is troubling. The message is clear: vaccine scarcity could be avoided, e.g., by bolstering the supply system.

Irresponsible Maladaptive Consumption

Problem scope: Prevalence and impact of irresponsible maladaptive consumption.

Another 2030 United Nation goal is to encourage more responsible consumption (United Nations, 2015). We focus here on irresponsible consumption that is maladaptive, meaning it is excessive or extreme, difficult to stop or reduce, and harmful to the self and/or others (Boland et al. 2020). Irresponsible maladaptive consumption includes habitual behaviors that are unhealthy for the consumer, but it also encompasses non-sustainable behaviors that harm the planet, or that harm consumers in ways other than health (e.g., gambling). Irresponsible maladaptive consumption, depending on the substance consumed, can lead to addiction. For instance, about 1 in 4 adults globally are addicted to the nicotine in tobacco products (37% of men, 8% of women), and tobacco use kills half its users or 8 million people annually (World Health Organization, 2023b). The alcohol addiction rate is lower, but still substantial at 4% of the global adult population (World Health Organization, 2024a). Social media addiction has become widespread, with 1 in 3 U.S. teens reporting being on social media “almost constantly” (Pew Research Center, 2023), undercutting time spent on other important developmental behaviors.

Consumer research to address the problem of habit turning into maladaptive consumption.

Research article overview. Due to concerns about normal everyday behaviors that cross a threshold and become problematic, as with excessive social media use, shopping, gaming, eating, or sports, Boland et al. (2020) study the maladaptive threshold, what they refer to as the tipping point. The researchers expand current theory on tipping points (O'Brien and Klein, 2017) which discusses when and why people eventually notice a change that is initially too gradual to detect. The researchers also use theories of addiction (Bevins & Palmatier, 2004; Loewenstein, 1996) to explain that the tipping point is not yet addiction so remedial action is easier.

Psychology theory predictions. Boland et al.'s (2020) new tipping point framework posits that a maladaptive behavior starts innocuously with normal frequency and intensity. Behavioral frequency and intensity gradually increase, producing harm in terms of intruding on other important aspects of life, but that harm goes unrecognized. At the tipping point, the behavior's invasiveness become so great that the harms are recognized. The behavior becomes maladaptive if it continues at a comparable or higher level, despite the recognition of harm, due to the challenges of stopping. However, the framework posits that maladaptive behavior is easier to remedy than addiction because stopping is possible with minimal or no physiological craving or withdrawal, which are addiction hallmarks (Bevins & Palmatier, 2004; Loewenstein, 1996).

Research implications. Boland et al. (2020) discuss how social media platforms are a cause of maladaptive use, as they have removed stopping rules, and replaced them with keep-going rules. Stopping rules are also disappearing elsewhere in life due to marketplace incentives to sell more (e.g., restaurants offer supersizes, unlimited refills and all-you-can-eat). The researchers provide numerous arguments for imposing reasonable stopping rules (e.g., minors can only use social media one hour per day), bans (e.g., no social media in school classrooms; Los Angeles Unified School District, 2024), and notification restrictions (e.g., no social media notifications to minors late at night (under consideration; California State Senate, 2024).

Consumer research to address the problem of addiction to social media.

Research article overview. Motivated by the conflicting research findings on whether adolescent social media use adversely affects their well-being, Fumagalli et al. (2024) seek to find tipping points when social media usage begins to yield negative effects. They also seek to determine whether tipping points relate to adolescents' age or gender or social media use type.

Psychology theory predictions and findings. To study the impact of social media on adolescents (Fumagalli et al., 2024), the researchers use psychological theories of social comparison (Lockwood et al., 2004; Suls, Martin & Wheeler, 2002) and adolescent stress (Arnett, 1999; Hollenstein & Loughheed, 2013). Social comparison theory posits that people tend to compare themselves to others, and that repeated upward comparisons to those deemed superior often results in low self-esteem, life and body dissatisfaction, depression, and even suicidal ideation. When adolescents compare themselves to others on social media, they mainly seem to fear missing out (Fumagalli et al., 2021), but how adolescents use social media also matters. Upward social comparison and its adverse effects primarily seem to occur from browsing social networking sites, rather than more active use like using group chat apps (Fumagalli et al., 2021). The researchers also find that the relationship between social media use and well-being is J-shaped, meaning a few hours of daily use improves well-being, but continued use decreases it, consistent with there being a tipping point (Boland et al., 2020). The tipping

point or J-upturn appears to depend on the youth's age and sex, occurring at ages 11-13 for girls versus 14-15 for boys, due to sex-related developmental differences (Fumagalli et al., 2024).

Research implications. Fumagalli et al. (2024) conclude that a ban on youth social media use is unwarranted, as low use is often beneficial especially if active, such as group chatting or using YouTube for school research. The researchers also argue that policies and interventions could be based on an understanding of the J-shaped relationship between social media use and well-being, including age- and sex-related differences in the tipping point or J-upturn. The researchers also call for more research on social media features that reduce well-being as well as features that instead enhance well-being (Uhalde et al., 2024).

Consumer research to address the problem of addiction to tobacco.

Research article overview. Tobacco use, driven by nicotine addiction, is of such concern there is a major global framework for tobacco control (World Health Organization, 2003). The tobacco in cigarettes, e-cigarettes or vape is addictive and the addiction generally starts in adolescence. The average age of smoking initiation is 15-16, but significant numbers of people start even earlier (Xing et al., 2022), and high proportions of these youths become regular smokers. The risk of premature death from smoking is about 50% overall (World Health Organization, 2023b), but starting smoking before age 10 triples the risk, while starting before age 15 doubles it (Xing et al., 2022). Pechmann and colleagues seek to understand whether smoking scenes in movies or on television might encourage adolescent smoking initiation (Pechmann & Shih, 1999; Pechmann & Wang, 2010) and, if so, potential remedies.

Psychology theory predictions and findings. To study youth's response to smoking scenes in movies, Pechmann and Shih (1999) compare two prevailing theories. The standard theory of product placement is excitation transfer (Singhal & Rogers, 2002) which predicts that positive affect from the movie scene transfers to the product placement. The researchers find, though, that it is immaterial if the smoking is shown in a positive or neutral scene, meaning excitation transfer is not predictive. Forbidden fruit theory applies instead (Bushman & Stack, 1996); the smoking itself arouses positive affect enhancing intent to smoke. But showing an antismoking ad before the movie can nullify the pro-smoking impact of the smoking scenes by portraying smoking as tainted fruit rather than forbidden fruit (Bushman & Stack, 1996).

Other research has assessed how young people react to television scenes of people their own age smoking (Pechmann & Wang, 2010). Theories of reference group or normative influence have been used, positing that people are affected by descriptive norms about what different people do and injunctive norms about what is appropriate for people to do (Cialdini, Reno & Kallgren, 1990; Park & Lessig, 1977). Pechmann and Wang's (2010) findings indicate that, when television scenes show young actors smoking, this promotes smoking among the young viewers, because the scenes convey that smoking is prevalent among attractive young people. To offset these concerns, the script writers of youth-oriented shows sometimes employ entertainment education, meaning they ensure the shows depict peer disapproval of the smoking. Pechmann and Wang (2010) find entertainment education to be effective; depicting youth smoking can be offset by showing their peers expressing disapproval of the smoking.

Research implications. The extant research (Pechmann & Shih, 1999; Pechmann & Wang, 2010) indicates that smoking scenes in movies and on television can induce youth to try smoking. The findings indicate it is insufficient to ban *paid* tobacco placements in movies and on

television (National Association of Attorneys General, 1998); *unpaid* placements are also problematic. Hence, youth programming that depicts smoking could include a parental warning or be denied a PG or child-approved rating. Alternatively, an antismoking ad could be shown before a youth-oriented movie or television show with smoking. Indeed, the U.S. movie industry agreed to place antismoking ads before PG-rated DVD movies depicting smoking, as research showed this inoculated youth from the pro-smoking scenes (Pechmann & Shih, 1999).

Consumer research to address the problem of food waste.

Research article overview. Globally, one-third of food is wasted, millions of tons annually, valued at \$1 trillion (World Food Programme, 2020). Yet one in nine people globally are chronically undernourished and one in six U.S. families are food insecure (Block et al., 2016). Block et al. (2016) offer a framework for understanding food waste that they call the squander sequence. Their framework acknowledges that food waste occurs at various stages of food production and consumption, perpetrated by different actors, but they focus on consumers' irresponsible food habits.

Psychology theory predictions. The squander sequence framework (Block et al., 2016) identifies several consumer biases that lead them to irresponsible consumption causing food waste. The framework posits that retailers discard imperfect foods due to perceived contagion (Rozin and Royzman, 2001); they fear consumers will perceive flawed items as contagious and contaminate nearby items. It posits an optimism bias (Weinstein, 1980), whereby consumers over-forecast their food consumption, resulting in food waste. It posits an anchoring and adjustment effect (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), such that consumers discard food based on the manufacturer's best-by date, even though it is not an expiration date. It posits an availability bias (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974) that causes people to consume their most recently purchased items, while older items spoil. Finally, the squander sequence framework predicts licensing (Wilcox et al., 2009); after eating some leftovers, consumers feel licensed to discard the rest.

Research implications. Block et al. (2016) recommend ways to combat food waste at each stage of the squander sequence. They recommend consumer education, as extensive psychological research shows knowledge reduces decision biases (Alba & Hutchinson, 2000). The researchers also advocate for public policies to reduce food waste, for instance, best-by dates could be disallowed with only expiration dates permitted. However, the researchers note that some policies could be counterproductive, e.g., curbside pickup of food waste for composting could further license people to create more food waste. Therefore, they recommend that policies be studied before implementation and monitored afterward.

Poverty and Hunger

Problem scope: Prevalence of poverty, hunger, and inability to meet basic needs.

Two additional critical United Nations goals for 2030 are no poverty and zero hunger (United Nations 2015). These are daunting goals, because currently 8% of the global population, or 648 million people, live in extreme poverty and survive on less than \$2.15 per day (World Bank, 2022). In addition, 23% of the global population lives below the lower-middle-income poverty line of \$3.65 per day (World Bank, 2022). Being impoverished restricts consumers' ability to meet their basic needs; they lack adequate food, clothing, and/or shelter. More

generally, people who are impoverished suffer from vulnerability, a state in which they are susceptible to harm because their access to and control over resources are restricted (Hill and Sharma, 2020). Transformative consumer researchers have sought to address the problems of poverty and hunger by looking at its cognitive, motivational, sociocultural, and behavioral manifestations and by studying interventions to help address the crisis (Chakravarti 2006).

Consumer research to address the problem of poorly understood scarcity experiences.

Research article overview. Being in an impoverished state means that consumers face a scarcity of resources (Hill, 2020). Cannon et al. (2018) uses social psychology to provide a unifying theory for studying resource scarcity. They define it as “sensing or observing a discrepancy between one’s current level of resources and a higher, more desirable reference point” (Cannon, et al., 2018, page 105). Initially the consumer behavior literature lacked an overarching theory of response to resource scarcity, but Cannon et al. (2018) has provided such a theory to guide research on poverty and how to combat it.

Psychology theory predictions and findings. Cannon et al. (2018) build on self-regulation theory (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Carver, 2004), which states that people look at their current state versus their desired end state and then adjust to reach that end state. Cannon et al. (2018) predict that how people approach reaching their desired end state depends on mutability or the “perceived ability for the situation to be changed” (page 109). Mutability moderates how people facing resource scarcity respond to the gap between current and desired states, by influencing which of two pathways they choose to remedy their situation. When people feel they can invest reasonable effort to get what they need, they try to reduce their scarcity. However, when attaining what they need is not possible with reasonable effort, people instead focus on reestablishing psychological control to self-regulate, despite this being counterproductive to their need reduction. Overall, the Cannon et al. (2018) research findings show that when in situations of high mutability, consumers seek scarcity reduction. When in situations of low mutability, consumers seek control restoration. When in situations of ambiguous mutability, consumers seek scarcity reduction if they expect positive outcomes; otherwise, they seek control restoration.

Research implications. The Cannon et al. (2018) self-regulatory model of resource scarcity provides a foundation for better understanding impoverished consumers’ differing reactions to scarcity. The research highlights the importance of making the processes to secure resources reasonable because, if unreasonable, people will resort to seeking psychological control versus pursuing the resources required to meet their needs. These insights help to inform government and charity organizations on how to set up their aid programs to promote utilization, such as reducing the red tape around programs.

Consumer research to address the problem of people facing scarcity feeling lack of control.

Research article overview. Historically, it had been assumed that consumers have choice and the means necessary to pick from a desirable choice set, but transformative consumer researchers find this is not always the case with impoverished consumers. Often impoverished consumers are captive users of aid delivery services, and the only services available to them are poorly designed, restricting their choice set (Rayburn, et al., 2020). Inesi et al. (2011) study the effects of limiting consumer choice on consumer well-being.

Psychology theory predictions and findings. Inesi et al. (2011) employ control theory to examine how constrained choice affects consumer well-being. Control theory posits that, when people's sense of personal control is threatened, they will attempt to restore their personal control to improve their well-being. In other words, people seek to restore "the belief that events are influenced by and contingent upon one's own behavior and not fate, circumstances, other people, or uncontrollable physical forces" (Inesi et al., 2011, page 1042; Rotter 1966). Inesi et al. (2011) predict that for people to reestablish control, they can either increase their interpersonal power and/or their ability to choose, and one or both must be sufficient to reach the threshold at which control is adequate. Inesi et al. (2011) also posit that, as power and choice are substitutable to bolster personal control, in the absence of one, people will seek the other. Finally, because people seek a threshold level of control, if provided one of the two sources of control, either power or choice, adding the other yields diminishing returns.

Research implications. The Inesi et al. (2011) work shows the importance of providing resource-scarce consumers who are seeking aid with sufficient personal control, interpersonal power, and/or choice, to ensure their well-being. It also shows that, when aid delivery services want to help users feel in control, they can provide greater choice, e.g., with their products; and/or they can bolster users' interpersonal power, e.g., with their rules and procedures. Either or both actions could help people seeking aid to reach the threshold level of personal control they need to experience well-being.

Consumer research to address the problem of optimal delivery of aid services.

Research article overview. Poverty triggers felt deprivation, which are the beliefs, emotions, and experiences people have when they are unable to fulfill basic consumption needs to live a decent life (Blocker et al. 2013). Transformative consumer researchers work to improve the design of aid services for impoverished consumers to alleviate the psychological burdens that come with poverty, such as felt deprivation, dissatisfaction, or feelings of injustice. North and Pechmann (2024) study aid service designs that lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and injustice and how to engage in redesign to minimize such negative feelings.

Psychology theory predictions and findings. North and Pechmann (2024) use perceived justice theory (Adam 1965) to study what might cause people seeking aid to perceive they have been treated unjustly. Perceptions of procedural injustice arise when a person views the procedures and processes used to arrive at distribution outcomes as unfair or inequitable (Dailey and Kirk 1992). Government and nonprofit aid services are often designed to meet operational needs like avoiding out of stock items or lowering costs but, as a result, users often perceive the procedures and processes to be unjust and unfair. Building on North's personal observations and experiences, North and Pechmann (2024) use the theorizing of Inesi et al. (2011) to posit that when aid services limit low power people's product choices (e.g., to avoid stockouts), there will be negative ramifications. Consistent with predictions, the findings indicate that when people have low power and encounter a donation service that limits (vs. expands) their product choices, they perceive lower procedural justice, which mediates the effect on their satisfaction and willingness to return. However, if people's power in the aid service setting is elevated through procedures like minimizing wait time, demonstrating respect, and soliciting feedback, limitations in product choice no longer elicit perceptions of injustice, dissatisfaction, or low willingness to

return. In other words, the increase in interpersonal power buffers the impact of low product choice, consistent with the theorizing of Inesi et al. (2011) as discussed above.

Research implications. The North and Pechmann (2024) research demonstrates the value of ensuring that aid delivery services provide as much choice as possible to users. Aid delivery services could also empower their users, e.g., by allowing them to provide feedback. Increasing users' interpersonal power in aid service delivery settings can buffer against any restrictions in choice that may be necessary for operational reasons, e.g., due to stockout concerns.

Marginalization, Inequality, and Inequity

Problem scope: Injustice, inequality, inequity, and exclusion in the marketplace.

Additional key United Nations development goals for 2030 are gender equality and reduced inequalities (United Nations 2015). Inequality and inequity are still happening globally on a large scale as worldwide one of six people has experienced some form of discrimination (United Nations, 2023). Groups are marginalized and treated unfairly due to race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or another factor. Yet, there has been a staggering lack of research on marginalized groups in consumer psychology, including around topics of oppression and power (Uduehi, Forehand, & Tveleneva, 2026). Williams et al. (2018) note that most published studies were conducted with white, heterosexual, educated people. Recently, transformative consumer researchers have been working to shift the research scope to improve diversity and inclusion. Arsel et al. (2022) define diversity as representing “real or perceived physical or socio-cultural differences in research, market spaces, and organizations,” and they define inclusion as “creating a culture that fosters belonging and incorporation of diverse groups” (p. 920). They suggest more diversity in consumer research is needed that considers participant gender, age, and body type; race and ethnicity; social class and social status; and religion and cultural identity.

Consumer research to address the problem of women's reproductive rights challenges.

Research article overview. Promoting rights for women continues to be a challenge in part due to continued gender-inequality laws in many countries. At the current rate of change, it is forecasted to take 286 years to close the gap in legal protections for women (United Nations, 2023). Women are twice as likely as men to report sex-based inequality, and almost half of married women lack control over decisions about their sexual and reproductive health (United Nations, 2023). Furthermore, many topics important to women, such as the right to end a pregnancy, are often publicly debated, and may not fully consider women's perspectives. To provide insights into women's reproductive challenges, Patterson et al. (1995) study birth-or-abortion decisions from the perspective of women who have utilized abortion services.

Psychology theory predictions and findings. To shed light on birth-or-abortion decisions, Patterson et al. (1995) starts with theories of moral decision making. Moral theories (Gilligan and Attanucci, 1988) show that a woman is ethically obligated to meet her responsibilities to her community of personal relationships. Through in-depth interviews, Patterson et al. (1995) find that women making birth-or-abortion decisions do consider their responsibilities to their communities of personal relationships, but often their prime consideration is their responsibility to the potential child-to-be. In other words, contrary to the common assumption that women make abortion decisions based on ethics related to the child-to-be, women consider their

responsibility to the potential child to-be and are often gravely concerned about being unable to care for that child. Furthermore, the Patterson et al. (1995) research shows that when women make their own birth-or-abortion decisions, they cope better with the decisions and the emotional aftermath. However, women often have difficulty articulating their ethical views on birth-or-abortion and then acting in accordance with those views, as this requires considerable ethical maturity, self-esteem, and pushing against status quo and legal restrictions.

Research implications. The Patterson et al. (1995) research highlights the challenges that women face when making decisions about their sexual and reproductive health. The researchers show that the language used in public debates on abortion often differs from the language used in private decision making based on women's own ethical standards. Women make birth-or-abortion decisions in large part based on their responsibility to the child they would bring into the world, which is consistent with ethical principles. Allowing women to act based on their own ethical decision-making helps them cope with the emotional aftermath. By better understanding how women psychologically confront birth-or-abortion decisions, we can enable women to make the best decisions for themselves and safeguard their emotional well-being. Considering such implications becomes increasingly important as health policies change and further impact on women's health, privacy, care options, and information flow (Fitzgerald et al., 2023).

Consumer research to address the problem of racial stigma and inequities.

Research article overview. Worldwide, racial inequity is a remarkably widespread problem (United Nations, 2023). However, little research has explored how racial identity, or racial inequities, might impact consumers. In a content analysis of consumer research journals, Williams et al. (2018) found that only 3.4% of articles focused on racial or ethnic minority identity. Yet, we know that racial and minority identities (Sellers et al., 1998) and stigmatized-identity cues (Rank-Christman & Wooten 2023) can affect consumer experiences. To understand a common aspect of the consumer experience of racial inequity and stigma, Pittmann (2020) studied racial profiling in retail settings.

Psychology theory predictions and findings. Pittmann (2020) interviewed black consumers to understand their retail shopping experiences, guided by theories of symbolic boundaries and social hierarchies in the marketplace (Wherry, 2008). Theories of symbolic boundaries and social hierarchies posit that low-status people often face negative assessments and characterizations in the marketplace because they are not expected to buy expensive items, which can lower their social status and negatively impact how they are treated. Based on these theories, Pittmann (2020) posited that, in retail settings, black consumers as a racially marginalized group would be perceived as lower in status, eliciting negative characterizations and treatment. The findings indicate that black consumers are, indeed, treated inequitably, which taints their shopping experience, making it less rewarding. If consumers from racially marginalized groups are treated poorly in retail settings, making them dislike shopping, they spend less; yet many retailers do not take sufficient steps to end the mistreatment.

Research implications. The Pittmann (2020) research sheds light on how being part of a marginalized racial group impacts consumer experiences. Due to perceived symbolic boundaries and social hierarchies, many people from marginalized racial groups experience status misrecognition in retail settings, resulting in service inequities and mistreatment. This work shows the importance of studying consumption experiences from a broader perspective to

understand the experiences of marginalized groups and how to improve services for them. This research also highlights the importance of reducing societal inequities and making the marketplace more inclusive globally.

Consumer research to address the problem of weak social movements for social change.

Research article overview. Social movements to address injustices and inequalities are often major drivers of systematic change as people collectively rise. Since 2006, transformative researchers have studied social movements to promote justice such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and Marriage Equality. As many social movements fail or die out, Nardini et al. (2020) offer a framework of best practices for social movements, utilizing several different theories.

Psychology theory predictions. The Nardini et al. (2020) framework for social movements identifies several psychological mechanisms that encourage people to move from the role of bystander to active upstander, who act in support of a cause. The framework posits that, at first, it is important to create the social movement by connecting people to the cause using psychological principles like psychological ownership (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001), and also connecting the movement members to each other using principles like trust. Next, the framework posits that one can build a larger social network through tactics like goal setting, and then nudge people forward based on theories of goal pursuit (Austin & Vancouver 1996). It posits one can build leadership leveraging empathy and further expand the social network based on shared pride. Finally, it posits that one can win hearts by eliciting emotions like anger and anxiety that will spark action; and win minds by encouraging bonding (Berger & Heath 2008) through identity signaling and sharing of that identity on social media.

Research implications. Nardini et al. (2020), using social psychology theories, identifies the many steps involved in starting and growing social movements to increase likelihood of success. Through their framework, they provide a deeper understanding of what motivates collective action and inspires people to become active upstanders versus standing on the sidelines, such as building trust, setting goals, and creating shared pride. Their work also highlights the importance of social movements in creating fundamental changes in society despite the challenges involved.

Continuing Transformative Consumer Research to Alleviate Societal Challenges

With the birth of the transformative consumer research movement in 2006, consumer researchers started redirecting more of their attention to the numerous challenges facing society. In addition, the United Nations, a global intergovernmental organization, set several goals in motion including ending poverty, hunger, inequality, and non-sustainable consumption; improving health and education; providing water, sanitation, energy, infrastructure, economic growth, and safety; and preserving the planet (United Nations, 2015). In this chapter, we have reviewed numerous papers addressing these goals that transformative consumer researchers have produced, where they have used social psychology theories or their own related theories to understand the societal problems and identify potential solutions. The researchers featured in this chapter have sought to address unhealthy consumption, irresponsible maladaptive consumption, poverty, hunger, inequality, and marginalization of groups.

Globally, transformative consumer researchers have been working to increase consumer and societal well-being through their work, and we applaud their efforts. Yet, given the gravity of the challenges facing society, there is room for both more research in the area and more researchers to join the movement. Ozanne et al. (2024) outlined some paths forward including focusing on “diverse, marginalized, and historically absent perspectives to enrich research and subsequent solution” (pg. 196). We encourage researchers to reflect upon the United Nations goals and apply their skills and training to work towards addressing these challenges, so all of us can prosper as one people on one planet. As Nardini et al. (2020) note, together we rise or fall, so we hope more consumer researchers will join in trying to address global societal problems. Table 1 provides summary of major transformative topics, related issues, relevant consumer research papers, and applicable psychological theories; see below.

Table 1: Consumer Research Papers and Associated Psychology Theories

Topic	Related Issues	Relevant Consumer Research Papers	Psychology Theories
Unhealthy Behaviors	Self-Regulation	Dynamics of self-regulation: How (un)accomplished goal actions affect motivation. (Koo & Fishbach 2008)	Self-Regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Carver, 2004)
	Poor Diets	How to combat the unhealthy = tasty intuition: The influencing role of health consciousness. (Mai and Hoffman 2015); The unhealthy = tasty intuition and its effects on taste inferences, enjoyment, and choice of food products. (Raghunathan et al., 2006)	Naïve Beliefs (Deval et al., 2013; Faro, McGill, & Hastie, 2010)
	Media Exposure and Childhood Development	When students patronize fast-food restaurants near school: The effects of identification with the student community, social activity spaces and social liability interventions (Davis & Pechmann, 2023); How childhood advertising exposure can create biased product evaluations that persist in adulthood (Connell et al., 2014)	Child Development (Ellis & Ralph, 2000; Ellis, Holmes & Wright, 2010; John, 1999); Persuasion Knowledge (Friestad & Wright 1994)
	Vaccination Scarcity and Hesitancy	Scarcity in COVID-19 vaccine supplies reduces perceived vaccination priority and increases vaccine hesitancy (Pereira et al., 2021)	Scarcity Theory (Hamilton et al. 2019; Lynn 1991)
Irresponsible Maladaptive Consumption	Maladaptive Consumption	In search of well-being: Factors influencing the movement toward and away from maladaptive consumption (Boland et al., 2020)	Tipping Points (Obrien & Klein, 2017); Addiction (Bevins & Palmatier, 2004; Loewenstein, 1996)
	Addiction to Social Media	Centennials, FOMO, and loneliness: An investigation of the impact of social networking and messaging/VoIP apps usage during the initial stage of the coronavirus pandemic (Fumagalli et al., 2024); Facilitating relationship-building online for positive adolescent development (Uhalde et al., 2024)	Social Comparison (Lockwood et al., 2004; Suls, Martin & Wheeler, 2002); Adolescent Stress (Arnett, 1999; Hollenstein & Lougheed, 2013)
	Addiction to Tobacco	Proportion and trend in the age of cigarette smoking initiation among adolescent smoking experiencers aged 13-15 years in 148 countries/territories (Xing et al., 2022); Smoking scenes in movies and antismoking	Excitation Transfer (Singhal & Rogers, 2002); Forbidden Fruit and Tainted Fruit (Bushman & Stack,

		advertisements before movies: Effects on youth (Pechmann & Shih, 1999); Effects of indirectly and directly competing reference group messages and persuasion knowledge: Implications for educational placements (Pechmann & Wang, 2010)	1996); Reference Group or Normative Influences (Cialdini, Reno & Kallgren, 1990; Park & Lessig, 1977)
	Food Waste	The squander sequence: Understanding food waste at each stage of the consumer decision-making process (Block et al., 2016)	Contagion (Rozin & Royzman, 2001); Optimism (Weinstein, 1980); Anchoring and Adjustment and Availability (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974); Licensing (Wilcox et al., 2009)
Poverty and Hunger	Scarcity Responses	Does research on scarcity apply to impoverished consumers? (Hill, 2020); A self-regulatory model of resource scarcity (Cannon, et al., 2018)	Self-Regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Carver, 2004)
	Personal Control of Services	Service captivity: no choice, no voice, no power (Rayburn, et al., 2020); Power and choice: Their dynamic interplay in quenching the thirst for personal control (Inesi et al., 2011)	Personal Control (Rotter 1966)
	Delivery of Aid Services	Improving donation service design: expanding choice to increase perceived justice and satisfaction (North and Pechmann 2024)	Felt Deprivation (Blocker et al. 2013); Perceived Justice (Adam 1965)
Marginalization , Inequality, and Inequity	Women's Reproductive Rights	Abortion in America: A Consumer-Behavior Perspective (Patterson et al. 1995)	Moral Decision Making (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988)
	Racial Stigma and Inequity	Diversity issues in consumer psychology (Williams et al. 2018); “Shopping while black”: Black consumers’ management of racial stigma and racial profiling in retail settings (Pittmann 2020)	Racial Identity (Sellers et al., 1998); Symbolic Boundaries and Social Hierarchies (Wherry, 2008)
	Social Movements	Together we rise: How social movements succeed (Nardini et al. 2020)	Psychological Ownership (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001); Goal Pursuit (Austin & Vancouver 1996); Bonding and

			Identity Signaling (Berger & Heath 2008)
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