

Embedded-embodied consumer experiences and the limits of responsabilization theory

Robin Bankel and Cecilia Solér

Abstract

Purpose – *Critical studies within the economic and administrative sciences are increasingly paying attention to the way markets shift responsibility to consumers for societal and personal goals, referring to this process as consumer responsabilization. This article advances a new approach to responsabilization theory with the aim of overcoming some of its limitations.*

Design/methodology/approach – *A conceptual approach is used to critique dominant post-structural understandings of consumer responsibility and to advance alternative ways of thinking about responsabilization regimes that highlight the embodied and embedded experiences of responsible consumers.*

Findings – *The article suggests that responsible consumption is embodied and embedded within neoliberal social structures characterized by inherent tensions and will produce strained experiences rather than skilled and empowered neoliberal subjects. The authors underscore the need for an empirical focus on the adaptational responses of consumers to responsabilization processes. With a focus on the frictional relationship between the idealization pressures involved in responsabilization processes and the real-world consequences embodied in consumer experiences, the conceptual approach may provide new ways to advance the concept of responsabilization as a critique of neoliberal marketization.*

Originality/value – *While responsabilization theory has been gaining widespread attention, this is the first paper to critically examine its limitations and offer an embedded-embodied perspective on consumer responsibility.*

Keywords *Embodied experiences, Embeddedness, Responsibilization, Marketization*

Paper type *Conceptual paper*

Robin Bankel is based at Business Administration, School of Business Economics and Law, University of Gothenburg, Goteborg, Sweden and School of Business Society and Engineering, Mälardalen University, Eskilstuna, Sweden. Cecilia Solér is based at School of Business Economics and Law, University of Gothenburg, Goteborg, Sweden.

Introduction

The term *responsibilization* is gaining traction across the social and behavioral sciences. It describes a process where responsibilities and risks are transferred from the state to private actors (O'Malley, 2013; Shamir, 2008). This development is closely linked to processes of marketization and individualization under neoliberalism (Burchell, 1993; Rose, 1990). Against the backdrop of this political trajectory, marketing scholars have recently turned their attention to how markets and marketization processes shift responsibility to consumers. But responsabilization research was not the first stream of research to note the increasing expectations within our current market society on consumers to take social responsibility (see e.g. Devinney *et al.*, 2010). Before the concept emerged, scholars relied on other concepts such as consumer sovereignty and political consumerism to argue for the capacity of consumers to take an active role in pushing businesses toward social responsibility (Neilson, 2010; Tadajewski, 2018) and often promoted these solutions as reflections of free societies (Friedman, 1962/2020; Persky, 1993).

The concept of consumer responsabilization presents a very different understanding of responsible consumption. It reinterprets responsible consumption as a socially constructed

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solution for addressing societal issues within contemporary market societies. [Giesler and Veresiu's \(2014\)](#) seminal article on consumer responsabilization conceptualized the responsible consumer as a social construction created through moralistic discourse. These authors' skillful attempt at framing consumer responsibility as a form of governance sparked a line of research that critically highlights the way responsabilization processes "de-politicize" societal issues by presenting consumer choice as the sole, proper and natural way to address them. For instance, [Kipp and Hawkins \(2019\)](#) showed how cause-related marketing campaigns aim to transform citizens into "development consumers" by drawing on techniques that personalize, authorize and capabilize individuals to be subjectivized in this way. [Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria \(2021\)](#) studied the personal encounters of micro-lenders and how companies work with affective apparatuses to create an ambiance that amplifies the engagement of the micro-lenders in global poverty as a distinctively personal responsibility. Beyond global poverty, other topics including social inequality ([Eckhardt and Dobscha, 2019](#)), financial risk and sustainable development ([Giesler and Veresiu, 2014](#); [Mesiranta et al., 2022](#); [Soneryd and Ugglä, 2015](#)) have been addressed.

While the framing of consumer responsibility in terms of neoliberal governance holds great potential to unpack the role of responsible consumption in the political economy and contemporary market societies, a review of the responsabilization literature suggests that it often rests on a post structural theoretical perspective (governmentality) that, we argue, may inhibit the critical potential of the concept (e.g. [Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria, 2021](#); [Giesler and Veresiu, 2014](#); [Kipp and Hawkins, 2019](#)). Alternatively, responsabilization studies tend to lack a theoretical framing to explain the role of responsabilization in the political economy and how it connects to a particular type of governance (e.g. [Anderson et al., 2016](#); [Gonzalez-Arcos et al., 2021](#); [Thompson and Kumar, 2021](#)). We believe that the literature building on a governmentality perspective on responsabilization is correct in scrutinizing the macro-level of responsible consumption. However, we see important shortcomings in the literature on two levels.

First, at the theoretical level, the governmentality perspective that guides much of the responsabilization research seems to obfuscate the more coercive elements of the neoliberal political economy. Consumer responsabilization, it is assumed, materializes not primarily through the political-economic structure that affords individuals particular opportunities to take certain actions, but through consumer choices that analysts are inclined to portray as the result of "free" and "governed" choices. This apparent oxymoron requires further explanation, which we believe is lacking in the literature. Empirically, researchers allude to structural impediments but tend to follow the post-structural ambition to theorize on the emergence of new human "subjectivities" through which consumers understand themselves as engaging freely in responsible actions ([Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria, 2021](#); [Coskuner-Balli, 2020](#); [Giesler and Veresiu, 2014](#)). That approach, however, does not solve the tension. Instead, it risks obscuring the mechanisms at play under neoliberal governance. We fear that the critical potential of responsabilization scholarship is undermined by radical social constructivism and how it frames the relationship between "free choices" and the neoliberal governing of these choices in terms of subjectivity. In the following sections, we argue that the implication of this theoretical framing is a reification of the neoliberal claim that responsabilization is based on consumers' consent and free will.

Second, while the mark of governmentality has limited the critical potential of responsabilization theorizing, its post-structural stance may also imply limits on how responsabilization is studied empirically. For one thing, the coercive elements such as institutional and social pressures that shape consumers' action possibilities are largely overlooked in empirical studies on consumer responsabilization. Instead, studies tend to implicitly treat the successes and failures of responsabilization as outcomes of free will, implying that consumers comply with responsabilization if they consent to its proposition or, conversely, reject responsabilization if they disagree ([Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria, 2021](#);

[Eckhardt and Dobscha, 2019](#); [Gonzalez-Arcos et al., 2021](#); [Mesiranta et al., 2022](#)). This dualism, which we link to certain theoretical inclinations, precludes or downplays the pressures of responsabilization that people may feel when they experience a lack of plausible alternatives. Consider, for instance, how consumers may experience “choicelessness” ([Dholakia et al., 2021](#)) as they confront a choice between conventional goods and sustainability-labeled goods within an exploitative and unsustainable system. These pressures that consumers face have not been sufficiently unpacked in the literature.

Another tendency is that the governmentality approach is often delimited to political discourse and text documents rather than the empirical settings where marketization is played out ([Beudaert, 2020](#); [McKee, 2009](#)). Because discursive “rationalities” are emphasized as the dominant mechanisms by which responsabilization materializes, consumer embodiment – understood in this context as dispositions acquired within responsabilized marketplaces – is largely ignored. [Beudaert \(2020\)](#) showed how an embodied perspective on disabilities in consumption settings opens up new considerations regarding the understandings, meanings and, crucially, barriers that confrontations between the marketplace and consumer bodies give rise to. We believe that the embodied perspective is necessary to stimulate similar considerations of consumer experiences in the context of responsible consumption, as it is structured by the neoliberal political economy.

Overall, empirical studies that approach responsabilization as governmentality have largely ignored the structure of the political economy and how it is reflected in the socio-material environment and embodied experiences of individual consumers. To address these concerns, we pose two research questions:

First, we ask: How does the import of Foucauldian poststructuralism create obstacles for responsabilization scholarship to theorize and empirically investigate the coercive pressures of responsabilization? To respond to this question, we review and develop a closer critique of the post-structural perspective that allows us to unpack the implications of responsabilization as a mode of governmentality. We draw on previous critiques of governmentality and its radical social constructivism. The discussion considers the concept’s foundation in Foucauldian power analysis together with the development of the field of governmentality studies and its offshoot responsabilization, to understand how responsabilization research is constrained by this perspective.

Second, we ask: How can these impediments to responsabilization theory be overcome? The paper aims to offer an alternative perspective on consumer responsabilization. We ground this alternative in what we refer to as an embedded-embodied perspective to make the case that responsabilization should be understood as a part of a political economy that functions on multiple levels. This includes recognition of the creation of institutions that pressure individual social action into becoming embedded in a neoliberal market regime as well as the micro-level conditions that shape how responsabilized actions are learned and embodied. We integrate the concept of embeddedness developed by Karl Polanyi with the concept of embodiment as the bodily location of perception and knowledge ([Merleau-Ponty, 1962](#)) that assumes reciprocity between marketplace activities and structures that consumers experience ([Yakhlef, 2015](#)). As a result, we approach consumer responsabilization as an arena of the actualization of frictional logics between social integrative action and the type of individualized economic action that is instituted by the market economy and neoliberal marketization of social spheres.

Third, by contrast to the governmentality perspective’s strong focus on how frictional logics discursively create new forms of subjectivities, the embedded-embodied perspective that we advance involves contributing to new empirical directions for consumer research. By focusing on embodied consumer experiences of responsabilization and the subordination of social action to the socio-material market economy in responsabilization contexts, empirical studies are encouraged to pay closer attention to how market relations structure, actualize

and realize complex dilemmas as matters of individual consumer choice. An important aspect of this will be to analyze the various effects that this has on consumers' lives. This way, responsabilization can advance toward the potential of an empirically oriented and substantial critique of neoliberal governance and marketization.

Our paper is outlined as follows. We begin by discussing the theoretical underpinnings and empirical studies of responsabilization as a mode of governmentality, with a particular focus on Foucault's post-structural theories on power. In the second part, we outline the contours of an alternative conceptualization of responsabilization; one that considers how consumers' embodiment of responsible action is embedded within neoliberal institutions that produce both willing or unwilling compliance to responsabilization doctrines. Finally, we present some new directions on consumer responsabilization that pay attention to how neoliberal ideology materializes through the political and economic structuring of consumers' action possibilities and embodied experiences.

A critique of the post-structural approach to responsabilization

Responsibilization is a term that was first formulated and developed within Foucauldian post-structuralism and *governmentality studies* (O'Malley, 2013). In fact, responsabilization is often referred to as a mode of governmentality (Dean, 1999; Shamir, 2008) and this conceptual proximity is also reflected in the idea of consumer responsabilization (Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria, 2021; Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014; Pellandini-Simányi and Conte, 2021). Governmentality is intimately connected to the notion of governing people at a distance through subjectivity and self-government (Gordon, 1991; Miller and Rose, 1990) and may thus be understood as the principal theoretical underpinning of responsabilization. Despite the central role of governmentality in responsabilization theorizing, consumer research has yet to carefully consider the concept and its implications for responsabilization.

In the consumer research literature that embraces a governmental lens, marketing discourse is often described as a technique of governance that contributes to the way marketers and consumers alike engage in entrenching the consumer role in society. An example of this is how marketing equips consumers with competencies to take up an active role to assert influence within the commercial realm (Cova and Cova, 2009; Shankar *et al.*, 2006; Zwick *et al.*, 2008). Consumers are activated to govern their own behavior in line with neoliberal governmentality. They participate, supposedly voluntarily, in the co-creation of value as a result of being governed by marketing discourses (Cova and Cova, 2009). The emphasis is on how discourse liberates and disciplines simultaneously (Cova and Cova, 2009; Shankar *et al.*, 2006). For Cova and Cova (2009), the disciplinary character of governmentality is reflected in the way subjects are unsensitized to the potential loss of competencies being crowded out by marketing discourses. This includes simple daily routines like spending time reflecting or enjoying nature alone or in the company of others.

Indeed, marketing discourses may contain such potential. But the most disciplinary manner in which they operate is the social and institutional expectation on people to conform to the structures put in place by them, whether people prefer to or not. When non-commercialized competencies are crowded out, this does not only affect subjects who are oblivious to what is going on, but skeptics too experience a need to adapt. In these cases it is not primarily a question of subjectivity, and the discursive construction of new subjects through "technologies of truth" (Heikkinen *et al.*, 1999; Miller and Rose, 1990). Instead, such adaptation reflects a coercive institutional order. Extending this logic to the area of responsible consumption suggests that if individuals are successfully "constituted" as responsible consumers, this is wrongfully assumed to be the outcome of their belief in associated technologies of truth, rather than reflecting a form of subservience to a dominant order. Hence, consumer responsibility may create ambivalence even when consumers comply with expectations (Barnhart *et al.*, 2024; Connolly and Prothero, 2008). As a result of

this, the notion of “free choice” in responsabilization contexts deserves to be dissected and problematized in a different way than governmentality allows for. Furthermore, the concept of governmentality raises several other concerns, which in our view makes it unsuitable as a point of departure for research on consumer responsabilization.

Our first concern is the relationship between power and freedom. Whereas state power, in conventional liberal thinking, is considered in contradistinction to consumers’ freedom and autonomy, the soft power envisioned by Foucault in the emergence of the liberal state suggested a reformulation of this relationship (Burchell *et al.*, 1991; Foucault, 1991, 2003). Instead of existing in opposition to power, consumer autonomy would now be considered as a vessel for the channeling and exertion of power (Donzelot and Gordon, 2009; Miller and Rose, 1990; Rose *et al.*, 2006). This collapse of the distinction between state power and consumer autonomy and freedom is crucial to understanding why governmentality offers a too narrow and shaky ground for the study of responsabilization. Governmentality is about power operating through people’s thoughts, actions and their will (Burchell, 1993; Foucault, 1980, 1982). Formulated along these lines, responsabilization must permeate the personal goals of the subjects to be successful, an idea well-integrated in the post structural domain of marketing scholarship. The criterion of transformed and “willing consumers” has guided prior research on consumer responsabilization (Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria, 2021; Mesiranta *et al.*, 2022). But our argument is that consumer responsabilization does not require complete internalization of the imperative of consumer-based responsibility. Responsible action may stem from motives based on social justice and socially integrative principles that are more or less present in all social environments. In other words, consumers may consume responsibly because it is the dominant or only way for them to channel their solidarity. That responsibility is market-mediated through neoliberal governance may be less significant than the consumer’s subjective experience of being responsible for social others, which reflects values that have transcended human histories and geographies. Put differently, responsabilization may succeed because it taps into existing social mechanisms rather than transforms consumer subjectivity.

Our second concern is that the study of responsabilization as a mode of governmentality precludes its ambition as transformative consumer research. There is little ground for consistent critique if people who engage in taking responsibility through consumer choice are assumed to be acting – in a strict sense – in accordance with how they wish to lead their lives (cf. Fraser, 1981). Thus, we argue against the use of a circular mode of power dynamics in responsabilization as a mode of governmentality. Rather than being top-down, power, in the post-structural view, circulates in the form of governmentalities and subjectivities, including through the state apparatus (Foucault, 2007; Lemke, 2002, 2007). This non-hierarchical approach to power is reflected in the notion of the positive and productive power associated with governmentality which obscures the boundaries between the state and civic society (Donzelot and Gordon, 2009; Foucault, 2007). Integral to this conceptualization is that power on the one hand, and, on the other, virtues associated with a free and open society, such as freedom, autonomy and truth, are seen as inseparable and co-constitutive (Foucault, 1980, 1982, 1991). Following this logic, the very constitution of an expansionist market society that promotes responsabilization is testimony of its legitimacy, given that autonomy, freedom and truth are all present along with power in its constitution. Its subjects, consumers, are considered to be an effect of power (Bevir, 1999; Caldwell, 2007) but, in this view, power always presupposes subjects with a capacity to act (Foucault, 1982, 1991). Power travels, permeates and subjectifies through governmental rationalities that pass through the consciousness of the individual (Bevir, 1999; Dean, 1999; Foucault, 1982). If one were to consider governmentality through a structural lens, it could help explain the power that marketing holds over consumers who play along by self-governing themselves in a way that conforms to powerful interests (cf. Zwick and Cayla, 2011). But this sort of structural critique does not align with the post-structural character of the concept of governmentality. Governmentality, similar to adjacent post-structural theories like actor-network

theory (see [Whittle and Spicer, 2008](#)), flattens the power relations between the state, the market and consumers. Power is not exercised by one over another, instead neoliberal marketization reforms are upheld because consumers willingly and (to the extent possible) autonomously subordinate themselves to, and internalize, the rationalities of the neoliberal political economy ([Kerr, 1999](#)), including responsabilizing rationalities. Compliance with the alternatives available to responsible consumers (such as e.g. choosing to recycle in a particular way) must, for theoretical consistency, be understood as a form of consent no qualitatively different than that shared by those who initiated the system. If not, the omnipresent circular and positive character of power is put aside the power analysis. At best, this invites studies of the neoliberal rationalities that entertain the necessity and legitimacy of taking personal responsibility to secure the “freedoms” and functions of market society (e.g. [Coskuner-Balli, 2020](#); [Döbbe and Cederberg, 2024](#)). At worst, it ends up reifying what it scrutinizes. A governmentality perspective gestures toward a critical view but implies that consent is given to the very degree it is possible for consumers – being subjects of power – to consent. Thus, according to this perspective, consumers who comply with the four common types of responsible consumer – the health-conscious consumer, the financially literate consumer, the green consumer and the bottom-of-the-pyramid consumer ([Giesler and Veresiu, 2014](#)) – are not adapting to their weaker position in the marketized society, but they effectively consent to and self-govern themselves in the image of these ideals that are shaped by others. Such a perspective contravenes critical scrutiny of a system based on consumer responsabilization as a fair and efficient way to meet consumer needs or to solve societal problems such as climate change, poverty and biodiversity loss.

Our third concern is the implications of the philosophical foundation of the governmentality construct for the empirical study of responsabilization. This critique focuses on the implicit relativism in various aspects of Foucauldian governmentality and what we see as an overemphasis on the role of discourse in the constitution of social reality and human subject formation ([Habermas, 1987/2018](#); [Joseph, 2004](#)). In our understanding, these relativistic tendencies in the theoretical groundwork incentivize researchers to examine discourse and text documents and disincentivize them from examining the real-world effects of responsabilization, including embodied consumer experiences. We argue that scientific inquiry into consumer responsabilization needs to be situated in real-world market contexts. Only then can consumer responsabilization be critically problematized. Interestingly, three prolific studies on consumer responsabilization that go beyond a mere discursive analysis ([Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria, 2021](#); [Eckhardt and Dobscha, 2019](#); [Gonzalez-Arcos et al., 2021](#)) reveal consumer experiences of discomfort and refusal, suggesting a gap between prevalent neoliberal discourses that incessantly point to consumer choice as the proper instrument for acting responsibly, and actual consumer responses. For instance, [Eckhardt and Dobscha \(2019\)](#) reported on consumers who rejected the subject position of being responsabilized due to negative experiences from the consumption setting. Our concern is supported by previous critiques of governmentality studies. With its main focus on political discourse and text documents ([Cova and Cova, 2009](#); [O'Malley et al., 1997](#); [Rose et al., 2006](#)) governmentality studies have often been criticized for neglecting the local empirical realities where governmental rationalities play out ([Beudaert, 2020](#); [McKee, 2009](#)).

The embeddedness and embodiment of responsible consumption

Against the backdrop of the above critique, we believe that consumer responsabilization, including consumers' various forms of rejecting and accepting it, can empirically and theoretically be explored more congruently by avoiding the radical social constructivism associated with post-structural governmentality ([Bevir, 1999](#)). Instead of assuming that responsabilized consumers are fundamentally re-shaped as market agents through governance, the embodied experiences of responsabilized consumers should be a central

empirical concern for consumer researchers to understand both the reality and legitimacy of the responsabilizing systems in which consumers are entangled.

We find a useful steppingstone for this shift in empirical focus in an “embedded-embodied perspective”. This perspective builds on a combination of the institutional thinking of political economist Karl Polanyi and phenomenological theorizing on embodiment. This approach is similar to the governmentality perspective in that it historicizes and politicizes the emergence of the market society to view it as a product of governance. But in Polanyi’s (1944, 2001) specific institutional thinking, the potential for such governance is both enabled and constrained by the deep-seated social institutions that were natural to archaic and pre-industrial human societies, namely those based on mechanisms of social integration, primarily reciprocity and redistribution (see North, 1977). These two mechanisms were the integrative mechanisms of specific institutional arrangements, namely systems based on symmetry and centrality respectively (Cangiani, 2003). Reflecting on Polanyi’s work from the perspective of North’s (1990, p. 2) definition of institutions as “rules of the game”, one might say that Polanyi detailed how the rules of the game along with their arrangements shifted with the advent of capitalist industrial market relations. In the marketization of society, Polanyi observed how those social institutional arrangements that previously guided economic activity were overtaken by a market system founded on the idea of *homo economicus* and personified in what he referred to as “the marketing mind” (Polanyi, 1947, 1977). Polanyi attributed performative power to these ideas but did not consider them to be natural like the pre-capitalist social institutions that had been shaped over millennia. Therefore, Polanyi put much effort into studying the friction that this emerging economic institution produced in unsettling the social fabric of society. In our view, this means that an embeddedness perspective on consumer responsabilization should acknowledge the intimate and friction-laden relationship between two ontologically different institutional constructs, social life and economic transactional relations.

A central motivation for leaning on a Polyanian perspective on consumer responsabilization is its emphasis on how coercive institutional elements arrange society in line with market economy ideals. Polanyi argued that “it requires statecraft and repression to impose the logic of the market and its attendant risks on ordinary people” (see Polanyi, 1944/2001, p. xxvii). For Polanyi, marketization or the subordination of social life to the economic realm, occurs in the first instance through structural pressures on the individual in the political economy rather than discursive pastoral guidance of the individual’s most inner desires. Responsibilization, then, can be thought of as a continuation of the embedding of social objectives and institutions in an economic structure, affording individuals specific opportunities to address their personal, societal and environmental concerns without necessarily reforming their identity to become reconstituted as veritable neoliberal subjects (cf. Fraser, 2014; Pyysiäinen *et al.*, 2017).

Polanyi’s observations of how economic institutions structure society should draw our attention to the political embeddedness of responsabilization processes, meaning how decision-makers at different levels exercise power in a way that structures the decision realm of consumers. But an embeddedness perspective should also include how individuals respond to the micro-realities affected by these political processes and acknowledge what their social and cognitive embeddedness means for responsabilization outcomes (Zukin and DiMaggio, 1990). This implies an interdisciplinary approach that takes an interest in the inequalities of power that produce neoliberal governance frameworks at a macro (political) and meso (organizational) level but that simultaneously recognizes “the limits to rationality posed by [the instituted] uncertainty, complexity, and the cost of information”, “the culturally shared collective understandings” including norms that govern exchange relationships, and the social structures that eventually result in responsible behaviors at the micro-level of consumers (see Zukin and DiMaggio, 1990, pp. 14–26). In sum, a critical view of the place of consumer responsabilization in contemporary social and

economic life requires bridging the tradition in political economy that focuses on more tangible forms of domination of social classes through capital control and regulatory struggles with the subtle social, cultural and cognitive conditions that determine the possibilities for governance at the micro-level. This approach actualizes the lived experiences and the adaptation or struggles of responsabilized consumers in the neoliberal political economy.

However, the latter, micro-perspective, is only hinted at in the literature. Thus, to inform a perspective on consumers' lived experiences, Polanyi's understanding of the political embeddedness of the market (and responsabilization) must be supplemented with an existing theory of consumer experiences as social and situated. A socially embodied and situated approach to consumer responsabilization (Gärtner, 2013) explicitly recognizes that consumer perception reflects the relation between the consumer and specific marketplaces (Yakhlef, 2015). It reflects Merleau-Ponty's (1962) concept of an "intentional arc", as it involves perception as learned bodily skill and disposition to respond in a fine-tuned way to situations in the world (Dreyfus, 2002). In practice, this means that consumers' perceptions and choices are learned and that this learning to a substantial extent is acquired by consumer marketplace experiences (Dreyfus, 2002; Gibson, 1979/2014). Such a view on embodiment and perception has important implications for the study of consumer responsabilization.

First, an embodied view on consumer responsabilization reframes consumer choice as not only bodily experience, meaning-making and sensory perception in *specific* market environments, but also experience based on learned and acquired perceptual and bodily skills in marketplaces more generally. This means that consumer experiences in responsabilized markets such as food markets where consumers are expected to express their responsibilities through, for example, the consumption of higher priced organic food should be understood as a phenomenon shaped by the marketplace itself through discourses and branding appeals that suggest what is the right sustainable choice of food. The body's role as the *locus* of perceptual capacities in social and situated embodied understandings of market offerings implies both that experiences of products and services are mediated by bodily encounters and that products/services are experienced in a pre-reflective way (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Yakhlef, 2015).

Second, following the assumed relation between bodily experience of marketplaces and consumer choice, research on consumer responsabilization could address market mechanisms and institutions that sustain consumer choice in a way that pressures consumers to comply with marketization of solutions to "sought-after ends" (Aneshensel, 1992). Examples include when elderly care benefits are organized as part of a market of private providers, or when environmentally concerned consumers conform to the range of sustainably certified products as a way to act in a responsible manner. The embodiment of responsabilization reflects how consumers take on socio-material structural qualities (Gärtner, 2013) where a combination of ideological norms (such as those promoting "free choice") and related marketplace material and discursive structures, shape consumers' lived experiences of responsabilization in various domains. More specifically, the embodiment of responsabilization acknowledges the performative effects of a neoliberal ideology that permeates political and economic discourses of free choice in contexts such as being the responsabilized manager of your health, of climate change etcetera (Döbbe and Cederberg, 2024; Shamir, 2008). The concept of embodiment emphasizes how human experience is learned and situation-specific (Gallagher, 2006; Gärtner, 2013; Yakhlef, 2015), and consumer responsabilization should accordingly be understood as a learned bodily skill that takes place within the responsabilizing socio-material marketplace (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Claycomb and Mulberry, 2007). As human perception is based on previous experience of the responsabilizing character of marketplaces, responsabilization is always to some extent conditioned upon consumers' understanding of their responsibility

(Merleau-Ponty, 1962). From the non-dualist embodiment perspective, it follows that any human experience – of nudging or any other feature in social or physical environments – leads to body–mind learning and dispositions to act (Dreyfus, 2002).

The embodied perspective on consumer responsabilization is thus well-aligned with the institutional approach of Polanyi where reactions against the anti-social marketization processes are thought to emanate from the lived experiences of those concerned. While the latter emphasizes the structural ordering of action possibilities at the macro-level, the former complements this approach with a micro-perspective that explains how the human body learns, adapts and reacts to a socio-material environment that promotes marketized social responsibility.

New directions

Combining the macro-focus of embeddedness and the micro-focus of embodiment, an embedded-embodied perspective will highlight the responsabilizing mechanisms of neoliberal governance and the outcomes for consumers. This implies new directions for consumer responsabilization research.

Multi-level approach

For one thing, the embedded-embodied approach involves a multi-level research approach. As Dolan (2002, p. 171, cited in Akaka *et al.*, 2023), explains, “individual acts of consumption are not in opposition to, and prior to, macro structures and processes: they *are* macro processes at work”. Within consumer research, some scholars have developed multi-level frameworks that take this into account (Akaka *et al.*, 2023; Chandler and Vargo, 2011). Whereas these may be used to inform research on consumer responsabilization, they are ideologically attuned to the notion that market processes and their institutionalization into “service eco-systems” are, per definition, reflective of value creation. While we welcome their dynamic and multilevel understanding of “how large-scale social structures and institutions evolve relative to the individual service efforts of actors, dyads, triads, and complex networks” (Chandler and Vargo, 2011, p. 44), the embedded-embodied approach to understanding responsabilization would facilitate a perspective that does not take for granted the legitimacy of the system at a macro level. Rather it proposes a critical examination at the macro (political, policy, regulatory), meso (market, organizational) and/or micro (consumer) level. A multi-level approach suggests that researchers will take the context of context (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011) into account to integrate the pressures to responsabilize consumers in the political economy with the embodied experiences of consumers. Such examination would include consideration of not only the processes but also the outcomes of responsabilization in terms of consumer well-being and the effectiveness or plausibility of the consumer-based solutions.

Macro-level processes

To explore the process of responsabilization from an embedded-embodied perspective, the institutional pressures of the specific marketplace should be considered. By institutional pressures we refer mainly to two things. The first is the various ways in which a market logic is imposed on consumers by the state and other institutional actors. By situating the solutions to different types of problems (environmental, ethical, personal problems) in the socio-material domain of the market with its focus on individual decision-making, rather than in the political democratic domain of collective action, responsible choices and actions are made possible by the affordances of specific empirical contexts where consumer responsabilization is created (Yakhlef, 2015; Gibson, 1979/2014). Consumers often become dependent on the instituted means of addressing certain needs and responsibilities, which must be considered as a form of power exercised through the political economy. How these

instituted means are constituted, what type of actions they enable, and the constraints associated with these arrangements are key concerns. To understand the constraints that such arrangements impose on people's embodied experiences, the alternatives must be considered. By this we mean the perceived availability of alternative ways for people to address the same ends outside of a market context. Common alternatives to address similar issues that responsabilization processes are concerned with include changes in policy and legislation that replace individual responsibility with collective political responsibility, sometimes referred to as de-responsibilization, and the arrangements in place that facilitate or impede such changes. For instance, conscientious consumers may demand high minimum standards for labor rights and environmental protection, which would de-responsibilize them in the marketplace by removing these criteria as part of consumers' choices. In the absence of such regulation or socio-political arrangements, these consumers are not merely encouraged but may experience no choice but to engage in moralistic consumer choice to achieve social ends because of a perceived lack of concrete, plausible, alternatives. On care markets and in health care services, consumers may be expected to regulate their own behavior rather than having institutional actors reign in on marketplace communication and offerings that trigger problematic behavior (e.g. unhealthy diets, smoking, obsessive gaming and more; see [Alexius, 2017](#)). Policies in this direction may also involve the removal of support mechanisms that help consumers handle these pressures, notably through austerity measures widely associated with neoliberal politics. Actual institutional pressures will largely be context-specific and require empirical work dedicated to the unveiling of the complex and context-dependent responsabilizing structures, including regulatory and policy settings. Concepts from political economy and psychology, such as Amartya Sen's capability approach and Gibson's affordance theory, could inform and complement the embedded-embodied approach to explore these and similar issues around consumer responsabilization.

The second type of institutional pressures that responsabilized consumers become entangled in is complementary to the policies, regulation and supply of socio-material affordances. The neoliberal political economy also works through ideology, idealized images and constructs that affect consumers' bodily experiences and their perceptions to influence their understanding of responsibility ([Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017](#); [Giesler and Veresiu, 2014](#); [Schmitt et al., 2022](#)). Some responsibilities are not merely *channeled* through markets but are fundamentally shaped or constituted by them. For instance, consumers' understanding of their personal or societal responsibility may be shaped by commercial messages, practices, places and relationships. While this brings our embeddedness approach closer to responsabilization research drawing on the governmentality perspective, we firmly underline the need to focus on the frictional relationship between the idealization pressures at the macro-level and the real-world consequences embodied in the experiences of consumers at the micro-level.

Micro-level processes

At the micro-level, the focus will be on understanding the adaptational responses of consumers to institutional responsabilization processes including exploring why consumers are susceptible to responsabilization in the first place, how responsabilization is rationalized and legitimated by consumers, and the personal (e.g. social, psychological, emotional, economic) outcomes of responsabilization revealed in the experiences of consumers. The susceptibility of consumers to responsabilization may be connected to the nature of their needs, including those emanating from medical conditions, care responsibilities, personal obligations toward external entities (the family, society, nature) and other necessities that are fundamentally internalized and embodied. As self-determination theory informs us, humans have fundamental psychological needs that must be satisfied for the well-being of individuals ([Deci and Ryan, 2012](#); [Kasser, 2003](#)). If the resources required to meet these

needs are bound up in marketized forms of organization, consumers will be pulled toward these markets. By considering various social and psychological mechanisms, researchers will likely find themselves in a position to uncover many instances of successful responsabilization even where the political dimension of marketization is recognized and its legitimacy is challenged by consumers. Prior research on consumer responses to responsabilization has either explored why consumers willingly assume responsibilities for social problems ([Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria, 2021](#)) or resist such responsibilities ([Eckhardt and Dobscha, 2019](#); [Gonzalez-Arcos et al., 2021](#)). The embedded-embodied perspective on responsabilization recognizes that incredulous or antagonistic feelings toward responsabilization may still result in consumer acquiescence to responsabilization processes due to a perceived and actual lack of effective alternatives. Uncovering the particularities of such empirical contexts will surely advance the contribution of the responsabilization concept as a critique of the neoliberal political economy.

An embedded-embodied consumer responsabilization approach will also consider how consumers legitimize and rationalize their engagement in responsabilized consumption settings. Adding to the frictional situation described in the previous paragraph, this may involve expressions that de-politicize the role of the market, entertain notions like empowerment and economic freedom, and support the political/ideological rationale for advancing consumer choice-based solutions. These expressions should be considered in relation to the lived experiences revealed by the same consumers (as well as other types of logics embraced) which may reveal frictions, contradictions and paradoxes. Insights from psychology may help to understand these mechanisms, including the cognitive biases involved in consumer decision-making but also other constructs such as cognitive dissonance ([Festinger, 1962](#)).

The outcomes of embedded-embodied responsabilization

A firm focus on the outcomes of responsabilization revealed in the experiences of consumers should be a central concern for consumer researchers. A part of this will be to understand how responsabilization creates psychological, emotional, economic or physical strain for consumers even when these personal costs are rationalized by the responsabilized subjects themselves ([Pyysiäinen et al., 2017](#)). This implies probing the experiences of consumers rather than taking their spontaneous narratives at face value. Bringing these familiar considerations within consumer research ([Campbell et al., 2020](#); [Tezer and Bodur, 2020](#)) and psychology ([Festinger, 1962](#)) into the study of responsabilization as a political-economic form of governance seems both relevant and important, not least for its ambition to provide a critical and transformative consumer research project concerned with consumer welfare ([Giesler and Veresiu, 2014](#)). By focusing on and probing consumer experiences of burdens, risks and costs associated with responsible consumption, the embedded-embodied perspective on responsabilization that we envision takes into account and explains the uneasy and stressful experiences of responsabilization ([Eckhardt and Dobscha, 2019](#); [Gonzalez-Arcos et al., 2021](#)), even when responsabilization leads consumers to act in accordance with ascribed responsibilities.

While close attention should be given to the outcomes related to the welfare of consumers, the outcomes should not be considered separately from the processes of responsabilization. One reason for this is that the effects of responsabilization felt by consumers will not only produce different outcomes but will form part of the processes of responsabilization, for instance in stimulating rationalization and resistance. Also, outcomes in terms of the effectiveness of consumer responsabilization are important because a lack of effectiveness suggests the societal problem being addressed is not resolved satisfactorily. Whether or not measures are effective and bring desired outcomes will depend on consumers' ability to adapt to the instituted solutions. That, in turn, will likely affect outcomes for consumers, such

as the burdens that consumers experience because of a mismatch between their capabilities and the resources provided.

All this pertains not only to the feasibility of the system within which responsabilization emerges but also to the legitimacy of the system. While we have provided some broad contours of what an embedded-embodied approach to consumer responsabilization can entail, we close by suggesting a set of concrete proposals for future research on consumer responsibility that relate to points we have touched upon (see [Table 1](#)).

Concluding discussion

In this article, we argue that consumer responsabilization may have more to do with the socio-material market affordances instituted as a part of the neoliberal political economy and the adaptational responses by consumers, than rationalities creating fundamental acceptance of how the political economy orders the possibilities for effective action. The embedded-embodied perspective on responsible consumption that we propose serves several purposes. First, it recognizes that consumer responsabilization is driven by political and economic institutions that channel and shape responsibility in ways that pressure consumers into perceiving their market choices in terms of responsible action. Second, it brings attention to the tendency in marketization to subordinate certain social logics and mechanisms to economic transactional orders. As such, the perspective highlights the emerging frictions and tensions in this relationship as an important object of inquiry. Third, the realism that brings into focus the embodied experiences of the subjects living in this institutional setting may explain how and why responsabilization sometimes leads to compliance despite its oft burdening impact on consumers.

To the extent consumer researchers identify responsabilizing contexts that result in negative outcomes for consumers, an embedded-embodied perspective may involve policy implications to relieve or “de-responsibilize” ([Pellandini-Simányi and Conte, 2021](#)) consumers from the market-induced burden. For instance, prior research has shown that consumer choice may increase satisfaction for hedonic goals whereas externally determined

Table 1 Ten questions to inspire future research

1	How can we conceptualize consumer responsabilization so that it is meaningful from a transformative consumer research perspective? For example, is the transfer of responsibility to consumers to be understood as “responsibilization” if it is attuned to the capacities of consumers to take responsibility or should responsabilization denote “excess responsibility”?
2	What competing social and economic logics are at play in responsabilization marketization processes and under what situations/contexts do these come into conflict?
3	How do the competing social and economic logics at play materialize in different consumption settings and how do consumers make sense of them?
4	How do consumers balance responsibilities in their personal lives with responsibilities that are more abstract and distanced?
5	What personal motivations make people susceptible to consumer responsabilization?
6	How is regulation and marketization related to responsabilization and de-responsibilization of consumers? For instance, under what institutional circumstances does marketization lead to consumer responsabilization?
7	How are market-level affordances configured to shape responsible consumption and how do consumers respond to those affordances?
8	How do market level affordances affect consumer embodied experience of domains that prior to marketization were viewed as part of the social sphere, such as care services?
9	What socio-material market structures work to legitimize consumer responsabilization on the political, market and individual level?
10	How do consumers reconcile their responsabilized efforts with their ineffectiveness or uncertainty?

Source: Authors' own work

(non-choice) outcomes may result in higher satisfaction or well-being in difficult and non-hedonic choice settings (Botti and McGill, 2011; Botti *et al.*, 2009). Following Polanyi (1944/2001, p. 265), we suggest that relief from responsabilizing settings may be found in the freedom that regulation in the opposite direction of marketization sometimes affords. Such regulation may be required to facilitate channels for effective collective action, in contrast to the currently prevalent insistence on individualized action to address common social and personal challenges.

In general, responsabilization research has strong potential to inform some of the most fateful issues of our times, including the capacity and legitimacy of consumer-based solutions to societal and even existential problems. But, as we suggest, it must critically engage with the mechanisms that lead consumers to confront the expectations posed by responsabilizing structures and institutions. The ultimate goal should be to try to understand the consequences of their engagement, including the effectiveness of the consumer-based solutions and the outcomes for personal and social well-being.

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Corresponding author

Robin Bankel can be contacted at: robin.bankel@mdu.se

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