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**Re-view**

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## **Re-viewed: Alan Warde's (2005) 'Consumption and Theories of Practice' in the Journal of Consumer Culture**

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### **Abstract**

This first set of re-views revisits a foundational text in the sociology of consumption, Alan Warde's 'Consumption and Theories of Practice', published in the *Journal of Consumer Culture* in 2005. Rather than offering a single reading, the section brings together three commentaries written by people whose work has been influenced by the article. Dale Southerton positions Warde's article within a series of intellectual 'moments' that have shaped his own research trajectory. Tamzin Rollason revisits the text from the perspective of sustainable consumption and fashion research. Finally, Torik Holmes invites a re-reading of Warde's work as an intervention in the politics of consumption. Together, these re-views provide a glimpse into the past twenty years of debate at the intersection of practice theory and consumption and show how contributions like Warde's article are interpreted and mobilised in current research.

### **Keywords**

*consumption; fashion; moments; politics of consumption*

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## Introduction to the Re-view

*Jenny Rinkinen and Elizabeth Shove*

Welcome to the first set of re-views in *The Journal of Practice Theory*. The Re-views section invites contributors to experiment with the format, scope, and aims of the 'review'.

Reviews are typically critiques or reflections of recent books. Our Re-views section starts from a broader premise. Readers and authors are constantly re-viewing texts that are no longer new, but that continue to shape scholarly discussion. In this part of the journal, we invite commentators to take this approach, responding to the same text from different disciplinary, theoretical, or empirical angles.

The first three re-views focus on a widely cited article that has become something of a classic: Alan Warde's 'Consumption and Theories of Practice', published in the *Journal of Consumer Culture* in 2005. Written at a time when practice theory was gaining momentum in the sociology of consumption, Warde's work has been hugely important in redefining the terms in which consumption is conceptualised, analysed, and debated.

Re-viewers include people whose work has, in different ways, been shaped by Warde's 2005 contribution to practice theory and the study of consumption.

Dale Southerton positions Warde's article within a series of intellectual 'moments' that have shaped his own research trajectory, methodologically, conceptually, and theoretically. Tamzin Rollason revisits the text from the perspective of sustainable consumption and fashion research,

considering the promises and challenges of advancing practice-based research in these fields. Finally, Torik Holmes invites a re-reading of Warde's work as an intervention in the politics of consumption.

Together, these re-views provide a glimpse of the past twenty years of debate at the intersection of practice theory and consumption, also showing how contributions are reinterpreted and reactivated in the present.

Re-views is an ongoing section of the journal. If you have a text you would like to re-view or to be re-viewed, please see further details on the journal's website.<sup>2</sup>

## 'Moments' in 'Consumption and Theories of Practice'

*Dale Southerton*

I choose the word 'moments' in the title of this review of Alan Warde's (2005) 'Consumption and Theories of Practice' for many reasons. Consumption as a moment in practices is the most powerful idea that I take from the article. Looking back, the article also marks a series of moments. A moment in the study of consumption. A moment in the advance of practice theories. A moment that provided the conceptual scaffolding for topics that we are more familiar with today, particularly sustainable consumption.

At the time the article was written, frustrations with dominant framings of consumption abounded. Consumption was held to be the principal means of identity-formation. In the field of consumer culture, there was an emphasis on lifestyles – the selection and arrangement of the abundant

<sup>2</sup>

<https://ojs.library.lancs.ac.uk/jpt/typesofcontribution>

goods and services provided by markets into a style of life – through which individuals playfully (and/or anxiously) expressed who they are and which tastes they share. By implication, people could freely change their style-of-life, so long as they had the resources to access the market. From this perspective, the consumer was an essentially individualised figure and consumption reduced to a mode of symbolic communication. Debate centred on the role of the consumer in reproducing social differences, how it was manipulated by market forces, and its consequences (such as political apathy, the rise of materialism, and globalisation). In this framing, the mundanity of ordinary consumption was marginalised, as was materiality and the use of things.

Using the practice of motoring to illustrate his argument, Warde claimed that “consumption is not itself a practice but is, rather, a moment in almost every practice...” (2005, 137). The significance of this statement cannot be understated. In fifteen words, it undermined the core contention that consumption was a matter of individuals assembling a lifestyle. Attention instead turns to the organisation of practices and how goods and services are appropriated in the course of performing them. Immediately, a host of critical questions come into view: how are practices organised; in what ways and with what variations are they performed; how do practices connect; how are they reproduced and changed; in what ways are they shared? These are now familiar questions to readers of this journal, but at the time, this was a fresh approach.

I choose to describe the article as a ‘moment’ for three further reasons. First, it made retrospective sense of a body of research that focused on repetitive forms of action, everyday-ness, normality, practical knowledge and know-how, sociality, and

materiality. At the time of publication, Warde’s article pulled together a set of ideas that had emerged over the previous decade but were distributed across different fields.

Second, the article was published at a time when major societal challenges concerning climate change and health and well-being were consistently being presented as social problems, often associated with consumption. Put simply, the dominant framing of consumption as a matter of individual lifestyle choices pointed toward solutions nested within behaviouralist approaches that sought to persuade individuals to make different, more desirable choices for themselves. As Warde points out, practice theory inverts the logic. If consumption is a ‘moment in almost every practice’ then choices (or attitudes) follow the logic of (shared) practices. For those whose research eschewed individualism, Warde described a ready-worked out theoretical position that provided a basis for combating behaviouralism, and for taking a more systemic view of the dynamics of social practice.

Third, Warde’s is a deliberately ‘abridged account’ but is much more than a concise summary of what we now think of as practice theory. By mobilising the principles of practice theory and applying them to a specific field (in this case, transport and mobility), Warde’s article moves from abstract theory to an attempt to provide a platform for empirical endeavour. In this respect, the article has been hugely influential. Twenty years after publication, it is now unusual to read an empirical account in the (sociological) study of consumption that does not draw on practice theory in some way or other.

I end with three observations related to my own work. Each derives from the analytical liberation provided by taking practice as the principal unit of analysis. The first is methodological. Starting with practices, tracing them, paying attention to how they relate and vary, and so on, does not demand new methods. But it does demand a different orientation to the application of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Warde's example of the practice of motoring offered an early blueprint for thinking through the questions that could be asked of data, the methodologies that can be used to enquire into the lives of practices, and what they mean for consumption.

The second is conceptual. Starting with practices 'unlocked' how I conceptualised time or temporality, moving gradually away from a focus on how people experience time (as a thing), towards how temporalities are made (and re-made) through the "sequential and simultaneous engagement in diverse practices, especially when involving people belonging to disparate and heterogeneous social networks..." (Warde, 2005, 144).

The third is more obviously theoretical. In his conclusion, Warde suggests that "specifying how new practices emerge..." (2005, 146) is a key question for sociological enquiry. This is a fiendishly difficult question to answer – what is a new practice? It is a question I am confronting in my current work on sociodigital practices. The rise of digitality is constantly presented in popular and academic debates as creating new practices. But as these new practices seem, to me at least, to echo or shadow established practices, then how to determine what is new? And does it matter? In some ways, it does not; practices are constantly emerging, unfolding such that they are never really new. At the same time, the language of 'new' is performative, as we are seeing in claims about digitality. That I am

currently grappling with the empirical question of how to identify 'new' practices is a sign of the influence Warde's article has had and an example of the many problems and questions it has helped generate within consumption studies and beyond.

## **Fashioning a Moment in Social Practice Theory**

*Tamzin Rollason*

It is hard to pinpoint exactly when Warde's argument became part of the conceptual framing of my sustainable fashion consumption research, but like many social practice theory-informed consumption scholars (Evans 2012; Middha 2020; Shove 2011), I have internalised a critique of behaviour change approaches to sustainable consumption. Part of the attraction of Warde's account was my growing recognition that the individualised behaviour change campaigns and technological solutions within sustainable production and consumption agendas (Hickel 2020) have been readily co-opted by fashion as marketing devices and efficiency tweaks (Rollason 2023), while production, consumption, and associated impacts have continued to escalate (Niinimäki et al. 2020). Adopting Warde's pivotal claim that consumption is best understood as a moment within practices (Warde 2005), rather than a discrete practice in itself, shifts the focus from the act of shopping to the broader temporalities, processes, doings, and sayings that organise the fashion world. Consumption occurs "within and for the sake of practices..." (Warde 2005, 145), as competent practitioners avail themselves of requisite services and tools for engaging in activities such as commuting, parenting, or socialising. Recasting consumption in this way avoids the almost inevitable drift towards individualism that follows when consumption is treated as a discrete practice, resisting the

gravitational pull of individualising concepts central to fashion, including the formation and presentation of identity and marketing (Rollason 2023).

Warde further notes that items are appropriated and appreciated within the effective performance of practices and illustrates this through the integrated practice of motoring. The notions of appropriation and appreciation, and his later addition of acquisition, are especially valuable in research into fashion consumption and sustainability, as they offer a way to examine processes that are peculiar to fashion yet central to sustainability outcomes. The problem in fashion is not a lack of material durability; the durability of plastics in fashion is one of the intractable problems for fashion sustainability (Niinimäki et al. 2020), but a lack of connection between material arrangements and practices. Instead, sustainability comes from long and frequent use, as Kate Fletcher observes, "Durability becomes embedded in the techniques and processes of use." (2015, 230) Acquisition, appropriation, and appreciation have therefore been foundational for my exploration of how fashion materiality, dressing practices, and long use intersect in the pursuit of sustainability.

Practice-based research on consumption around the time of publication was focused on hidden or inconspicuous consumption of resources such as energy and water within practices (see, for example, Hand et al. 2005; Shove 2003; Southerton et al. 2004).

Warde's work was influential in extending practice-based analysis to domains of study that are central to consumption studies, such as food (see Halkier 2009; Middha 2020) and, in my case, fashion. The significance of this move lies in the capacity to take seriously post-modern explanations of everyday life as messy, emergent and pluralistic, rather than

distilling social life into a linear sequence of cause and effect, while still aiming to make analytically strong claims about how that world is organised. Social practice consumption research attends not only to practices, but to what constitutes and organises their development and reproduction. Patterns of consumption can be explained by different contexts and the varied pleasures, shared understandings, and capabilities associated with the appropriation and appreciation of fashion, keeping both "the social and the cultural in the frame..." (Warde 2005, 147).

In my research, this has translated into a focus on the relationships between materiality (garments, washing machines, the body, weather), bundles of practices (outfit making, commuting, mending, parenting), timespace (style preferences, memories, habits) and organising elements (trends, being well-dressed, feeling like myself). This has included a digital ethnography (Middha 2018) and wardrobe study (Fletcher and Klepp 2017) to explore everyday dressing practices and sustainability (Rollason 2023). We have worked with the Change Points workshop (Hoolohan and Browne, 2020), adapting practice-oriented design (Kuijter and Wakkary, 2017) to dressing-oriented fashion, to speculate about a more sustainable relationship between production practices and dressing (Rollason et al. 2025). A study framed by the social model of disability (Barnes 2019) examined how occupational therapists negotiate materiality and provision for their clients' diverse patterns of use. In these projects, reference to Warde's work has allowed me to see what is often unseen, be sensitive to processes and relatedness, and account for the uncertainties of emergent outcomes in self-reproducing, dynamic systems.

In the twenty years since publication, Warde's writing (2005) has, in effect, provided the default definition of consumption in social practice theories. In the same way that social practices are a way of seeing the social world (Schatzki 2003), Warde provides a way of studying how that world is provisioned, one that resists the neat, pleasing narratives often expected of policy and intervention. Its strength and weakness lie in lifting thinking about consumption out of either an individual or cultural frame into a practice-centred account, but it is one that is both demanding and difficult to appreciate (Spurling et al. 2013).

At the beginning of this piece, I suggested that theories of practice are needed to understand why the production and consumption of fashion continue to increase in volume and impact. Embedded in that claim is a concern with change. Social practice theories have been critiqued for a limited capacity to bring about change (Whitmarsh et al. 2011), including by those working within the practice tradition (Sahakian and Wilhite 2014; Walker 2013; Welch and Yates, 2018), yet there are compelling arguments that other approaches have failed catastrophically to alter patterns of consumption (Hickel 2020). For those of us who have worked with consumption and theories of practice, this raises a challenge. We may need to be bolder and firmer in insisting that, although addressing practices is messy, time-consuming, and difficult to explain to a non-social practice theory audience, advancing consumption as practice requires examining the hows and whys of treating consumption as a social practice, and what this demands of sustainability policy and scholarship.

## Re-viewing a Classic

*Torik Holmes*

Alan Warde's (2005) paper is widely cited in practice theory and consumption studies. In this re-view for *The Journal of Practice Theory*, I consider why it is a classic, focusing on the strength of Warde's (2005) theoretical reframing of a specific topic. I note the paper's marked, somewhat curious impact on sustainable consumption research and its tendency to highlight the mundane rather than the overtly political. I go on to make the case for 're-viewing' Warde's (2005) paper as a means of developing insights and arguments about the politics of consumption, which are often thought of as being beyond theories of practice.

Warde (2005) is centrally concerned with challenging the tendency to reduce issues of consumption to issues of symbolic play and identity formation. He does so by articulating an alternative way of theorising "how consumption is organized and how it might best be analysed..." (2005, 132). This involves conceptualising and analysing consumption as "a moment in almost every practice..." and crucially one that "occurs within and for the sake of practices..." (2005, 145). This reframing signals a decisive turn toward treating social practices as the primary units of enquiry and means of explaining processes of "appropriation and appreciation..." (Warde 2005, 137). As part of justifying this move, Warde provides an "abridged account of a theory of practice..." (2005, 132), which includes useful analytical distinctions between praxis and practice; practice entity and performance; and dispersed and integrative practices.

The relevance and strength of Warde's reframing are perhaps most evident in its influence on the field of sustainable

consumption research. While Warde does not mention sustainability (or, for that matter, the environment), his paper is cited in much social science research on the topic and in studies of the mundane, largely unreflective practical dimensions of consumption.

The paper has also attracted critical reflections. Questions have been raised about the critique that arises from Warde's (2005) reframing and the turn to practice that it contributed to (Evans 2019; 2020). These concerns echo a broader sentiment that theories of practice do not adequately account for politics, "especially given the heightened moral imperatives of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene..." (Evans 2019, 503).

In my view, sustainable consumption scholarship has paid greater attention to the mundane aspects of consumption over the past twenty years or so, thanks in no small part to Warde's (2005) well-justified intervention. However, it is short-sighted to view Warde's (2005) contribution in these terms alone. This is because Warde's (2005) paper also provides the basis for a far-reaching critique of the politics of practice and relatedly pressing sociological issues, particularly those wrapped up with sustainable consumption.

For example, Warde (2005) makes the case for viewing social differentiation as an emergent feature of the internal organisation and performance of practices and associated moments of consumption, rather than as an expression of social structures, including those of class. In Warde's words, "social practices do not present uniform planes upon which agents participate in identical ways but are instead internally differentiated on many dimensions..." (2005, 138).

Working with the example of driving, he suggests that participation depends on

various factors, including "past experience, technical knowledge, learning, opportunities, available resources, [and] previous encouragement by others..." (2005, 138).

As the history of driving demonstrates, opportunities to participate and gain a foothold in the practice were internally differentiated along lines of commitment, competence, and gender. As Warde puts it, "the belated, and still restricted, access of women to the driving of cars, as well as the rationalizations for such exclusion, demonstrates [...] that practices are differentiated..." (2005, 138).

I take this to be an important conclusion: Warde appears to argue that the positions people have with respect to a practice reflect the internal politics of that practice, and that this also matters for what is consumed and who is doing the consuming.

Beyond internal differentiation, there is also a politics to "the multiplicity of practices..." (2005, 141). Warde (2005) gestures to this by highlighting the instituted character of relationships between practices. To quote, "practices have a trajectory or path of development ... conditional upon the institutional arrangements characteristic of time, space and social context..." (2005, 139). This leads him to conclude that "the effect of production on consumption is mediated through the nexus of practices..." (Warde, 2005, 141) and that "explicit examination of the interconnections between changes in practice and demand for commodities reveals a tangled web of forces..." (2005, 142).

It is Warde's (2005) view of the politics of practice and consumption that has had the greatest impact on my work. In particular, I have been inspired by the idea that practices are instituted and that they carry institutional qualities, which matter for how they relate to

one another, as well as for associated performances and moments of consumption.

This is an idea that colleagues and I invoked in questioning the view that the COVID-19 pandemic presented policymakers with an opportunity to permanently downsize the consumer economy (Holmes et al. 2022). A suggestion connected with an understanding that "in the aftermath of disasters, we will quickly forget 'how things used to be'..." (Cohen 2020, 2).

As we found, large-scale trends in the acquisition of things like information technology and fitness equipment suggest that the UK COVID-19 lockdown involved remaking sites and moments of consumption, as homes were turned into gyms and offices (Holmes et al. 2022). In this case, already established ideas about office life and keeping fit were transplanted into the home environment. We found, for example, that privacy and dedicated space were valued when working from home. Multiple home office workers struggled to work in the same room. More than that, office work did not gel well with other practices (for example, those of cooking, eating, keeping fit, and sleeping).

Warde's (2005) paper suggests that these awkward conjunctions represent a clash of multiple, instituted practices, each with its own conventions, material cultures, and qualities. Building on these ideas, our further step was to relate these tensions to the demand for larger homes with more space. This is a simple example, but it illustrates connections between mundane practices and the wider politics and political economies of housing and resource consumption (Holmes et al. 2022).

In conclusion, Warde (2005) provides a selective summary of ideas rooted in a theory of practice and uses this to change and challenge the terms in which consumption studies are organised. The result is a paper that has wide-ranging implications beyond an emphasis on the importance of the mundane. As these comments suggest, I encourage others to re-view the paper not only as a means of getting to grips with theories of practice but also as a way of generating new, more institutional accounts of the politics of practices and sustainable consumption.

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