The Transformation of Luxury in Post-Consumerism

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Abstract

Luxury is a variable and equivocal concept whose meaning is constantly changing and subject to individuals' perceptions and external social, political, economic, and cultural contexts. The contemporary meaning of luxury is undergoing a transformation regarding the rising criticism of capitalist consumerism and a series of social turbulences, including the global pandemic, wars, climate change, and wealth polarisation. This thesis, therefore, sets out to explore how the notion of luxury is transformed and adapted to a post-consumerist context. In doing so the thesis engages literature from critical marketing, anti-consumerism, degrowth, and critical and unconventional luxury studies. To understand how luxury is understood and presented by non-mainstream social parties and groups, a discourse analysis on contents produced by alternative media was conducted. Stemming from this, 'post-consumerist luxury' is proposed as an alternative theoretical perspective to conceptualise luxury in post-consumerism. Following this, an ethnography was undertaken in an intentional community in England and employed research methods, including participant observation, field notes, and ethnographic interviewing, for data collection. Data collected from the ethnography contributed to three analysis chapters, which, respectively, disclose the liminality of the community residents for living on the border between the mainstream consumerist society and the alternative post-consumerist community; the construction of the term 'post-consumerism' by the community members; and how these people, as post-consumerist citizens, interpret and experience post-consumerist luxury in everyday practices. Altogether, these chapters shed light on what meanings and forms luxury has been given in contexts beyond consumerism and what underlying values are appreciated and endorsed in post-consumerism that encourage the formation of these new meanings. Further, this thesis adds to the conceptualisation of the emerging idea of 'post-consumerism' and implies the challenges that post-consumerist citizens may face in finding an equilibrium between their practice of alternative post-consumerist living and their inevitable entanglement with the capitalist society.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Statement of Copyright

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of Studies

How do we understand luxury in contemporary society? Predominantly, luxury is characterised by high prices (Featherstone, 2016), quality products (Ko et al., 2019), well-known brands (Armitage and Roberts, 2016a), prestigious social status (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009), and is accompanied by a promise of consumer happiness and satisfaction. However, multiple scholars remark that our perception of luxury is transforming (Banister et al., 2020; Cristini et al., 2017), as it is influenced by subjectivity and socio-cultural contexts (Armitage and Roberts, 2016a). Recently, society as we have known it, has faced some significant challenges. The widening gap in wealth distribution, high unemployment rate, volatile economy, global pandemic, and wars are shaking people's belief in the 'good life' as it has been delineated by capitalist consumerism. These concerns have become even more relevant and evident nowadays since the Covid-19 pandemic. It has hugely changed the way we live and has subverted the established landscape of contemporary luxury. The worth of the global luxury market dropped to the level that it was in 2015 (Wang et al., 2022). Economic hardship, resource scarcity, and difficulties in getting their basic needs met have triggered changes in consumption patterns and consumer perceptions (Wang et al., 2022). New discourses of luxury arise as lockdowns and social-distancing escalate the issue of inequality by dividing people into those who can afford to stay or work at home and those who cannot. Both "stay-at-home" and "social-distancing" are reckoned as luxuries in this pandemic (Huang et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2022). People are also questioning their interpretation of luxury. Subsequently, a rising number of studies (e.g., Eckhardt et al., 2015; Thomsen et al., 2020) are dedicated to discovering unconventional notions of luxury, which move beyond the logic of capitalist consumerism and focus on inconspicuous, inexpensive, and consumer-defined luxury.

Building on this body of work, this thesis explores unconventional meanings of luxury in the context of post-consumerism – an alternative consumption logic that redefines the target of development of our societies and what counts as a quality life (Soper, 2000, 2017; Cohen, 2013; Chatzidakis et al., 2014). The concept of post-consumerism is mainly developed in the literature over the past two decades. Since 2008 when the financial crisis hit worldwide economies, reflections on the correctness of the ever-growing economy took off, and discussions about post-consumerism thereafter flowed from it. Many academics view post-consumerism as a solution to problems caused by capitalist consumerism. For example, Soper (2000, 2017) believes that living in post-consumerism can bring people 'alternative hedonism',

which provides sustainable sources of happiness that capitalist consumerism has failed to achieve. Cohen (2013) suggests that post-consumerist societies could be the answer to the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2008, and the transition to post-consumerism has begun in many developed countries globally. Post-consumerism is also in parallel with the idea of degrowth (Kallis et al., 2012; Latouche, 2009; Schneider et al., 2010). It is a logic that counters traditional, unsustainable economic growth whilst advocating growth on other kinds of abundance such as quality of life (Chatzidakis et al., 2014). Post-consumerism – from the viewpoint of degrowth – suggests that the circle of production and consumption should be localised, driven by necessity, and conducted within self-organised communities (Chatzidakis et al., 2014). As such, the contemporary notion of luxury is seemingly opposite to what post-consumerism advocates. Luxury therefore is likely to either encounter a shift from its contemporary form or develop alternative meanings to harmonise with post-consumerism.

Concerning the personal motivation for studying alternative luxury and post-consumerism, my interest in luxury started from my master's studies in Luxury Brand Management. Back then, my understanding of luxury was limited, as I simply equalised the notion of luxury to fashionable clothes, handbags, and globally known brands. I was also accompanied by a cohort, most of whom came from affluent backgrounds. Through them, I was able to peek at the world of luxury consumers and subsequently emerged the query of "Will people ever get over consuming luxury goods?". Stemming from this, I started to wonder what will come next after consumerism and coined such thoughts 'post-consumerism', and then questioned what luxury will be in post-consumerism. I embarked on the pursuit of answering these questions first in my master's dissertation and later decided to continue it as doctoral research.

Altogether, this thesis presents the unorthodox meanings of luxury that are developing in response to the rising critiques of capitalist consumerism and changing social environment. It draws upon a range of literature and empirical studies to discuss alternative meanings and practices of luxury that are emerging in post-consumerism, where consumption and material fulfilment are no longer central to people's life. The discussion also contributes to advance the current conceptualisation of post-consumerism.

1.2. Research Overview

The aim of this thesis is to explore *how the notion of luxury is transformed and adapted to post-consumerism*. A number of follow-up questions naturally derive, as one may wonder, "Why does luxury need to transform?" "What is 'post-consumerism'?" and lastly, "What are the differences between luxury in post-consumerism and consumerism?". Respectively, these questions motivate me to investigate the socio-cultural and economic logic underpinning the contemporary notion of luxury and post-consumerism. Literature in historical luxury studies, critical luxury studies, critical marketing, consumer culture studies, degrowth, and anti-consumerism are drawn upon to unpack the ideological incompatibility between contemporary luxury and post-consumerism. Nevertheless, in executing the research, one barrier exists, that is, how to study post-consumerism empirically when the existing discussion around the term is majorly on paper. In response, I decided to funnel the obscurity of post-consumerism through a series of progressive questions. First, I expand the research context to the wider non-mainstream social parties and groups and form the first secondary research question of this thesis:

> *How is luxury understood and presented by non-mainstream (in other words, alternative) social parties and groups?*

Alternative media is chosen as the research context to address this question, for they are believed to embody anti-capitalist visions and imagine beyond the mainstream capitalist societies (Atton, 2002; Fuchs, 2010; Rauch, 2016). Content produced by a handful of selected alternative media are collected and analysed using the method of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1992), which particularly scrutinises how language is used in legitimising, maintaining, and neutralising social power and inequality (Bouvier and Machin, 2018: 178). This approach of analysis aligns with this research's overarching research paradigm of interpretivism, which endorses that reality is socially constructed and mentally perceived, and therefore, interpretivist research is a process of sense-making based on the researcher's observation of and participation in social activities (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). In examining the texts of alternative media, luxury has been presented as a symbol of immorality and a privilege that is only attainable for those with adequate social capital. Besides, alternative media also exhibit a pessimistic, anti-capitalist attitude against luxury, differing from the hedonic and celebratory spirit upheld by existing conceptualisations of luxury. This different approach to understanding luxury is termed 'post-consumerist luxury' in this thesis.

Second, following the findings from analysing alternative media, I shift the research context to an intentional community – a group of people who share mutual interests of escaping the norm of consumer society and living in an environmental-friendly fashion (Van Schyndel Kasper, 2008). The community presents a quasi-post-consumerist social environment where anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist ethos have been put into practice. Naturally, the next secondary research question revolves around

> *How do alternative communities and consumers construct the concept of post-consumerism?*

An ethnographic approach is employed to study the community. Ethnographic research has a particular interest in understanding the customs, values, and the shared system of meanings of a culture (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008; Goulding, 2005) so as to make sense of the motivations behind certain cultural groups' behaviour, emotion, and speech (Venkatesh et al., 2017). In studying the community, ethnographic research methods, including participant observations, field notes, and ethnographic interviewing, are engaged to gather data of which transcripts of the interviews account for the majority and are supplemented by insights from the field notes. The analysis adopts the thematic analysis approach and a constructionist perspective, examining the underlying assumptions, ideologies, and sociocultural contexts that shape the semantic content of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This study at first brings an unexpected discovery that many residents in the community also face challenges of harmonising their intention of ethical living with their inevitable interaction with mainstream capitalism, which subverted my rosy impression at the start of the community being a place where anti-capitalist ethos is holistically implemented. Of the interview questions, a set of questions is specifically designated to understand how the community members interpret the term 'post-consumerism'. The analysis of those questions suggests that post-consumerism is an equivocal and, to some extent, contradictory notion, for it embodies both optimistic and pessimistic visions of the future of human societies. This contradictory feature inspires me to interpret post-consumerism as a sensibility consisting of the constant interplay between consumerist and anti-consumerist discourses. Consequently, the conceptualisation of post-consumerism as a sensibility leads to the final secondary question:

> *How does the logic of post-consumerism help post-consumerist citizens reconceptualise and practise (e.g., access, use) luxury outside of capitalist consumerism?*

Another part of the interviews is dedicated to this query. Similar to their attitude towards post-consumerism, the community members exhibit ambivalent and contradictory feelings against luxury. They simultaneously construct luxury as an apparatus of consumerism and as non-

consumerist things that they aspire to but cannot be obtained through purchasing. Further examination is invested in the latter type of luxury and discloses a number of connotations of luxury that move the notion beyond the logic of capitalist consumerism. Luxury is used to refer to the freedom of doing things without constraints, human endeavours, creativity, companionship, basic natural resources, and the state where comfort, harmony, and beauty are achieved. These connotations also reflect that the values of humans and nature are endorsed in the culture of the community. Bringing these findings together, at the end, I encapsulate 'ambivalence, contradiction, and liminality' as the overarching theme of this thesis and reframe the concept of 'post-consumerist luxury' as a composition of luxury that operates upon alternative ethos, which manifests differently in consumerist and post-consumerist contexts.

1.3. Thesis Structure

The thesis begins with Chapter 2, which provides a literature review of luxury. It first introduces the variable and equivocal characteristics of luxury to justify why luxury has different meanings in different historical, sociocultural, and geographical contexts. It then, through a historical lens, introduces the waxing and waning of luxury in consumerism, followed by outlining several emerging conceptualisations of luxury that are alternative to the mainstream consumerist luxury.

The second literature review chapter turns to post-consumerism, which is the other focus of the thesis. The chapter begins with a critical examination of consumerism and then highlights three alternative consumption paradigms, including ethical and sustainable consumption, anticonsumption, and postmodern consumption, to suggest what solutions have been proposed in response to the flaws of consumerism. These are followed by a review of current conceptualisations of post-consumerism, which attempts to further understand the term by comparing it with the concepts of degrowth and anti-consumerism.

Chapter 4 gives a thorough review of the methodology adopted in this research. It begins with outlining the research questions and establishing interpretivism as the overarching research paradigm of this thesis. It then divides the chapter into two studies – a discourse analysis on alternative media and an ethnography in an intentional community – and discusses them, respectively. The researcher's reflexivity is also included here.

As the first analysis chapter, Chapter 5 draws on data gathered from alternative media, presenting how these media employ language to moralise and other luxury from the values they stand for. Luxury in this chapter is presented as a reflection of the media's pessimism on the future of economic growth, social justice, and the environment.

Chapter 6 and onwards exhibit analyses conducted based on the data gathered from an ethnography in an intentional community. Chapter 6 focuses on the community, its members, and their ambivalent relationship with mainstream capitalist consumerism. The community is suggested as a liminal space between the mainstream and the alternative, and its residents are liminal individuals who live within and suffer from such liminality.

Chapter 7 dedicates to exploring the conceptualisation of post-consumerism in the context of the community. It investigates how the community members characterise and practise post-consumerism. In the end, the chapter, from a theoretical perspective, suggests understanding post-consumerism as a sensibility.

The last analysis chapter, Chapter 8, returns to the subject of luxury. It first delves into the community members' ambiguous and contradictory feelings against luxury and then proposes several themes of luxury that emerge from the everyday practice of the community. This chapter also offers analysis echoing previous analysis chapters.

Chapter 9 presents a conclusive discussion, taking all the findings and analyses together. It summarises the overarching themes of the thesis and takes a final look at the conceptualisation of 'post-consumerist luxury'. Besides, it also discusses the key contributions, limitations, and implications for future research that this thesis offers.

CHAPTER 2:

TRANSITIONING FROM CONSUMERIST TO ALTERNATIVE LUXURY

2.1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on understanding how existing literature's conceptualisation of luxury progressively develops from simply seeing luxury as a component of consumerism to it being an everchanging notion with diverse meanings. The chapter begins by arguing that the notion of luxury understood and discussed in the context of this thesis is variable and equivocal, which enables multiple meanings of luxury to coexist. Following this, a literature review of luxury within the context of capitalist consumerism is provided, which consists of a historical review of the emergence of consumerist luxury, the characteristics of luxury in consumer society, ways of knowing luxury in consumerism and lastly, current criticisms regarding consumerist luxury. Unpacking the criticisms of consumerist luxury eventually leads to the last section of this chapter, which underscores four emerging theoretical and conceptual perspectives to study luxury in alternative manners.

2.2. The Variability and Equivocality of Luxury

Many qualities that seem to be perpetually tied to the notion of luxury prevail only for a certain period of time. For instance, Veblen's (1899) theory of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure only emerged in the late nineteenth century but has now become one of the most significant attributes to characterise luxury consumption (Uzgoren and Guney, 2012; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). As such, it is essential to highlight that this thesis endorses the standpoint that luxury is a variable and equivocal notion; this is to say, what is regarded as a luxury by a person could be valueless to others, and what is luxurious in a certain period of history could be unexceptional at another time. This view has been shared by other scholars in luxury studies. As noted by Armitage and Roberts (2016a), luxury is a fluid concept whose meaning depends on cultural and social contexts, as well as individuals' interpretation. The notion of luxury has been reconceptualised multiple times in history to adapt to different historical, cultural, social, and economic contexts.

The variability and equivocality aspects of luxury have taken on greater significance since the prevalence of postmodernism (e.g., Firat and Venkantash, 1995) and liquid modernity (Bauman, 2007). Under the influence of liquid modernity, social structures lose stability and the ability to provide reference and guidance for human actions (Bauman, 2007), leading to the

liquefaction of meanings. Concepts including materialism (Atanasova and Eckhardt, 2021), social status and distinction (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020), as well as luxury (Bardhi et al., 2020), have been re-examined and incorporated under the umbrella of liquid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). As such, luxury is separated from tangible objects and stable images, and its connotation becomes more uncertain and ambiguous (Baudrillard, 1983; Featherstone, 2007). Previous research has indicated that luxury can be associated with various social issues such as eco-awareness, intelligence, and healthy and ethical lifestyles (Yeoman, 2010), showcasing that the conceptualisation of luxury is variable and equivocal.

Such variability of luxury manifests not only in terms of how luxury is conceptualised but also in how it materialises. The expression of luxury constantly evolves to adapt to the changing socio-cultural environments of societies, and the effect of this expression depends upon subjective perception (Kovesi, 2015). Travelling by ocean liner, for example, used to be a luxurious activity and the preserve of the elite until air travel replaced it and became the new mode of luxury travel in the 1950s (McNeil and Riello, 2016). This example showcases how the symbol of luxury transfers from one thing to another ascribes to a change in consumers' perception. Another example regarding the variable expression of luxury could be found in the progress of the democratisation of luxury. Historically, aristocrats used luxury to mark their privilege, but with the decline of the aristocracy and the rise of the middle class, luxury became accessible to a broader group of people from lower social classes (Featherstone, 2007). Urban plebeians thence were able to enjoy purchasing minor luxuries (e.g., belts, shoes, alcoholic drinks, coffee, tea) to distinguish themselves from peasants (Featherstone, 2007). Subsequently, the expression of luxury expanded to include masstige, which are available and affordable for wider sections of the population.

Although acknowledging its changeability, it is important to note that the meaning of luxury is not defined randomly but is socially constructed. Luxury carries meanings and symbolic values which are constructed by, and only meaningful to, certain social structures and cultural contexts (Roper et al., 2013; Thomsen et al., 2020). The meaning of luxury is formed by what Murray and Ozanne (1991) state as the constant interplay between subject (meaning) and object (social structures). To this point, it is sensible to suggest that there is no absolute reference or benchmark that offers a universal definition of luxury and thus it is essential for researchers to clarify the historical, social, cultural, and economic contexts where the notion of luxury is studied. The notion of luxury that will be considered in the following section of this literature

review (i.e., 2.3.) centres on luxury discourses developed and popularised by capitalist consumerism, which I call ‘consumerist luxury’.

2.3. Consumerist Luxury

2.3.1. Before Consumerist Luxury

How the concept of luxury evolved throughout history is a topic that has been recurringly discussed in numerous studies (e.g., Kovesi, 2015; Brun and Castelli, 2013; Featherstone, 2014; Berry, 1994). The word ‘luxury’ derives from ‘luxus’ in Latin, referring to “sumptuousness, luxuriousness, opulence” and “soft or extravagant living, (over-)indulgence” (Dubois et al., 2005: 115). The concept of luxury for a long time in history was associated with negative traits (Dubois et al., 2015; Roberts, 2019) and connotated softness, effeminacy, and unmanly behaviour (Berry, 2016). In ancient times, luxury was condemned by morality laws for being a sign of degeneration and weakness (Featherstone, 2016), and it was generally believed that consumption beyond necessity was morally unacceptable (Allison, 2008). The ancient Greeks considered that indulgence in luxury would pose a threat to societies as extravagant hedonism could divert citizens’ attention from the polis to private life (Brun and Castelli, 2013). Roman elites deemed the word ‘luxury’ (or ‘luxuria’) a vice and used it to denigrate the lifestyles and expenditures of non-elites (Kovesi, 2015). A slight attitude shift was observed in the following centuries, during which the concept of luxury started to be associated with precious objects such as gold and gems and was popular among royalties and aristocrats (Brun and Castelli, 2013). Nevertheless, access to luxury was still restricted, as it was used to represent social classes at the time. Sumptuary laws were implemented to forbid the common people from consuming certain luxuries (Featherstone, 2014), which resulted in the impression of luxury being a sign of extravagance and corruption.

The negative connotations of luxury persisted until the late eighteenth century, when consumption expanded and thus marketing structures became more complex (Berry, 2016). As Kovesi (2015: 28) suggests, ‘The eighteenth century saw a key shift in luxury discourses from the moral to the economic realm’. Against the backdrop of the two industrial revolutions, theorists of that time started to demoralise and consider luxury as a positive stimulant for the economy (Kovesi, 2015). David Hume linked luxury with happiness and virtue, claiming that consuming luxury is a means of pursuing pleasure (Berry, 2016). Meanwhile, luxury

consumption by the rich evokes desires for luxury and social emulation, subsequently contributing to the development of industrial productivity (Marshall, 2000) and leading to the democratisation of luxury. Luxury consumption expanded and 'trickled-down' (Michman and Mazze, 2006; Allison, 2008) to the rising merchant groups (Featherstone, 2007), signifying a power shift from aristocrats to merchants. The waning of the aristocracy and the rise of the bourgeoisie were crucial to progressive democratisation. The bourgeoisie's emulation of the extravagant consumption of the higher social classes stimulates growth in the demand for luxury from the lower classes. As Fine and Leopold (1990) suggest, mass-based consumer demand, especially for luxury goods, is a necessary precondition to the growth of mass production. Such an increasing consumer demand has also been suggested contributes to the formation of large-scale industrial production as well as industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century (Bocock, 1993). Luxury, by this point, was recognised as an economic stimulant to boost employment, industrial productivity, and consumer wants (Berry, 2016; Marshall, 2000). Luxury is embraced as a marketing tool to make products desirable and pleasurable (Berry, 2016). The concept of luxury, therefore, was given its modern meaning, that is, 'the habit of indulgence in what is choice or costly' or 'something enjoyable or comfortable beyond the necessities of life' (Brun and Castelli, 2013: 827).

The nineteenth century also witnessed the emergence of modern luxury companies (Antoni et al., 2004), but the growth of these companies into well-established, reputational brands happened later in the twentieth century, during which products manufactured by these brands earned the repute of 'luxury' for their high-level quality, durability, performance, and design (Brun and Castelli, 2013). In the meantime, those who accumulated wealth from trade and industrial production in the early development of capitalist production formed the new social class of *nouveau riche*, who displayed wealth through luxury consumption to emulate the lifestyles of aristocrats (Bocock, 1993) so as to signal their entitlement to higher social status. This phenomenon is coined by Veblen (1899) as 'conspicuous consumption'. The emergence of *nouveau riche* also popularised the lifestyle in which things such as clothes, personal adornment, and opulent pleasurable pursuits became the central interests of consumption (Bocock, 1993). Additionally, the image of luxury was widely disseminated and visualised through sites for leisure, such as department stores, cinemas, and theatres, as well as through the medium of the fast-expanding film industry (Bocock, 1993; Featherstone, 2014; Tamari, 2016). These channels cultivated consumers' awareness of the power of signs, identity, fashion, and lifestyle (Bocock, 1993). The concept of luxury, till this point, had developed multiple

connotations, including status symbol, personal indulgence, and leisure time (Brun and Castelli, 2013; Okonkwo, 2007).

2.3.2. The Emergence of Consumerist Luxury

The twentieth century marks the transformation of luxury from democratisation to mass consumption and consumerism. The democratisation of luxury is signified by luxury brands beginning to launch more affordable yet exclusive products that target mass, lower-class audiences (Hemetsberger et al., 2012; Holmqvist et al., 2020). As a result, the moral criticism against luxury started to ease and resolve. Luxury progressively separated from its negative immoral implications and was associated with happiness and virtue, coinciding with rising voices claiming that consuming luxury was a means of pursuing hedonistic entities and experiences (Berry, 2016). Consumer culture had taken on greater significance. Consumers were taught to appreciate and incorporate the consumer culture lifestyles, whilst luxury products and experiences were equipped to offer new sensory fulfilment and to 'stimulate their desires for fantasies, excitement and emotional satisfaction' (Tamari, 2016: 98). Berry (2016) names such a hedonistic shift as the 'demoralisation of luxury'. It refers to the process of de-coupling luxury from negative, immoral connotations and instead associating it with positive social and economic implications (e.g., it contributes to employment and economic growth). By doing so, luxury is justified as morally acceptable with positive influence.

The economic discourse also marketised luxury by exhibiting it as products and services that are measurable by price (Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2019). Meanwhile, the market for luxury offerings expanded from small family-owned businesses to multinational luxury conglomerates in the late 1990s and the early 2000s (Seo and Buchanan-Oliver, 2015). As a result, scholarship on luxury branding and luxury brand management (e.g., Kapferer and Bastien, 2009; Ko et al., 2019; Seo and Buchanan-Oliver, 2015) emerged and has attracted much attention and discussion in academia ever since (Okonkwo, 2009). To a large extent, these studies contribute to the formation of the contemporary concept of luxury, which is embedded within the context of capitalist consumerism.

2.3.3. The Characteristics of Consumerist Luxury

Although it is still under debate regarding how luxury (and luxury brands) should be defined (Ko et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2022), there seems to be a set of characteristics luxury is

commonly associated with in consumer capitalism. Dubois and colleagues (2001) offer a series of facets to capture the nature and characteristics of luxury: excellent quality, high price, scarcity and uniqueness, aesthetics and polysensuality, ancestral heritage and personal history, and superfluousness. Beyond these, more characteristics, such as craftsmanship (Quelch, 1987), exclusivity (Phau and Prendergast, 2000; Nueno and Quelch, 1998), prestigiousness (Antoni et al., 2004; Tynan et al., 2010; Ko et al., 2019), symbolic value (Reddy and Terblanche, 2005), and conspicuousness (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999; Allison, 2008; Wang and Griskevicius, 2014), have emerged alongside the ongoing debates around the conceptual development of luxury brands (e.g., Berthon et al., 2009; Keller, 2009; Tynan et al., 2010; Heine, 2012; Brun and Castelli, 2013) and around understanding the motivations for luxury consumption (e.g., Dubois et al., 2001; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Wiedmann et al., 2009).

When studying consumers' motivations for luxury consumption, many studies (e.g., Berthon et al., 2009; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004) tend to dichotomise those motivations into internal and external factors. For instance, Kapferer and Bastien (2009) suggest that consumers seek out luxury brands to attain self-indulgence (luxury for one's self) and to signal social success (luxury for others). Vigneron and Johnson (2004) categorise extended self and hedonic as the 'personal' motivations for luxury consumption and regard conspicuousness, uniqueness, and quality as the 'non-personal' motivations. Drawing on a wide range of literature, Ko and colleagues (2019) outline six theories used in luxury branding that are key to understanding consumers' motivations for engaging with luxury brands. Of these, self-concept theory (Gil et al., 2012), extended self (Belk, 1988), and consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) concentrate on understanding how consumers confirm and adjust self-identities and enhance self-concept through luxury consumption; conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899), social comparison theory, and theory of uniqueness (Snyder and Fromkin, 1977) are concerned with how consumers utilise luxury consumption to signify wealth and social status to distinguish themselves from others. Table 2.3.1. below summarises several key characteristics luxury is associated with in consumer society, implied by the existing literature.

Table 2.3.1. Characteristics of luxury

Characteristic	**Explanation**	**Relevant literature**
High quality	The excellence of a luxury product or service in terms of its functionality, performance, and durability.	Quelch, 1987; Nueno and Quelch, 1998; Vigneron and Johnson, 1999; Dubois et al., 2001; Kapferer, 2001; Antoni et al., 2004; Vigneron and

		Johnson, 2004; Reddy and Terblanche, 2005; Allison, 2008; Berthon et al., 2009; Tynan et al., 2010; Heine, 2012; Brun and Castelli, 2013; Ko et al., 2019
Craftsmanship	The expertise involved in producing and manufacturing high quality objects.	Quelch, 1987; Nueno and Quelch, 1998; Berthon et al., 2009; Brun and Castelli, 2013; Ko et al., 2019
Expensiveness	The premium price of a luxury product or service, which is perceived as a logical consequence of the high quality and the high value of the product compared to non-luxury objects.	Ng, 1987; Dubois et al., 2001; Keller, 2009; Tynan et al., 2010; Heine, 2012; Featherstone, 2016; Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2019; Ko et al., 2019
Exclusivity	The restricted access of luxury due to scarcity; only consumers with certain privileges (e.g., wealth, status) have the access.	Nueno and Quelch, 1998; Phau and Prendergast, 2000; Tynan et al., 2010; Brun and Castelli, 2013
Prestigiousness	The premium image and reputation of a luxury brand established upon its continued excellence.	Nueno and Quelch, 1998; Antoni et al., 2004; Keller, 2009; Tynan et al., 2010; Brun and Castelli, 2013; Ko et al., 2019
Hedonic and emotional values	The hedonic or emotional satisfaction of consumers obtained from luxury objects and experiences.	Nueno and Quelch, 1998; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Berthon et al., 2009; Allison, 2008; Tynan et al., 2010; Brun and Castelli, 2013; Ko et al., 2019
Symbolic value	Luxury objects contain particular social and cultural implications through which consumers can signal their distinction.	Quelch, 1987; Nueno and Quelch, 1998; Reddy and Terblanche, 2005; Berthon et al., 2009; Keller, 2009; Tynan et al., 2010; Brun and Castelli, 2013
Scarcity	The limited availability of luxury that is either created by shortage of natural resources or maintained artificially.	Keller, 2009; Tynan et al., 2010; Heine, 2012; Brun and Castelli, 2013
Uniqueness	The singularity and irreplaceability of a luxury product or experience.	Nueno and Quelch, 1998; Dubois et al., 2001; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Allison, 2008; Brun and Castelli, 2013

Aesthetic and extraordinariness	The beauty of a luxury object and the out-of-ordinary, exceptional, sensual satisfaction that consumer obtains from luxury.	Dubois et al., 2001; Heine, 2012; Brun and Castelli, 2013
Heritage	Luxury objects or brands' links with historical reputation or craftsmanship which result in their excellence.	Nueno and Quelch, 1998; Dubois et al., 2001; Brun and Castelli, 2013
Excessiveness	The superfluousness and uselessness of luxury; luxury is not essential nor necessary for survival.	Dubois et al., 2001; Twitchell, 2003; Tynan et al., 2010; Heine, 2012
Conspicuousness	Wealthy consumers signalling their economic and social superiority through luxury consumption.	Veblen, 1899; Vigneron and Johnson, 1999; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Allison, 2008; Wang and Griskevicius, 2014
Extended self	Consumers using luxury possessions to shape self-identities to match with their ideal self-images.	Belk, 1988; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004

As shown by Table 2.3.1., the consumerist notion of luxury is characterised by high quality, craftsmanship, expensiveness, exclusivity, prestigiousness, hedonic and emotional value, symbolic value, scarcity, uniqueness, aesthetic and extraordinariness, heritage, excessiveness, conspicuousness, and extended self. Of these, some characteristics, including high quality, craftsmanship, expensiveness, aesthetic and extraordinariness, and heritage, are more intrinsic to luxury objects and experiences. They are embedded within luxury products and services and do not tend to change with consumer perception. A few other characteristics from the table appear to align with what Kapferer and Bastien (2009) identify that consumers pursue luxury either for indulging the self, i.e., hedonic and emotional value and extended self, or for communicating their social success to others, i.e., prestigiousness, symbolic value, conspicuousness, and uniqueness. The last three characteristics – exclusivity, scarcity, and excessiveness – are neither intrinsic to luxury objects nor comprise the motivations for luxury consumption. However, these three characteristics are found significant in the following analysis chapters, thus further elucidation of each of them is provided as follows.

The exclusivity of luxury has a long history. As Nueno and Quelch (1998) suggest, the term 'luxury' has been historically referred to objects that are rare and only available to the

privileged. In the medieval and early modern eras, sumptuary laws regulated consumption in many regions of the world. These laws restricted the acquisition of certain goods to preserve social distinctions (Featherstone, 2014; Muzzarelli, 2009). Royalties and aristocrats, who were the legislators of sumptuary laws, defined what should be regarded as luxury at the time. Their privilege of using luxurious and scarce goods (e.g., gold, silk brocade, precious fabrics) on garments and other visible displays symbolised their social status and power (Muzzarelli, 2009). Goods that were exclusively available to them and forbidden to the common people were recognised as luxuries. In the contemporary capitalist and consumerist society, some scholars have suggested that luxury has become less exclusive (Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2019). As the democratisation of luxury proceeds, some luxury brands start to offer secondary lines with products of more accessible prices (Kapferer and Laurent, 2016). Consequently, luxury goods became more affordable and accessible to lower-class and lower-income consumers (Brun and Castelli, 2013; Roper et al., 2013) and thus less exclusive. In more recent research, scholars have suggested that the exclusivity of luxury could also be obtained through non-consumption means, such as through achieving mastery of skills (Holmqvist et al., 2020).

The notion of scarcity, or rarity, is implied as one of the major factors that contribute to the exclusivity of luxury (Septianto et al., 2020). Catry (2003) states that the scarcity of luxury comes in four folds: (1) the 'natural rarity' caused by the limited availability of natural resources, raw ingredients, or production capacity; (2) the 'techno-rarity' that is restricted by the development of technologies and innovation, e.g., air travel used to be regarded as a symbol of elitism (McNeil and Riello, 2016); (3) the rarity of 'limited editions', and the supplies of which are deployed and managed by companies, signifying a shift from actual shortage in resources to virtual supply constraints; and (4) the 'information-based rarity', referring to companies and brands sending out information to make consumers believe in the rarity of luxury products. As such, exclusive luxury is suggested created by rarity caused by constraints of natural resources, technological innovation, and limited editions, while information-based rarity is designed to ensure that luxury maintains its exclusivity without impeding the growth of sales (Catry, 2003).

Like exclusivity, excessiveness has long been assigned to characterise luxury since ancient times. Ancient Greeks regarded indulging in luxury as a means of gaining excessive pleasure (Brun and Castelli, 2013), associating luxury with excess and hedonism. The Romans also linked luxury with extravagance, excess and negative self-indulgence (Dubois et al., 2005),

identically suggesting that luxury is beyond necessity. Kovesi (2015: 26) states that 'luxury at its most elemental is defined by the non-essential; goods or even simply experiences that are superfluous to need', and Berry (1994) defines luxury as the antonym of necessity and something that is non-universal.

In addition to the characteristics presented above, there is another characteristic worth highlighting, that is, luxury should be socially desired. Berry (1994) suggests that luxury objects represent socially recognised desires and provide pleasure instead of simply relieving pain. In contrast to Berry's opinion, Armitage and Roberts (2014: 118, 2015: 42, 2016b: 28), inspired by Marcuse's (1964) idea of 'false' needs, define luxuries 'not as painless substitutes lacking fervent desires but as alienating surrogates saturated with the urgent sense of a life determined by external forces, and consequent lack of control or authenticity and oneness with ourselves'. This definition implies that luxury embodies socially recognisable desires but, meanwhile, argues that such desires are misled by external forces that create 'false' needs of consumers. For example, department stores in early twentieth-century Japan provided a space for luxury businesses to cultivate consumers' false needs for luxuries (Tamari, 2016), communicating images of luxury to the public and thereafter fostering luxury products as socially desirable objects. By carefully manipulating the rarity, uniqueness, and aesthetic appeal of products, luxury companies can create and maintain such desirability (Antoni et al., 2004).

2.3.4. Knowing Luxury in Consumerism

There are two stages of knowing luxury: 'know that' and 'know how', according to Armitage and Roberts (2016b). 'Know that', also known as 'propositional knowledge' (Polanyi, 1958), refers to knowledge which is explicit and can be acquired through texts, images, and words (Armitage and Roberts, 2016b). In comparison, 'know how', or 'prescriptive knowledge' (Polanyi, 1958), represents tacit knowledge, which is acquired through practice and experience (Armitage and Roberts, 2016b). For example, consumers learn through adverts and media what kind of wine is luxurious (i.e., know that), but to acquire true knowledge to understand the luxuriousness of the wine, they need to experience the wine by tasting it (i.e., know how) and comparing with wine produced by different producers. Another theory regarding approaches to knowing luxury is proposed by Featherstone (2014), who suggests that one's understanding of luxury can be categorised into 'knowledge-with' and 'knowledge-about'. The former is

gained through close engagement with luxurious objects and experiences, similar to 'know how', while the latter – knowledge-about – is to recognise the value of luxury through relativising its value within different symbolic hierarchies such as its monetary value or technical excellence (Featherstone, 2014).

In capitalist consumerism, people's perceptions and knowledge of luxury are predominantly shaped by capital-driven luxury brands. One quintessential example is how consumers' enduring romantic association between diamonds and love was constructed by the diamond company De Beers, for example, using advertising slogans such as 'A Diamond is Forever' in 1948 (Bergenstock and Maskulka, 2001; Harris and Cai, 2002). At the same time De Beers controlled roughly 75% of the world's diamonds, allowing them to restrict supply, thereby perpetuating the perception of diamonds as a rare and valuable item (Bergenstock and Maskulka, 2001). Thus, De Beers used marketing strategies to manipulate consumer desire for diamonds whilst simultaneously creating artificial scarcity to promote diamonds as an expensive, luxurious symbol of devotion.

In a society where marketing is facilitated by digital technology, big data, and social media, information and knowledge about luxury is intensely codified and objectified (Armitage and Roberts, 2016b). These coded messages, including advertisements, media, brand narratives, and luxury brand rankings, become the primary sources for consumers to learn about and form understandings of luxury. These messages educate consumers on what luxury is but do not engage them with luxurious activities nor mention luxury's socio-cultural value beyond the form of consumer goods. Therefore, consumers' understanding of luxury often seems incomplete and monopolistically constructed by messages created, delivered, and filtered by brand managers and marketers.

The consumerist market also changes how consumers recognise and evaluate luxury. Price has become the most influential determinant of an item's luxury value (Featherstone, 2016). The process of commoditisation contributes to this, turning 'luxury' into products and services that are measurable by price. As a result, consumers judge whether an item is 'luxury' by looking at how much it costs. Luxury brand managers and marketers are dedicated to adding superfluous value to luxury products so that they can be sold at higher prices (Berry, 2016). These contribute to consumers' narrow perception that expensive branded goods are the only

manifestation of luxury and therefore educate consumers to recognise luxury by price and reputation rather than its socio-cultural imperative (Armitage and Roberts, 2016a).

To sum up, studies about luxury in the recent two or three decades predominantly revolve around constructing luxury as branded products that can be priced, traded, and consumed. I borrow words from Armitage and Roberts to encapsulate the contemporary notion of luxury and its entanglement with the consumerist market: 'expensive goods or services supplied by well-known brands' (2016: 25). These words reflect a limited view of luxury, which is constrained within the logics of the capitalist market and consumer culture. The following sections, therefore, present criticism towards this limited view in which the moral of the market- and product-centric luxury is questioned, followed by a review of studies (see 2.4.) exploring alternative and unconventional meanings of luxury.

2.3.5. Criticising Consumerist Luxury

The notion of consumerist luxury is embedded in and founded upon capitalist consumerism and aligned with the belief in infinite economic growth. It is also regarded as a part of consumer culture, which is delineated by Featherstone (2007) as encompassing three attributes: accumulation of consumer goods and development of capitalist commodity production, symbolised goods attached to social structure and distinction, and emotional pleasures of embodied and aesthetic consumption. Critiques of consumerist luxury, therefore, are often rooted in the scrutiny of capitalist consumerism. The main criticism of capitalist consumerism addresses its failure to deliver consumer satisfaction as promised. It argues that consumption beyond fulfilling basic needs appears incapable of bringing long-lasting happiness, as the duration of satisfaction generated by each act of consumption tends to decrease over time (Alvesson, 1994). Luxury consumption, which centres on fulfilling excessive desires, also faces similar criticisms around whether it is beneficial and morally acceptable to societies (e.g., Hemetsberger, 2018; Roberts, 2019). It is also concerned that advocates of market-driven and consumer-centric luxury tend to neglect the negative impacts of luxury over its moral correctness (Armitage and Roberts, 2016).

These, therefore, prompt debates regarding the moral correctness of consumerist luxury. Some scholars have expressed concerns that the notion of luxury may again turn into a symbol of vice. In *The Vice of Luxury: Economic Excess in a Consumer Age*, Cloutier (2015) challenges

the legitimacy of luxury and the assumption that luxury brings positive impacts on consumers and economies. Following this, Berry (2016) synthesises contemporary critiques of luxury into three types – ethical, social, and environmental. The ethical critiques revolve around the concern that luxury may cultivate selfishness (Berry, 2016), provoke envy (Gino and Pierce, 2009), and result in criminal and immoral behaviour (Roberts, 2019). Instead of empowering consumers, luxury may cause them to question their entitlement to luxury and subsequently feel undeserved of it (Goor et al., 2020). Social critiques argue that luxury may 'distort the value-structure of society' (Berry, 2016: 58). Consumers, impelled by the narrative of consumerism, desire sensory fulfilment through luxury consumption (Tamari, 2016), and this may result in the overemphasis on luxury over other values, such as wellbeing and interpersonal relationships. Moreover, the increasing demand for luxury from the super-rich also plays a part in causing negative social impacts. Traditionally, the super-rich were expected to contribute to healthy economies by investing in the national economy and passing down wealth to less affluent people (Hemetsberger, 2018). However, instead of doing that, they choose to spend wealth on luxuries and exert power on manoeuvring policies and regulations to serve their interests, which, as a result, intensifies inequalities and social fragmentation (Roberts, 2019). Lastly, environmental critiques problematise the phenomenon of luxury companies adopting green and sustainable messaging as a marketing tactic to bolster the industry's unsustainable growth (Berry, 2016) and highlight the careless and damaging use of resources caused by the production of luxury goods (Roberts, 2019). These criticisms are encapsulated by Berry (2016) as the 're-moralisation' of luxury.

2.4. Towards Alternative Luxury

The moral examination of consumerist luxury signifies a series of changes in luxury studies. A rising number of scholars now turn to exploring alternative concepts of luxury beyond its consumerist meaning. This section presents four emerging perspectives which study and conceptualise luxury in alternative manners.

2.4.1. Critical Luxury Studies

The first perspective is Critical Luxury Studies, proposed by Armitage and Roberts (2016a) in their book *Critical Luxury Studies: Art, Design, Media*. In the book, they call for integrating critical approaches to luxury studies and point out that the notion of luxury is variable and

subject to external social and cultural contexts and individual consumers' perceptions. Therefore, critical luxury studies should be a dynamic process which acknowledges and reflects 'the ever-shifting attitudes towards luxury as both a subject and a socio-cultural practice' (2016a: 1). Similar viewpoints have been expressed in other luxury studies. It has been implied that luxury, perceived by consumers, is contextual (Wiedmann et al., 2007), relative (Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2019), and subjective (Roper et al., 2013; Kapferer and Laurent, 2016). Moreover, it is worth noting that the approach of critical luxury studies does not simply equal 'criticism' of luxury studies but should be recognised as a radical critique of the present concept of luxury, which is embedded in contemporary global capitalist and consumerist society (Armitage and Roberts, 2016a). This perspective also argues that luxury scholars and managers tend to ignore the ethical concerns of luxury and uncritically accept it as a significant contributor to the consumerist market. Critical luxury studies, as a response to this, encourage critical examinations of luxury beyond the logic of capitalist consumerism.

2.4.2. Inconspicuous Luxury

Another emerging perspective is the shift of luxury consumption from conspicuousness to inconspicuousness. Eckhardt and colleagues (2015) suggest that the relationship between luxury consumption and conspicuousness – a characteristic that has been associated with luxury for over a century – is weakening and will be overtaken by the growing trend of inconspicuous luxury consumption. As mentioned in 2.3.1., 'conspicuous consumption', coined by Veblen in his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), refers to the behaviour of wealthy consumers, especially the *nouveau riche*, conspicuously spending their time and money on luxury and leisure in a way that the mass consumers cannot, to signal their higher social status. This concept has ever since taken on its relevance in luxury studies. Scholars for generations have adopted conspicuous consumption as a theoretical perspective to study and understand luxury consumption and consumers (e.g., Wang and Griskevicius, 2014; Walters and Carr, 2019; Siepmann et al., 2022). However, Eckhardt and colleagues (2015), in a conceptual paper, highlight the emerging phenomenon of consumers not wanting to 'stand out' as conspicuous during economic hardship and preferring subtle and sophisticated designs of luxury to distinguish themselves from peers. They recognise this shift of consumer preferences as a transformation towards inconspicuousness. Due to the prevailing sharing economy and masstige luxury, conspicuous luxury goods lose their functions of offering exclusivity (Eckhardt et al., 2015) and signalling social classes (Hemetseberger et al., 2012), motivating

wealthy consumers to move beyond status-seeking and search for quiet, low-key luxury only they can recognise (Han et al., 2010). The conceptual development of inconspicuous consumption has also been discussed by other scholars conceptually (Cavender et al., 2014; Makkar and Yap, 2018a; Makkar and Yap, 2018b) and applied empirically (e.g., Jiang et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2017). For instance, Wu and colleagues (2017) studied the transformation of Chinese luxury consumers, indicating that consumers' purposes of luxury consumption are shifting from displaying and status-seeking to entertaining and self-serving (also see Sudbury-Riley et al., 2020). In addition, it has been suggested somewhere else that luxury consumers are turning from emphasising the functional and symbolic values of luxury to the emotional value (Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2019). Such a transition from 'luxury for others' to 'luxury for the self' marks the increasing importance of consumers' perception and experience in luxury consumption.

2.4.3. Liquid Luxury

Likewise, some scholars believe that the consumer, rather than the market, should be at the centre of defining luxury (Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2019). This is to say, in principle, to a thousand consumers, there could be a thousand interpretations of luxury. The meaning of luxury, therefore, becomes uncertain, unstable (Thomsen et al., 2020), and, as Bardhi and colleagues (2020) coin, liquid. The liquefication of luxury builds upon the theory of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2007) and the context of liquid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017); the latter illustrates a hyper-consumerist scenario where consumption experiences are ephemeral, access-based, and dematerialised, resulted by the prevalence of digitalisation, increased mobility, and social acceleration (Rosa, 2013). Building upon the context of liquid consumption, Bardhi and colleagues (2020) explore the nature of luxury in a condition where luxury is access-based (i.e., through rental or sharing), not exclusive, of fast temporality, and presented in the form of experiences and inconspicuous consumption.

In this work, they are concerned with how the value of luxury shifts to adapt to the social-cultural context of liquid consumption. For example, they suggest that the value of exclusivity of luxury is preserved, though consumers no longer desire exclusivity from traditional luxury products such as watches, cars, and handbags but instead from personalised experiences and experiential consumption; in addition, craftsmanship and exquisite quality of luxury products may get devalued because of the rise of fast fashion, and time will be more valuable due to the

acceleration of societies (Bardhi et al., 2020). In short, luxury in such a context is no longer bound by permanent ownership of material objects; instead, it is accessed transiently via rental and the sharing economy (Bardhi et al., 2020). As such, the notion of luxury is decoupled from some of its orthodox features (i.e., permanence and private ownership) and married with a new discourse – liquidity.

2.4.4. Unconventional Luxury

Moving forward, Thomsen and colleagues (2020) propose the term 'unconventional luxury' to offer another perspective to capture alternative meanings of luxury. Here, the term 'unconventional' refers to the antonym of conventional luxury, which is embedded in capitalist consumerism. Unlike conventional luxury that focuses on conspicuous, expensive, and marketing-led products, unconventional luxury studies align with the idea of inconspicuous consumption (Eckhardt et al., 2015) and show a particular interest in private-symbolic, ephemeral, inexpensive and consumer-defined luxury (Thomsen et al., 2020). As such, luxury has taken various forms, transcending the boundaries of the consumerist market. It has been conceptualised as moments of care (Kreuzer et al., 2020), as involvement in caretaking and escapism from routine activities (Banister et al., 2020), and as prerequisites of human existence such as clean air and water (Cristini and Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2020). Studying luxury in such an unconventional fashion allows researchers to capture the notion of luxury from situational, mundane, and trivial moments of life without relating luxury to consumption, brands, and prices – elements used to construct luxury in capitalist consumerism. To this end, this thesis continues exploring unconventional meanings of luxury, though within a different context. Studies of unconventional luxury to date are mostly embedded in the context of mainstream societies, focusing on discovering new conceptualisations of luxury from consumer's everyday life. However, little attention has been paid to studying the constructs of luxury in non-mainstream, anti-capitalist, and anti-consumerist contexts. This research, therefore, explores the conceptualisation of luxury under a non-mainstream (i.e., alternative) context and puts forward the question of whether luxury is given new meanings by it, and if so, what are they?

2.5. Chapter Summary

This chapter provides a review of the literature on the history and current landscape of luxury in capitalist consumerism. In addition, it also establishes two conceptual premisses for the later

analysis chapters: the notion of luxury is variable, equivocal, and subject to individual consumers' perceptions, and secondly, there is a rising interest in exploring luxury in contexts that are alternative to capitalist consumerism.

CHAPTER 3:

TRANSITIONING TOWARDS POST-CONSUMERISM

3.1. Introduction

Post-consumerism is a relatively nascent concept in marketing and consumer research. To seek a better understanding of the term, this chapter revolves around a review of the existing literature on 'post-consumerism' and related topics. Its purpose is to gather current conceptualisations and to summarise and frame theoretical knowledge of post-consumerism. This chapter firstly reviews the root cause of the emergence of post-consumerism, that is, criticisms and dissatisfactions with current capitalist consumerism and consumer society. As such, Sections 3.2. and 3.3. revisit theories and criticisms towards consumerism and outline a handful of alternative consumption paradigms which arise in response to the criticisms, including ethical and sustainable consumption, voluntary simplicity, consumer resistance and anticonsumption, and consumer escapism and postmodern consumption. However, this chapter continues to argue that these alternative paradigms do not fundamentally challenge the underlying logic of capitalist consumerism. Therefore, sections 3.4. to 3.6. turn to the emergence of the critical approach of post-consumerism and examine this concept through two key questions: how does current literature conceptualise post-consumerism, and what is the term's relationship with degrowth and anti-consumerism respectively?

3.2. A Critical Examination of Consumerism

First and foremost, it is necessary to clarify what the term 'consumerism' refers to in this thesis. Traditionally, in marketing and consumer research, the term 'consumerism' has been understood as "a social movement seeking to augment the rights and power of buyers in relation to sellers" (Kotler, 1972: 49) or "the organised efforts of consumers seeking redress, restitution, and remedy for dissatisfaction they have accumulated in the acquisition of their standard of living" (Buskirk and Rothe, 1970: 62). Alternatively, consumerism has also been suggested comprising the meaning as a consumerist lifestyle characterised by an excessive attachment to material possessions (Abela, 2006) or an obsessive interest in consumer goods and is often critiqued along with capitalist consumer culture (Larsen and Lawson, 2013). This section aligns with the second meaning of consumerism to explore the negative consequences of capitalist consumerism and factors that contribute to the emergence of post-consumerism, though, before these, it is important to introduce the broader disciplinary grounds of this research.

3.2.1. The Critical Approach to Marketing

This thesis adheres to the attitude of critical marketing studies. Unlike mainstream marketing, whose definition has gone through multiple refinements and developed from a narrow managerial focus to a broadened agenda, critical marketing is classified as the reflexive regime of marketing thoughts which produces reflexive and critical knowledge primarily for an academic audience (Shankar, 2009). The first time the term 'critical marketing' was used alongside critical social theory was by Hansen (1981), who regards the emergence of critical marketing as a response to 'the denigration of marketing and advertising in the late 1960s' (Tadajewski, 2010: 776). Critical marketing originates from long-going criticism within the marketing discipline, arguing that the field accepts little critique and dissension and scholars of this discipline are discouraged from embracing critical discourse (Burton, 2001). In response, scholars inside (and sometimes outside) the marketing discipline call for a critical examination of existing marketing theory in light of radical economic, social and political change (Burton, 2001).

Traditional marketing research is often criticised for its underdeveloped level of theory (Alvesson, 1994; Bartels, 1988; Ellis et al., 2011). In contrast, critical marketing is characterised by theoretical pluralism (Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008), incorporating theories and paradigms from other disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, and psychology, to enrich, complement, and consolidate the credibility and criticality of the marketing discipline. Svensson (2018) suggests that Marxist Theory, Critical Theory, Foucauldian Theory, and Critical Sociology are the four predominant sources from which critical marketing academics get theoretical inspiration. Critical marketing studies have also drawn on paradigms such as postmodernism, feminism, and poststructuralism to critically examine and question the way we view theory, thought, and practice in marketing (Tadajewski, 2012).

It has been suggested that the notion of critical marketing encompasses multiple meanings (Shankar, 2009). For example, Burton (2001) perceives critical marketing as a development of critical theoretical approaches in marketing disciplines, whereas Tadajewski and Brownlie (2008: 18) argue that instead of being 'equated with one brand of critical thought', critical marketing is rather conceived of as an 'ethos' or an 'attitude', which bears hallmarks of ontological denaturalisation, epistemological reflexivity, and a non-performative stance. Ontological denaturalisation entails the viewpoint that the structure of consumer society, rather

than naturally developing into the *status quo*, is socially constructed and affected by factors including power relations, knowledge and human interests (Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008). Epistemological reflexivity firstly presents a denial of the positivist belief in the existence of external reality and instead underscores the agency of the researcher in knowledge production, contending that scholars should reflexively consider the role of the researcher when studying and interpreting marketing phenomena (Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008). It is also remarked that the emphasis on reflexivity enables a constant questioning exercise towards the very foundations of marketing knowledge (Shankar, 2009). The last criterion – the non-performative stance – indicates that critical marketing research aims to step beyond the sole purpose of producing knowledge to help marketing managers maximise the sales results with minimal costs (Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008). Aligning with the critical 'attitude' disseminated by critical marketing research, the section below provides critical scrutiny of consumerism.

3.2.2. Criticising Consumerism

One of the negative impacts of capitalist consumerism is the inconsistencies between consumers' expectations of a 'good life', delineated by capitalist consumerism, and their actual experiences. For example, many scholars criticise consumerism's claims that one's consumption level creates an equivalent level of satisfaction (Alvesson, 1994; Ellis et al., 2011; Featherstone, 2010), conveying that human happiness and satisfaction can be achieved through consumption. This is true to some extent, as people may use consumption to signal their identities (Brown, 1995), tastes, self-images, and power (Bourdieu, 1984). However, studies from multiple disciplines have raised concerns about whether consumption leads to enduring happiness, and whether happiness grows in proportion to consumption. According to Alvesson (1994), consumption beyond the fulfilment of basic needs appears to be incapable of bringing long-lasting or greater happiness, and the duration of satisfaction generated by each act of consumption tends to decrease in affluent societies. Some academics view the satisfaction provided by consumption as relative and positional (Hirsch, 1976; O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2002), which means that the satisfaction arises not from consumption itself but from the signifiers of wealth, taste, identity, and social status that it confers.

Another inconsistency of consumerism is the argument that consumers have freedom of choice versus the reality that consumer sovereignty is incomplete and questionable. Individuals living in a consumer society believe they have the right to choose. Many scholars in marketing argue

that this belief is unrealistic and problematic (Rothenberg, 1962; Gabriel and Lang, 2008). In reality, the product options provided by the market are limited by available resources and technology, and therefore it is impossible to accommodate every consumer's wants (Rothenberg, 1962). Besides, not all options are accessible to every consumer (Venkatesh, 1994) and vice versa; not everyone in a society possesses adequate wealth and access to engage in a 'liberatory consumption' lifestyle (Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008: 303). In other words, consumers' freedom is constrained by manufacturers and marketers, who control the availability and accessibility of goods in the market. Freedom is also restricted by individual capital, including monetary, social and intellectual capital, which determine whether one can afford, access and appreciate a product.

Apart from the issues of diminished satisfaction and illusory freedom of choice, consumerism is also criticised by environmental academics and activists as it indulges in material waste and neglects the environmental consequences of overconsumption. There are not unlimited natural resources to assure the infinite growth of the economy and the permanent supply of materials (Schumacher, 1973), and consumerism seems to accelerate the process of exhausting these resources. Overconsumption, rather than bringing consumers happiness, destroys the environment and wastes natural resources (Hemetsberger, 2018; Roberts, 2019). As noted by Cohen (2013), the current mass-consumption society seems unlikely to be the endpoint of history, suggesting that new forms of consumption will eventually develop and transcend contemporary consumerism. The following paragraphs will explore some of these new forms of consumption which have emerged and become popular in past decades.

3.3. Alternative Consumption Paradigms

In light of consumerism's negative effects, alternative and countervailing consumption paradigms have emerged, attempting to improve the contemporary consumer capitalist system or to emancipate people from it.

3.3.1. Ethical and Sustainable Consumption and Voluntary Simplicity

Although discussed together, the notions of ethical/moral consumption and sustainable/green consumption hold nuanced differences. As Makri and colleagues (2020) suggest, both paradigms reflect prosocial consumption behaviours which aim to benefit either the society

(i.e., ethical/moral consumption) or the environment (i.e., sustainable/green consumption) or both (i.e., alternative consumption). The notion of sustainable/green consumption focuses on addressing the detrimental effects of the hyper-consumption on the environment. It argues that the current logic of economic growth is unsustainable and thus the contemporary view of consumption needs to change. Ethical/moral consumption, on the other hand, is concerned with ethical issues such as processed materials, Fair Trade principles, and exploitive working practices in developing countries (Bray et al., 2011). Ethical consumer behaviour is defined as 'decision-making, purchases and other consumption experiences that are affected by the consumer's concerns' (Cooper-Martin and Holbrook, 1993: 113). These two paradigms also overlap with each other. For example, the notion of sustainable consumption not only refers to preserving and protecting the natural environment but also aims to strengthen social equity (Seyfang, 2005). Likewise, consumers' ethical concerns include considerations regarding environment-related issues such as waste, climate change and the consequences of consumption on the planet (Featherstone, 2010).

Driven by ethical and sustainable concerns, consumers have been found to turn to a simplified and reduced level of consumption (Shaw and Newholm, 2002), also known as 'voluntary simplicity' (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977). Compared with the other two consumption paradigms presented in this section, voluntary simplicity as a construct appears to be more multifaceted, as it encompasses various forms, being considered as either a political act, a new social movement, a consumer behaviour, or a lifestyle (Rebouças and Soares, 2021). Reduction of work and material consumption, emphasis on internal values (e.g., well-being and personal growth), environmental responsibility, social consciousness, and practices on self-sufficiency are elements that characterise the idea of voluntary simplicity (Rebouças and Soares, 2021).

However, criticisms arise regarding these alternative consumption paradigms. Scholars stress that the goal of these paradigms is to maintain and optimise the long-term growth of the capitalist economy while addressing environmental and ethical considerations in decision-making to achieve 'sustainable growth' (Chatzidakis et al., 2014) and 'not to jeopardise the needs of future generations' (Ramos-Hidalgo et al., 2022). Particularly, voluntary simplicity has received criticism regarding its 'voluntary' nature, as the practice of transforming into a simpler lifestyle is excluded for those who have no choice but are coerced to live in austerity (Rebouças and Soares, 2021). In short, these paradigms still follow the logic of the capitalist

economic order. They challenge neither the dominance of capitalism (Blühdorn, 2017) nor the prevailing logic of economic growth (Chatzidakis et al., 2014).

3.3.2. Consumer Resistance and Anticonsumption

Apart from sustainable and ethical consumption, two other variants of consumption paradigms are developed to emancipate consumers from the logic of capitalist consumerism: resistance and escape (Cova and Paraque, 2018). The resistance variant is based on resistant attitudes towards consumerism. It suggests that consumers can emancipate themselves from the structured marketplace by being reflexive and resisting traditional notions of consumption (Cova and Paraque, 2018). This variant is closely connected to the study of anti-consumption, which explores the avoidance behaviour of consumers and ways to reduce consumption (Lee, Fernandez et al., 2009). Anticonsumption ideas can be expressed through consumer behaviours of resisting (Makri et al., 2020); vice versa, in some cases, consumer resistance can take the form of anti-consumption acts, including rejection, restriction and reclaiming. However, the meanings of these two concepts are not interchangeable (Cherrier et al., 2011; Chatzidakis and Lee, 2013). Consumer resistance only manifests when antagonists (e.g., a brand, an organisation, and norms) appear (Makri et al., 2020; Cherrier et al., 2011), while anticonsumption can also be triggered by consumer personal experiences of symbolic incongruity, negative experiences, or value inadequacy (Lee, Motion et al., 2009). The principle of anticonsumption is 'against' consumption, while consumer resistance sometimes – instead of against – is expressed through localised, customised consumption patterns, which sidestep the dominance of the capitalist market (Cova and Paraque, 2018).

Although these two paradigms hold a resistant attitude towards consumption, they are still far from subversive as they both are passive responses to extant capitalist consumerism rather than active reformation. As Lee, Fernandez and colleagues (2009) stress, anti-consumption is neither a contradiction of business success nor an inherent economic threat. Meanwhile, few studies are concerned with the consequence of anticonsumption, thus anticonsumption practices at the individual level may result in increased consumption of society as a whole (e.g., Arancibia et al., 2019). Similarly, concerns have also been raised regarding the possibility that capitalism may take advantage of consumer resistance practices and consumption patterns, using them as inspirations for new marketing techniques (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005).

3.3.3. Consumer Escapism and Postmodern Consumption

'Escape', according to Cova and Paraque (2018), is the other emancipatory variant. It encourages consumers to escape from the predominant logic of the marketplace and immerse themselves in fragmented social spaces where non-totalising, beyond-the-market consumption takes place (Cova and Paraque, 2018). Adopting Turner's (1969) structure/antistructure analytical dichotomy, Cova and colleagues (2018) delineate two pathways of consumer's escaping: 'escape from structure' and 'escape into antistructure'. The 'escape from structure' reflects consumers' dissatisfaction with situations in the mainstream structure and their romantic belief (Campbell, 1987) in the existence of a more exciting and liberatory way of living outside. Thus, they desire to break away from the mundane, routine everyday reality and search for highly intense pleasure and indulgence as compensation for the dullness of the mainstream. The 'escape into antistructure', on the contrary, focuses on consumers immersing themselves into enclaved and secure experiential contexts (Carù and Cova, 2007), allowing them to develop alternative selves and obtain the experience of navigating multiple identities simultaneously (Cova et al., 2018). The variant of escape also embraces attitudes of postmodern consumption. Consumers tend to escape to fluid, non-totalising arenas of postmodern consumption (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) to freely engage with a diversity of experiences. Further, postmodern consumption advocates tolerance and appreciation towards diverse consumption experiences and preferences (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). For example, extraordinary anti-consumption experiences such as the Burning Man Festival (Kozinets, 2002) attract academic interest because such activities attempt to disrupt consumers' daily routines and allow them to escape from the market and consumerism (Tumbat and Belk, 2011).

Nevertheless, the escape variant and postmodern consumption are criticised for overemphasising the playful and celebratory aspects of consumption and romanticising consumerism (Cova and Paraque, 2018; Tadajewski, 2010). Consumer escapism and postmodern consumption allow consumers to transiently escape from capitalist consumerism. However – like sustainable and ethical consumption – these approaches do not challenge the dominance of consumerism and capitalism but instead consolidate it, for such escapism often manifests as ephemeral, personal, and cathartic rituals of release or rebellion (Kozinets, 2002; Gluckman, 1954), which has been criticised as a romantic response to consumerism that is still colonised by market logic (Arnould, 2007). "This kind of escape is clearly not the kind

envisioned by the critics of market capitalism, and yet it is hard to imagine a realistic alternative" (Arnould, 2007: 104).

Most existing alternatives do not challenge the dominance and legitimacy of capitalism, as these alternatives attempt to reform and/or escape consumerism, but in the meantime, maintain economic growth and co-exist with capitalism. These alternatives neglect the fact that it is unrealistic to decouple consumerism from its embedded capitalist economy. Furthermore, consumerism serves the interest of modern capitalism by legitimising the capitalist economy (Bocock, 1993; Alvesson, 1994) and facilitating the creation of false needs and exploited consumers (Marcuse, 1956). Therefore, any alternative consumption paradigm that wishes to emancipate people from the structure of consumerism must involve a critical examination of capitalism. As such, post-consumerism emerges to provide a critical approach to discovering new consumption forms beyond consumerism.

3.4. Current Conceptualisation of Post-Consumerism

This section examines the existing literature on 'post-consumerism' and summarises similarities among and criticisms of these works to develop a broad understanding of post-consumerism from the academic perspective.

3.4.1. An Overview of Existing Literature

The term 'post-consumerism' has been used in various pieces of literature from different perspectives (e.g., Soper et al., 2009; Cohen, 2013; Chatzidakis et al., 2014; Blühdorn, 2017), which provides opportunities to explore the interpretation and expression of this term. Table 3.4.1. presents an overview of academic literature concerning the concept of post-consumerism based on their chronological order of publication.

Table 3.4.1. Academic literature on post-consumerism

Author(s)	Title	Publication
Soper, 2000	Other Pleasure: The Attraction of Post-Consumerism	Socialist Register
Soper, 2004	Re-thinking the 'Good Life'	Journal of Consumer Culture

Soper, 2008	Alternative Hedonism, culture theory and the role of aesthetic revisioning	Culture Studies
Soper et al., 2009	The Politics and Pleasures of Consuming Differently	Palgrave Macmillan
Frank, 2009	Post-consumer prosperity: finding new opportunities amid the economic wreckage.	The American Prospect
Varey and Mckie, 2010	Staging consciousness: marketing 3.0, post-consumerism and future pathways	Journal of Customer Behaviour
Walker, 2010	The Chimera Reified: Design, Meaning and the Post-consumerism Object	The Design Journal
Wenzel, 2011	Consumption for the Common Good? Commodity Biography Film in an Age of Postconsumerism	Public Culture
Cohen, 2013	Collective dissonance and the transition to post-consumerism	Futures
Cohen, 2014	The Decline and Fall of Consumer Society?	Great Transition Initiative
Chatzidakis et al., 2014	Farewell to consumerism: Countervailing logics of growth in consumption	Ephemera: theory & politics in organisation
Cohen, 2015a	Toward a Post-consumerist Future? Social Innovation in an Era of Fading Economic Growth	Handbook on Research on Sustainable Consumption,
Cohen, 2015b	The Decline and Fall of Consumer Society? Implications for Theories of Modernization	Global Modernization Review: New Discoveries and Theories Revisited
Cohen, 2016	The Future of Consumer Society: Prospects for Sustainability in the New Economy	Oxford University Press
Blühdorn, 2017	Post-capitalism, post-growth, post-consumerism? Eco-political hopes beyond sustainability	Global Discourse
Soper, 2017	A New Hedonism: A Post-Consumerism Vision	The Next System Project
Cohen, 2017	Workers—and Consumers—of the World Unite! Opportunities for Hybrid Cooperativism	Oxford Handbook of Cooperative and Mutual Business
Cohen et al., 2017	Social Change and the Coming of Post-Consumer Society	Routledge
Caruana et al., 2020	Alternative Hedonism: Exploring the role of pleasure in moral markets	Journal of Business Ethics
Soper, 2020	Post-Growth Living: For an Alternative Hedonism	Verso
Manfredini, 2020	Affirmatively Reading Post-consumerism: Distributed Participatory Creativity and Creative Destruction of the Malled Metropolitan Centres of Auckland, New Zealand, during COVID-19 Lockdown	The Journal of Public Space
Grochowski, 2023	Consumer Law for a Post-Consumer Society	Journal of European Consumer and Market Law

The table shows that the term 'post-consumerism' emerged at the beginning of the 21st century and was first used by Soper (2000) in a work criticising the current untrammelled growth and consumerism and suggesting the possibility of substituting capitalist and consumerism patterns of life and work with a more egalitarian and ecological global order. This article and works that flow from it (e.g., Soper, 2004, 2008, 2017, 2020; Soper et al., 2009; Caruana et al., 2020) constitute a substantive body of literature on post-consumerism. This stream of thought centres on the conceptual building of 'alternative hedonism'. Soper (2000, 2017) points out that traditional consumerism fails to contribute to consumers' well-being and happiness and subsequently introduces the concept of 'alternative hedonism' – a less-acquisitive lifestyle which reconciles pleasure with moral, ethical and ecological consumption activities (Caruana et al., 2020), thus envisioning post-consumerism as a form of societies where the idea of alternative hedonism concretises. Another significant group of literature on post-consumerism comes from Cohen and his colleagues. Coming from a historical perspective, Cohen (2013) believes that the financial crisis that happened in 2008 raised concerns about the continuity of consumer society and the limit of capitalist economic growth (also in Cohen, 2014). As a result, macroeconomic transitions from consumerism to post-consumerism are emerging in many wealthy countries worldwide (Cohen, 2013). Cohen (2014) carries on exploring the emergence of post-consumerism by looking at how post-consumerist practices (e.g. community gardening, clothing swaps) are incorporated as a part of people's lifestyles in some urban areas in the United States. A set of social innovations, including collaborative consumption (or sharing economy), community energy and food production, local living economy, mindful consumption, peer-to-peer provisioning, prosumption, self and communal cultivation and fabrication, and unconsumption, are also outlined at the end of this work. This stream of thought has also expanded into books (Cohen, 2016; Cohen et al., 2017) in which a number of social innovations (e.g. sharing economy, local food movements) and changes (e.g. abandoning the economic-growth narrative) that necessitate post-consumerism are discussed.

In addition to those two bodies of literature, Chatzidakis and colleagues (2014) engage with post-consumerism as the consumption imperative of a degrowth society where consumption is driven by necessity and conducted within self-organised communities. Varey and McKie (2010)

suggest that the discipline of marketing needs to transform to the 'marketing 3.0' to adapt to an era of post-consumerism. Outside of marketing and consumer research, the concept of post-consumerism has also been referred to by works from specific domains, including product design (e.g., Walker, 2010), architecture and space studies (e.g., Manfredini, 2020), law (e.g., Grochowski, 2023), fashion (e.g., Jardim, 2023), and film studies (e.g., Wenzel, 2011). These works understand the term 'post-consumerism' as a notion that is synonymous with "post-capitalism and post-growth" (Jardim, 2023: 159), "systemic shift, radical change, or post-materialism" (Walker, 2010: 10), and altruistic acts of consumption that benefit the planet and others in need (Wenzel, 2011).

3.4.2. Existing Literature's Construction of Post-Consumerism

Moving forward, the literature presented in Table 3.4.1. offers discrete interpretations of post-consumerism. A more comprehensive concept of post-consumerism may be constructed by examining similarities across these works. First, ecological and sustainability issues caused by capitalist consumerism are the main reasons for the emergence of post-consumerism. Soper (2000) expresses concerns about the ecological side-effects resulting from pleasure and convenient consumption, contending that the pleasure of consuming differently should be sought to achieve a more ecological, egalitarian, and cyclical mode of interaction with nature. Similarly, Walker (2010) suggests that the notion of post-consumerism is supplemented by contemporary thinking about product sustainability and post-materialism, signalling that the concept of post-consumerism is aligned with ecological and sustainable principles.

Second, this literature envisions a society or lifestyle that transforms the current system of capitalist consumerism. Soper (2000) argues that the current employment structure of consumer capitalism needs to be reformed, as it uses human labour for wasteful and luxurious production, which benefits the capitalist economy. As noted by Cohen (2013: 49), a post-consumerist future should 'entail clever combinations of urban agriculture, individual and communal provisioning, labour reskilling, infrastructural retrofitting, low-carbon technologies, carbon rationing, and hyperconnected modes of social interaction'. He furthers this delineation by listing emerging social innovations, such as the sharing economy (Cohen et al., 2017), economic localism, shared ownership and use, and peer-to-peer provisioning (Cohen, 2014). He encapsulates these emerging practices as 'expressions of post-consumerist interactions'

(Cohen, 2014: 4), which indicates that the notion of post-consumerism is interpreted as embodying subversions of capitalist social structures and consumerism.

Third, these articles express a sceptical attitude towards ideas which advocate that people should live in austerity and simplicity to achieve eco-friendly and sustainable societies. Ideas of austerity and simplicity often claim that humanity and human happiness need to be sacrificed for the good of the earth and the environment. However, these ideas suppress the human urge to seek pleasure and the nature that humanity tends to be less distinctively human when it becomes more eco-friendly (Soper, 2000). These articles suggest that instead of embracing austerity uncritically, a re-evaluation of social values is needed to discover new forms of happiness and pleasure that transcend material satisfaction (Soper, 2000; Chatzidakis et al., 2014; Blühdorn, 2017).

3.4.3. Criticising the Current Discourse of Post-Consumerism

The development of the conceptualisation of post-consumerism thus far has received several criticisms. Jardim (2023) remarks post-consumerism as a 'fashionable' concept and questions the genuineness of the contemporary discourse of post-consumerism. She argues that instead of genuinely seeking radical movement to change the status quo, post-consumerism, in fact, feeds into the continuation of consumerism. A similar concern has been raised by Blühdorn (2017), who contends that the discourse and practices of post-consumerism – along with parallel discourses of post-capitalism and post-growth – is employed as a substitution to the sustainability paradigm which is exhausted in contemporary societies by the superficial and ineffective efforts made by governments and international institutions in achieving the goals of ecological and sustainable development. Thus, Blühdorn (2017) suggests that post-consumerism will become the next sustainability paradigm that, albeit intended oppositely, accelerates modern societies towards more social inequalities and ecological destruction. These criticisms resemble what is described as 'the ethical consumption gap' (Carrington et al., 2016), that there is a discrepancy between a consumer's intention and their actual behaviours in practising ethical consumption (see also Coffin and Egan-Wyer, 2022).

Moreover, although these pieces of literature provide diverse expressions and interpretations of what post-consumerist society might look like, most of them remain at a conceptual level and barely apply these conceptualisations to practice. There is a lack of empirical studies on

social activities and communities that claim to adopt the ideas of post-consumerism. It is also worth noting that such a lack of studies might be attributed to the unawareness of the concept among social activists and alternative living practitioners (e.g., some residents in the community have never heard of the term, see 7.2.1.). At present, the expression of post-consumerism is suggested to be fragmentary (Cohen, 2013). Various social innovations and practices, such as 'new consumption communities' (Bekin et al., 2005) and sharing economy (e.g., Schor and Wengronowitz, 2017), are considered discrete expressions of post-consumerism. As such, this research attempts to explore and examine fragmentary expressions of post-consumerism rather than seeking a sample (i.e., a community or a society) equipped with a complete set of post-consumerist features. The following section, subsequently, focuses on the expressions, or social practices, of post-consumerism.

3.5. Post-Consumerism and Degrowth

The main question asked in this section is pragmatic: How can luxury be studied in a post-consumerist environment? The conceptualisation of post-consumerism is an ongoing process, and the expression of post-consumerism is fragmentary (Cohen, 2013), suggesting that there may be no existing countervailing activities or practices of capitalist consumerism completely compatible with a 'post-consumerist' perspective. Studies in post-consumerism, therefore, need assistance from more developed anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist discourses. The notion of degrowth is such an ideological discourse to turn to, as it not only embeds post-consumerism as its consumption imperative but has also been applied in various social movements and practices (Chatzidakis et al., 2014). This thesis draws on existing degrowth research to assist the investigation of post-consumerism. This section introduces degrowth, examining to what extent this idea has been practised to date and how existing degrowth studies interpret luxury.

3.5.1. Understanding Degrowth

The term 'degrowth' originates from the French word 'décroissance', meaning reduction (Demaria et al., 2013). The notion of degrowth started as a conceptual critique of the capitalist emphasis on never-ending economic growth but soon developed into a diverse praxis of social movements (Lloveras et al., 2018; Demaria et al., 2013). Degrowth aims to re-evaluate the concept of a 'good life', redirect the goal of growth away from economic and towards citizens'

well-being, and leverage the quality of life, social relations, equality and justice to redefine wealth (Schneider et al., 2010; Kallis et al., 2012; Chatzidakis et al., 2014).

Degrowth is also distinct from other growth paradigms such as 'negative growth' and 'a-growth'; the former delineates a recession of economies (Cosme et al., 2017), and the latter proposes to abolish GDP as an indicator of development and welfare and instead focus on effects of environmental, social and economic policies (van den Bergh and Kallis, 2012). Transforming into a degrowth society is suggested to entail a series of systematic realisations (Latouche, 2009): re-evaluate, reconceptualise, restructure, redistribute, re-localise, reduce and re-use/recycle. Degrowth holds that consumption and economic growth should not be central criteria for evaluating people's satisfaction or the affluence of a society. In terms of its relationship with post-consumerism, degrowth ideology embraces post-consumerism as its consumption logic and distinguishes post-consumerism from traditional consumerist and sustainable logic of consumption (Chatzidakis et al., 2014). Degrowth also concretises the idea of post-consumerism into social practices, providing opportunities to investigate post-consumerism in real-life social settings.

3.5.2. Degrowth Praxis

As a subversive ideology, degrowth draws on reformatory thoughts and studies from multiple disciplines. Its proponents come from various philosophical perspectives, movements and intellectual sources. These include culturalism, the quest for democracy, ecology, 'the meaning of life' movement and ecological economics, all of which contribute to the formation and development of degrowth (Schneider et al., 2010). Kallis and colleagues (2012) propose several political and institutional options for developing degrowth societies: improving the supply-consumption system of resources, non-debt money and regional currencies, zero interest rates, new forms of property, work-sharing and innovative models of local living. Stemming from these, practices to concretise degrowth have been studied from various perspectives.

For instance, as degrowth advocates re-localising production and consumption to reduce the environmental costs of transportation (Chatzidakis et al., 2014), establishing a local food system becomes a primary issue for degrowth practitioners. Regarding this, Hall and colleagues (2014) employ the life cycle assessment (LCA) model, supplemented by data collected from interviews and focus groups, to investigate the impacts of local food production systems in an

urban setting. Apart from localising food systems, issues such as inventing local/regional currencies (e.g., Douthwaite, 2012; Dittmer, 2013), co-housing (e.g., Lietaert, 2010), creating collective ownership (e.g., Kunze and Becker, 2015), and developing a microeconomic system (e.g., Cattaneo and Gavalda, 2010) have also been addressed Bloemmen and colleagues (2015) examine Community Supported Agriculture in Belgium to explore new microeconomic approaches to degrowth, adopting a holistic production-consumption model that is built upon trust, cooperation, and ecological responsibility. Lloveras and colleagues (2018), on the other hand, explore how degrowth activism and noncapitalist logic inspire and guide urban life through endorsing practices including building conviviality, sharing access to resources, implementing horizontal decision-making processes, and reforming the unequal, gendered distribution of social reproduction work, defined as activities such as cooking, cleaning and child-rearing that are considered indispensable for nurturing the workers of productive work (see Folbre, 1986). So far, scholars have explored various aspects of degrowth praxis and how to reconstruct systems for basic needs (i.e., food, currency, shelter) under a degrowth discourse; however, aspects beyond survival, such as notions of wealth, abundance, poverty, scarcity, and luxury, have not yet been considered and analysed.

3.5.3. Degrowth and Luxury

Current literature shares a common perception that luxury is opposite to the ideology of degrowth. Degrowth advocates believe that the pursuit of luxury implies overconsumption and acceleration of inequality (Sippel, 2009). Chertkovskaya and colleagues (2017) argue that luxury production, including communist (or anarchist) luxury, inevitably involves unnecessary material costs. However, at the same time, they also envision that luxury in degrowth societies will be communal, less material and be an expression of 'frugal abundance', signifying a possible conceptual shift of luxury that may harmonise luxury with the social, economic, and ecological principles of degrowth. This possible shift is reinforced by the emergence of studies centring on small-scale, non-growth-driven, and non-mainstream-culture communities worldwide, which have discovered alternative, non-material measurements of affluence (Kallis et al., 2018). A group of people called Ju/'hoansi evaluates affluence based on criteria of social relations, cultural abundance and time (Suzman, 2017). The Mbendjele Yaka people in Congo consider abundance, rather than scarcity, as the criterion to measure whether something is valuable (Lewis, 2008). These examples imply that alternative measurements of luxury are

possible in degrowth societies. Likewise, luxury in a post-consumerist environment might express itself in new manifestations that remain to be discovered.

3.6. Post-Consumerism and Anti-Consumerism

On the path of this research of understanding and conceptualising post-consumerism, a question has been raised by one of my progression review examiners. They enquire how is post-consumerism distinguished from anti-consumerism. Or, in other words, do consumer researchers need another new term to capture phenomena and activities of consumer society? As such, this section examines the existing literature revolving around post-consumerism and anti-consumerism to understand the relationship between these two and how to distinguish one from the other.

The relationship between anti-consumerism and post-consumerism is indistinct and has not yet been clarified. Section 3.3. presents a review of alternative consumption paradigms, including ethical and sustainable consumption, consumer resistance and anticonsumption, and consumer escapism and postmodern consumption. It criticises that these alternatives are far from radical and are not subversive enough to challenge the dominance of capitalism, thus distinguishing them from the idea of post-consumerism. In comparison with the above alternative consumption paradigms, anti-consumerism appears to be more critical and reflexive. It neither resists, nor escapes, nor rebels against consumption but seeks alternatives to contemporary consumer capitalism and explores ways to consume differently (Binkley and Littler, 2008). Anti-consumerism is a discursive formation (Bramall, 2011) containing a broad range of positions, traditions, theories, and rhetoric (Binkley and Littler, 2008).

When considering post-consumerism in relation to anti-consumerism, little information could be found. A supposition can be made based on Wikipedia's anti-consumerism page ("Anti-consumerism," 2023), which states that post-consumerism is a conceptual variation of anti-consumerism. Multiple pieces of literature suggest similar viewpoints to this statement. Firstly, both anti-consumerism and post-consumerism do not set out against consumption *per se* but attempt to pursue alternative modes of consumption that challenge and transcend capitalist consumerism (Binkley and Littler, 2008; Chatzidakis et al., 2014). Scholars have employed the wider discursive context of anti-consumerism to understand consumer practices and

movements. For example, Cherrier (2010) interprets custodian behaviour as an anti-consumerist resistance to the wastefulness of consumer culture. Bramall (2011) turns to the re-emergence of the 'dig for victory' discourse and suggests that the movement embeds anti-consumerist ideas of moving outside of the capitalist commodity system. Likewise, the logic of post-consumerism denies the centrality of consumption, and the concept itself has been adopted in movements of consumers withdrawing from the marketplace and noncapitalist processes (e.g., Lloveras et al., 2018; Bekin et al., 2005).

Secondly, it is common to find crossovers between the literature of anti-consumerism and post-consumerism. Soper (2004) marries anti-consumerism with sustainable consumption by drawing on her post-consumerist proposal of finding hedonism through alternative practices beside consumption. This idea is then referred to by Binkley and Littler (2008) in their attempt to define anti-consumerism. Another connection between anti-consumerism and post-consumerism is found in the literature about degrowth. It is suggested that some anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist activists have engaged degrowth as a key political slogan (Chatzidakis et al., 2014; Kallis et al., 2018) and *vice versa* (e.g., Chatzidakis et al., 2012). In light of the premise that anti-consumerism does not entail a cohesive and organised form of consumer resistance (Cherrier, 2010) but comprises a variable hybridisation of thoughts, sentiments, and discourses (Binkley and Littler, 2008), it is reasonable to assume that post-consumerism stands as a variation of anti-consumerism. However, it is also worth highlighting that several attributes of post-consumerism delineated by existing literature suggests a possible distinction between anti-consumerism and post-consumerism.

1. <u>Post-consumerism does not deny modern, material societies</u>

The logic of post-consumerism does not align with some anti-consumerist discourses which wish to correct consumerism by adopting austere, simple and non-material lifestyles. Being post-consumerist does not necessarily mean being less materialistic (Chatzidakis et al., 2014). Instead, post-consumerism encourages citizens to discover alternative sources of satisfaction (e.g., well-being, social relations) rather than rely on consumption. It also advocates new combinations of production and consumption, e.g., urban agriculture (Cohen, 2013), to rebuild the relationship between modern citizenship and consumption. Consumerism, as criticised, undermines individuals' sense of civic belonging, weakens their engagement with the public world, and destroys a meaningful sense of citizenship (Trentmann and Soper, 2008). In short,

post-consumerism is about restructuring social values and building new consumption order and citizenship rather than abandoning modern, urban, material life to live in austerity.

2. Post-consumerism focuses on reconstructing values

Literature on post-consumerism tends to suggest that to transcend consumer capitalism changes must be made through reconstructing values and reconceptualising notions such as wealth and scarcity (e.g., Chatzidakis et al., 2014), while anti-consumerist scholars, in comparison, often turn to social practices and movements to seek changes. For example, degrowth aims to subvert the view maintained by the growth paradigm that the global expansion of capitalist markets and economic growth is healthy signs of development (Kallis et al., 2018). A degrowth society abandons the belief in the economic growth and expects to replace egoism and competition with altruism and cooperation, and the obsession of work is expected to be replaced by the pleasure of leisure and social life (Chatzidakis et al., 2014). These suggested changes in values resonate with Soper's approach of 'alternative hedonism' to rethink 'human well-being, consumption, and politics of prosperity' (2017: 7). Differently, the notion of anti-consumerism is often approached as, and associated with, activism (e.g., Littler, 2005) with complex articulations such as boycotts, fair trade practices, and the movement for consumers' rights (Binkley and Littler, 2008).

3. Post-consumerism restructures labour relationships

Several scholars have discussed shifts in labour relationships and the role of production in post-consumerist societies. Soper (2000) criticises that the current employment structure relies on the misuse of human resources, thus the work and labour relationships need to be readjusted in post-consumerist societies. In line with the ideology of degrowth, post-consumerist citizenship suggests that individuals' roles in society should be assigned based on their social participation (Chatzidakis et al., 2014), and the role of production will be reconceptualised, restructured, and reduced to be coherent with post-consumerist values. Reduction in material and energy throughput, along with the increase of austerity policies, has resulted in growing numbers of worker-owner cooperatives in the post-consumerist era (Cohen, 2013), indicating a reconstruction of work and labour relationships in post-consumerist societies. In contrast, discussions around anti-consumerism predominantly focus on the consumption aspect and the agency of consumers, concerning how consumers engage in a multitude of activities to implement anti-consumerist ethos (e.g., Cherrier, 2010; Bramall, 2011), or even, as Binkley

(2008) argues, employing anti-consumerism to mediate, accelerate, and intensify ordinary forms of consumption and commodification.

3.7. Chapter Summary

This chapter starts with a review of the broader disciplinary approach of critical marketing and follows with a series of criticisms towards capitalist consumerism. Several alternative consumption paradigms are then included in the following section of the chapter to shed light on what solutions have been considered in response to the criticisms. The second half of the literature review turns to the concept of post-consumerism, examining how it is engaged, presented, and conceptualised by existing literature and comparing it with parallel concepts of degrowth and anti-consumerism.

This thesis's review of literature comes to an end here. Chapters 2 and 3 examined existing literature on consumerist luxury, alternative luxury, critical marketing studies, alternative consumption paradigms, and post-consumerism, establishing a conceptual and theoretical foundation for the following analysis. The review also set up the premise that luxury, in the context of this research, is understood as a variable and equivocal notion, allowing luxury to be reconstructed and redefined by different social actors in various socio-cultural contexts. Building on the literature, the following chapter turns to the research itself, outlining key research questions and the methodological stance employed in conducting the research. The chapter then introduces the two studies – a discourse analysis of alternative media and an ethnography in an intentional community – engaged in this research. The first study later contributes to the analysis in Chapter 5, in which how the notion of luxury is constructed by different alternative media is discussed. The second study leads to the analysis of Chapters 6, 7, and 8, depicting how post-consumerism and luxury are understood by a quasi-post-consumerist community and implemented in its everyday practice.

CHAPTER 4:

METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

This chapter details the methodology used in this thesis. It begins with the research questions and a discussion of the underlying research paradigm – interpretivism. This is then followed by a description of the two independent studies that comprise the thesis by respectively examining the transitioning meanings of luxury in the contexts of alternative media and an intentional community. Multiple research methods were employed across these studies, including discourse analysis, ethnography, participant observation, field notes, interviews, and thematic analysis, and each of them will be discussed in detail accordingly. One highlight of this chapter is the integration of reflexivity in the ethnographic study. The notion of 'reflexivity' refers to 'an awareness of the self in the situation of action and of the role the self in constructing that situation' (Bloor and Wood, 2006: 145). It has been suggested that being reflexively attuned to emotions throughout the research process and constantly questioning the trustworthiness of research interpretations contribute to more meaningful and rigorous work (Glesne, 2016). Hence, every data-collection method used in this ethnography, as well as the ethics section, was accompanied by a reflexive account of my experience as a researcher in the field. This chapter also lays the foundations for the analysis chapters that follow, justifying why certain research contexts were chosen and detailing how data were collected, categorised, and analysed.

4.2. Research Questions

The research questions were based on emerging questions identified in the review of the literature. Broadly speaking, the aim of this research to explore the transformation of the notion of luxury from its conventional meanings to alternative interpretations, particularly in the context of post-consumerism. In doing so, the conceptualisation of post-consumerism will also be further developed from its current burgeoning state.

As discussed in 2.3., the contemporary understanding of luxury concentrates on its economic and business value (e.g., Kapferer and Bastien, 2009; Okonkwo, 2007, 2009); its socio-cultural significance is rarely studied (Armitage and Robert, 2016a). In contrast, this thesis critically examines luxury through a socio-cultural lens and challenges the contemporary market-centric understanding of luxury, suggesting an evolving definition of luxury for both academics and

market practitioners in luxury studies. In addition, this thesis explores definitions of post-consumerism based on current literature and social practices. It is in post-consumerist environment that luxury – a powerful symbol of affluent materialism and capitalist consumerism – confronts a revolutionary ideology that denies the importance of material wealth and consumption-based satisfaction. Post-consumerism has not yet established a systematic knowledge framework. Scholars from multiple disciplines offer diverse interpretations of it, which has resulted in a fragmented understanding of post-consumerism. This investigation attempts to construct a broad understanding of post-consumerism and identify characteristics which differentiate it from other consumption logics.

The foremost question addressed in this research is: *how the notion of luxury is transformed and adapted to a post-consumerist context*? To some extent, this research is to explore the notion of luxury in alternative setting constructed by alternative groups of people. Three secondary questions were derived from this key question:

1. How is luxury understood and presented by non-mainstream (in other words, alternative) social parties and groups?
2. How do alternative communities and consumers construct the concept of post-consumerism?
3. How does the logic of post-consumerism help post-consumerist citizens reconceptualise and practise (e.g., access, use) luxury outside of capitalist consumerism?

4.3. Research Paradigm: Interpretivism

The overarching research paradigm adopted in this research is interpretivism. A research paradigm is understood as common assumptions shared across a discipline, or among a group of researchers, about the nature of reality, common methodologies, dealings with similar topics and so forth (Kuhn, 1970; Schwandt, 2001). Positivism and interpretivism (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988), along with critical theory suggested by Murray and Ozanne (1991), are recognised as the three predominant research paradigms that characterise marketing and consumer research and broader social sciences. These paradigms embody different ontological, axiological, and epistemological assumptions. For instance, positivist researchers tend to assume the existence of a single, objective reality, and its overriding goal is to ‘explain’ phenomena to eventually obtain context-free generalised knowledge (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Critical theory seeks

a critical and emancipatory middle-ground between the extremes of positivism and interpretivism. Scholars of this paradigm view reality as the product of constant interaction between meanings and social structures, aiming to produce forward-looking, imaginative, practical, critical and unmasking knowledge (Murray and Ozanne, 1991). Compared with the other two paradigms, interpretivism as a tradition of seeking knowledge denies the existence of one real world but instead believes that reality is socially constructed and mentally perceived (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Glesne, 2016). Interpretivists gain knowledge through observing or participating in social activities and creating devices such as theories and categories to make sense of their worlds and societies (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). In terms of the goal of knowing, interpretivist research does not seek to produce a generalised explanation but an interpretive understanding of social phenomena. The purpose of this research, which is to understand the transformation of luxury and post-consumerism, is therefore an adherent of this epistemology.

Interpretivism encapsulates a multitude of methodologies (Cova and Elliot, 2008). Although one should not arbitrarily categorise qualitative research methods to the domain of interpretivist research, qualitative data are seemingly well suited for, and commonly used in, interpretive consumer research (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000; Cova and Elliot, 2008), enabling a "humanistic" (Hirschman, 1989) approach to understand the research subjects in 'a natural, changing environment' (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988: 513) rather than a preconditioned, controlled lab. Qualitative data gathering techniques are widely employed by interpretive consumer researchers who are interested in understanding their informants' points of view so as to illuminate broader cultural meanings (Spiggle, 1994). In this research, qualitative data-gathering techniques including ethnography, participant observation, in-depth interviews, and fieldnote-taking were involved. These techniques legitimised the researcher to become a measuring instrument to understand phenomena through personal experience and from the perspective of the informants involved (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000).

Meanwhile, interpretivist scholars emphasise the subjective nature of the research (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1986; Spiggle, 1994; Ozanne and Hudson, 1989) and believe that knowledge produced under this paradigm is subjectively attained (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000). Methods adopted in this research reflect the subjective nature: occurrences and conversations collected from the data-gathering process were perceived by the researcher, and the techniques of discourse analysis and thematic analysis applied in the analysing process both revolved around interpreting language and text based on the researcher's understanding and experience of the

phenomena. The interpretivism paradigm naturally fits in the objective and the questions raised in this research, allowing the notion of luxury and post-consumerism to be interpreted flexibly and subjectively by different social actors within various social environments.

4.4. Study 1 – A Discourse Analysis of Alternative Media

4.4.1. Discourse Analysis as the Method

The study of alternative media was a decision made in response to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic that occurred in 2020. The pandemic constrained people's consumption activities from the physical marketplace. It, though disastrous, provided an opportunity to observe how people's perceptions of life changed in response to the lockdown and the removal from the external consumerist environment due to the closure of bricks-and-mortar consumption spaces such as shops and restaurants. This condition may have catalysed our society's transition to post-consumerism and triggered new luxury discourses to emerge. Moreover, the pandemic and the consequential lockdowns in the UK created obstacles to undertaking ethnographic fieldwork which was the proposed methodology for this study, as most communities did not want to accept external researchers due to health and safety concerns. Hence, I decided to turn to digital space, examining how discourses around luxury are discursively constructed in a non-mainstream context – alternative media.

Discourses, usually presented in forms of writing and talking (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), refer to social practices (Carbó et al., 2016) which constitute certain kinds of subjectivity and social reality (Ardley and Quinn, 2014) in a continuous, ongoing way (Wood and Kroger, 2000). Discourse Analysis (DA), as a research approach as well as a technique, centres on examining how language is used to produce and reproduce certain social realities and construct social structures, relations, and identities (Fairclough, 1993). Discourse Analysis can be approached and conducted from a variety of perspectives, including discursive social psychology (DSP) (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), social semiotics (or social linguistics – SS/SL) (Hodge and Kress, 1988), and conversation analysis (CA) (Sacks et al., 1974). Of these, discursive social psychology (DSP) sets out to understand how people employ various interpretive repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Palmer and Dunford, 2002) or linguistic devices (Billig, 1987) to construct their accounts rhetorically. DSP also entails an emphasis on the identification and deconstruction of existing D/discourses related to power and ideology, aligning with the

approach of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992) focuses on interpreting how language (e.g., writing and talking) is used to 'legitimise, maintain, and naturalise forms of social power and inequality' (Bouvier and Machin, 2018: 178). Likewise, the second perspective of DA, social semiotics, also alludes to CDA as it suggests that speakers make continuous semantic choices in speech, thus some terms are chosen over others, and SS/SL is concerned with unfolding the systematic relationship between social structures and language behind these choices (Halliday, 1973; Halliday and Hasan, 1989). The third perspective, conversation analysis (CA), emphasises the interactive and turn-taking (Sacks et al., 1974) features of talk and specifically examines the detail in terms of conversational strategies and devices recruited in talk (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998).

Alternative media, as producers of text-based content, are active users of language and thus possess the capacity to produce and disseminate discourses; meanwhile, the viewpoints of alternative media are often constituted by social norms and existing discourses, so the content produced by alternative media to some extent also maintains and normalises those norms and discourse. This dual characteristic of alternative media prompted this research to lean on the view of critical discourse analysts who contend that discourse 'both *constitutes* the social world and is *constituted* by other social practices' (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). In line with the approach of CDA, this research investigated how alternative media construct and reframe power relation among social actors by discussing subjects around luxury to understand what discourses of luxury emerged during such construction and how the notion of luxury transformed under the pessimistic climate of human societies exacerbated by the pandemic.

4.4.2. Research Context: Alternative Media

The research context of this study turned to the category of alternative media. Historically, alternative media have been considered a liberating force to empower and give voice to the groups that are marginalised from the dominant discourse of mainstream media (Holt, 2018). Alternative media are often understood and constructed in opposition to the concept of 'mainstream media' (Harcup, 2005), which is described as commercially oriented or state-owned, widely circulated, hierarchical, and predominant (Fuchs, 2010; Kolandai-Matchett, 2009). Hence, it appears natural for alternative media to represent anti-capitalist visions (Atton, 2002), and it is argued that any critical medium that imagines a world beyond capitalism should be considered 'alternative' (Fuchs, 2010; Rauch, 2016). At present, the context of alternative

media is under-utilised in consumer research (e.g., Kolandai-Matchett, 2009), given the high number of studies that have taken place within the context of mainstream and social media (e.g., Dou et al., 2006; Hutton and Fosdick, 2011). Unlike mainstream media, alternative media provide critical and counter-mainstream perspectives that challenge the norms and power relations established by the hegemonic groups. More importantly, they represent the countervailing force to the mainstream culture, which creates a countercultural context for exploring unconventional notions of luxury. The context of alternative media provided a lens through which we can observe how the notion of luxury is unconventionally interpreted, presented, constructed, and perhaps even transformed in the time of volatility imposed by the pandemic.

4.4.3. Data Collection

The selection of alternative media involved two steps. At first, desk research was conducted using keywords including 'alternative media', 'alternative media UK', and 'list of alternative media UK' to gather information about which alternative media have high exposure and popularity on the Internet. Ten independent web pages were discovered with discrete lists of alternative media. The names of media which had been respectively mentioned in different lists three times or more were then recorded, and twelve were shortlisted. The second step of the selection involves examining the shortlisted media's content and eliminating those which do not contain content related to luxury. To do so, Google was employed as the search engine, and the keywords for searching were formatted as '*luxury site:[the link of a medium's website]*', which searched the appearance of the word 'luxury' in a specified medium's website. As a result, the number of selected media were reduced to five (see Table 4.4.1.) because the rest of the twelve did not have any articles that contain the word 'luxury' in their content. Considering that the final five media are digitally accessible in the UK with nationwide and worldwide circulations, the websites of these media were visited to collect articles in which the word 'luxury' appears. Those articles were then saved as Microsoft Word documents. A total of 127 articles were retrieved in this way across the timeframe of 1st April to 30th November 2020, during which two national lockdowns were implemented in the UK due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Table 4.4.1. shows the number of articles retrieved from each medium, the country they are based in, and the editorial stances of each medium synthesised from their websites.

Table 4.4.1. The distribution of retrieved articles and information of selected alternative media

Alternative media	No. of articles	Country base in	Editorial stance
The Canary	7	The United Kingdom	The Canary is a radical working-class media outlet that is run by the workers. It produces high-quality, well-researched and incisive journalism that aims for the dismantling of power structures and the empowerment of working class and marginalised communities. (The Canary, n.d.)
Novara Media	11	The United Kingdom	Novara Media is an independent media organisation addressing the issues that are set to define the 21st century, from a crisis of capitalism to racism and climate change. Its goal is to tell stories and provide analysis shaped by the political uncertainties of the age, elevating critical perspectives that are unlikely to find elsewhere. Its output actively intends to feed back into political action. (Novara Media, n.d.)
openDemocracy	51	The United Kingdom	openDemocracy is an independent international media platform. It produces high-quality journalism which challenges power, inspires change and builds leadership among groups underrepresented in the media. (openDemocracy, n.d.)
Common Dreams	39	The United States	Common Dreams is a reader-supported independent news outlet. It shares values of social justice, human rights, equality, and peace. It is committed to not only being a trusted news source but to encouraging critical thinking and civic action on a diverse range of social, economic, and civil rights issues affecting individuals and their communities. (Common Dreams, n.d.)
Democracy Now!	19	The United States	Democracy Now! produces a daily, global, independent news hour which invites a diversity of voices speaking for themselves, providing a unique and sometimes provocative perspective on global events. (Democracy Now!, n.d.)

4.4.4. Highlighting, Coding, and Analysing

All the articles collected were read, and where the term ‘luxury’ and its derivatives (e.g., luxuries, luxurious) appeared was highlighted for further examination and coding purposes. The reason for using the technique of highlighting is because the focus of all the articles retrieved centre on subjects, such as politics, the cost-of-living crisis, and the Covid-19 pandemic, which were not directly concerned with luxury. As such, highlighting paragraphs containing the term ‘luxury’ was the first step of coding because it aggregated accounts most relevant to the research focus. However, this did not mean abandoning the rest of the content

and overlooking the contexts in which those accounts were situated. As Fitchett and Caruana (2015) suggest, interpretations of discourses in marketing studies cannot be separated from their embedded relational contexts. The following practice of coding took place in Microsoft Excel. Relevant accounts were categorised based on how the word 'luxury' was used (e.g., accounts in which 'luxury' was rhetorically employed to describe tangible or intangible entities belonging to two separate categories).

The process of analysis adhered to the guidance outlined by Bilić and Georgaca (2007) and Carbó and colleagues (2016), which suggests that researchers should consider examining each account's construction and function; intertextuality of identified discourses; positioning of the authors; and how the identified discourses consolidate particular social constructions and power relations. Following this guidance, a technical, micro-linguistic orientation (Fitchett and Caruana, 2015) was incorporated to examine exemplar accounts presented in the thesis in addition to the approach of critical discourse analysis. For example, grammatical structures such as pronouns, juxtapositions, and rhetorical devices in the accounts were carefully looked at and deconstructed, giving way to the identification of recurring patterns and interpretive repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Repertoires identified through this process then contributed to unpacking the power dynamics (i.e., imbalance among different social parties and power shifts from one to another) and what effect they achieved in alternative media's construction of luxury.

4.5. Study 2 – An Ethnography in An Intentional Community

4.5.1. Ethnography as the Method

When restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic eased in the Summer of 2021, I finally saw a chance to undertake an ethnography as planned in the first place. Ascribing to the 'interpretive turn' (Sherry, 1991), researchers in consumer research started to take on a naturalistic, interpretive, and humanistic scope to produce empirical studies (Spiggle, 1994). As a result, ethnographic research approaches have gained popularity in marketing and consumer scholarship over the past few decades (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994; Venkatesh et al., 2017). Ethnographic research often focuses on understanding culture, including its languages, customs, values, and the shared system of meanings, in particular societies or communities constructed by members' behaviour and perception (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008; Goulding, 2005).

Particularly, ethnographic approaches are commonly applied to study marginal and underrepresented consumer groups, such as degrowth activists (Lloveras et al., 2018), preppers (Campbell et al., 2019), ecovillages (Hong and Vicdan, 2016), and antimarket events (Kozinets, 2002). They seek to understand humans and the motivations behind their behaviour, emotion, and speech in particular cultural contexts (Venkatesh et al., 2017). As such, it was appropriate to use ethnography as a method given that my research objective is to explore alternative notions of luxury in a particular socio-cultural context (i.e., post-consumerism). Ethnography enabled close observation and engagement to understand what luxury means in a post-consumerist cultural context. It also offered the researcher chances to observe and document things that are unspoken and unaware of by the participants.

4.5.1.1. Embodied Ethnography

It is worth noting that due to the impacts of the pandemic and lockdowns, I had also been advised and thus once considered the possibilities of conducting netnography (Kozinets, 2010), an adaptation of ethnography to the digital age, instead of a traditional ethnography where the researcher is physically present. However, I soon realised that this method may not be able to accommodate this research. I was not aware of this initially but later learned from the fieldwork that many individuals in post-consumerist-like communities were not keen on modern technologies. Some people I met during the ethnography did not have mobile phones or smartphones, personal computers, or participation in online communities and forums. Stemming from this, it can be argued that netnography, regarding the particular research context of post-consumerist communities, cannot provide the same degree of embodied and sensory experience as a traditional ethnography, for the production of cultural and symbolic meanings shared within this kind of communities does not take place in digital space but occurs from the everyday practice in the physical environment. Besides, being physically present in the field allows researchers to 'empirically explore the sensory aspects of consumer culture' (Valtonen et al., 2010: 376); meanwhile, it is suggested that to gain 'first-hand' knowledge of any community, a good way is to subject the researcher's own body, personality, and social situation to the same circumstances to which the members of the studied community are subject (Goffman, 1989). Therefore, even though the study on alternative media already provided abundant insights into the transformation of luxury, I still felt the necessity to conduct an ethnography in order to gain first-hand insights from a quasi-post-consumerist community as

an ‘insider’. This approach enabled me to produce fruitful insights on research reflexivity, which is detailed in the following data collection section.

4.5.1.2. A Feminist Approach to Ethnography

When reviewing my ethnography, I noticed that the way I conducted the ethnography and the way I interacted with people naturally aligned with what feminist ethnography advocates, that is, to replace the hierarchical and exploitative relations of conventional ethnography research with ‘an egalitarian research process characterized by authenticity, reciprocity, and intersubjectivity between the researcher and her “subjects”’ (Stacey, 1988: 22). The approach of feminist ethnography stems from feminist research and epistemology. Earlier feminist scholars in the 1980s were concerned with the roles that power, patriarchy, and authority played in producing knowledge based on the epistemological assumption of positivism (Davis and Craven, 2020), which sees thought and feeling, subject and object, and personal and political as pairs of separate subjects (Stacey, 1988). In contrast, feminist epistemology endorses an integrative and transdisciplinary approach to knowledge (Stacey, 1988) and pays particular attention to marginality and power imbalance with regard to how and by whom knowledge is produced (Davis and Craven, 2020). This epistemology guides the practice of feminist ethnography to revolve around recognising, addressing, and supporting those who are struggling and marginalised due to structural inequalities (Davis and Craven, 2020), as well as encouraging ‘genuine familiarity’ between, and ‘a high level of reflexivity’ from, the researcher and researched (Oakley, 2016: 207; Thomson and Holland, 2010). The approach of feminist ethnography was adopted and sustained throughout the entire fieldwork. I was dedicated to contributing my time, labour, and emotions to the work and people in the community since the beginning of the fieldwork, which in return, enabled me to develop collaborative and reciprocal relationships with most community members. However, such an egalitarian approach, and relationships that flowed from this, as Stacey (1988) suggests, could also lead to ethical contradictions in terms of exposing the researched to greater risks of exploitation, manipulation, and betrayal from the research. I, too, had encountered situations as such and will discuss them further in the sections that follow.

4.5.2. Research Context: An Intentional Community

An ecovillage, also known as an ‘intentional community’, was selected as the studied object of this research. In definition, an ecovillage usually consists of dozens to hundreds of members

who share mutual interests of escaping the norm of consumer society and living in an environmental-friendly fashion (Van Schyndel Kasper, 2008). The concept of ecovillages also, to some extent, reflects what Cohen (2013) suggests; that is, the expression of post-consumerism in contemporary societies is fragmentary, only starting to emerge in a few affluent countries, and the transition to post-consumerism is unlikely to be straightforward because of the tenacious hold of consumerism.

In Autumn 2020, I started searching for ecovillages located in the UK. The search process consisted of mixed methods of word-of-mouth and online desk searching. Eventually, I shortlisted nine potential candidates in the UK, most of whom were registered with the Global Ecovillage Network. I placed these chosen communities in an order of priority based on the criteria that the target community should be cooperative, fully/partly self-sufficient, eco-mindful and non-religious. These criteria were selected based on the existing literature's construction of post-consumerism presented in Chapter 3 (see 3.4.), which characterised post-consumerism as a response to the ecological deterioration caused by consumer capitalism (e.g., Soper, 2000); in other words, post-consumerism is depicted to embody eco-mindfulness by the literature. Section 3.4. also suggested that post-consumerism is envisioned to encompass transitions of production and labour relationships (e.g., Cohen, 2013; Chatzidakis et al., 2014); therefore, a community that is cooperative and self-sufficient sufficed such envisioning. The reason for choosing a non-religious community was to ensure that the community's way of living and consumption habits were not solely motivated by religious purposes, given scholars have suggested that consumers tend to communicate and express their religious identities through consumption choices (Mathras et al., 2016). Once this was done, I started contacting each community through emails according to the order. Two out of the first three communities contacted never replied, and the other rejected my research request due to its capacity of accommodating research projects being full at the time. Hence, I moved on to the fourth community. Fortunately, this community showed interest to my research. Following a virtual interview with two of the members, I was awarded a residential place in the community and invited to conduct six-month ethnographic fieldwork there.

The community identified itself as an intentional community rather than an ecovillage. For ethical concerns and to protect the identity of the studied community, this thesis did not reveal the real name of the community but instead simply called it 'The Community' throughout the text. This community is located in the countryside of southern England and has about 50 acres

of land, including a large accommodation building, several patches of fields, a campsite, cottages, and a garden.

The residents there were a combination of community employees, lodgers, tenants, volunteers, visitors and guests. There were also a wider group of members and trustees of the community. Except for a couple, most trustees lived offsite. The community also endeavoured to maintain a non-hierarchical and cooperative relationship among its people. Every resident except for volunteers contributed eight hours of community work each week. Volunteers, different from other types of residents, worked five days a week for the community in exchange of accommodation and food, thus they were exempt from the additional eight hours. The community work usually followed a weekly routine. Monday and Friday were 'House Days' when volunteers and the housekeeper cleaned the mansion and prepare rooms for guests. Tuesday and Thursday were 'Estate Days'. On those days, volunteers worked with different estate coordinators to maintain the 50 acres of land in the community. The maintenance included tasks such as cutting hedges, fixing fences, herding cattle, mowing grass, and looking after the campsite. Wednesday was 'Gardening Day', which was also normally when trustees and external volunteers visited the community and helped with some community chores. The gardening tasks involved sowing, weeding, and harvesting plants, crops, and vegetables that grow in the garden. The community appointed a garden coordinator to oversee those tasks. Outside the weekly routine, there were also daily chores within the community such as cooking lunches and suppers for everyone, fetching newspapers from a nearby village, feeding chickens, and locking up windows and doors of the mansion at night (in the community, we called this 'Safety'). Community workers (this normally refers to the employed residents, volunteers, and whoever wants to help on the day) gathered every morning in a meeting to assign jobs for the day and recorded the arrangement on a whiteboard (see Figure 4.5.1.).

As part of the community's operation, the residents routinely gathered on Tuesday or Wednesday evenings for the 'Sensory Meeting' in which the attendants shared their emotions and feelings, instead of rational thoughts, towards certain topics. Again, on Thursday morning, they gathered for the 'Community Meeting', which was more management-oriented, to discuss managerial and operational matters of the community (e.g., making decisions on whether to host a festival next year or to accept a new resident). On top of this cooperative mode of management, the community also formed a Committee of Management (CoM) to be responsible for the overall strategies and directions of the development of the community. The

members of CoM, albeit in principle it is open to any community member, often overlapped with members of trustees and employed residents. To better demonstrate the work, finance, and residency relationships between the community and different types of residents, I present Table 4.5.1..

Figure 4.5.1. The white board of everyday work

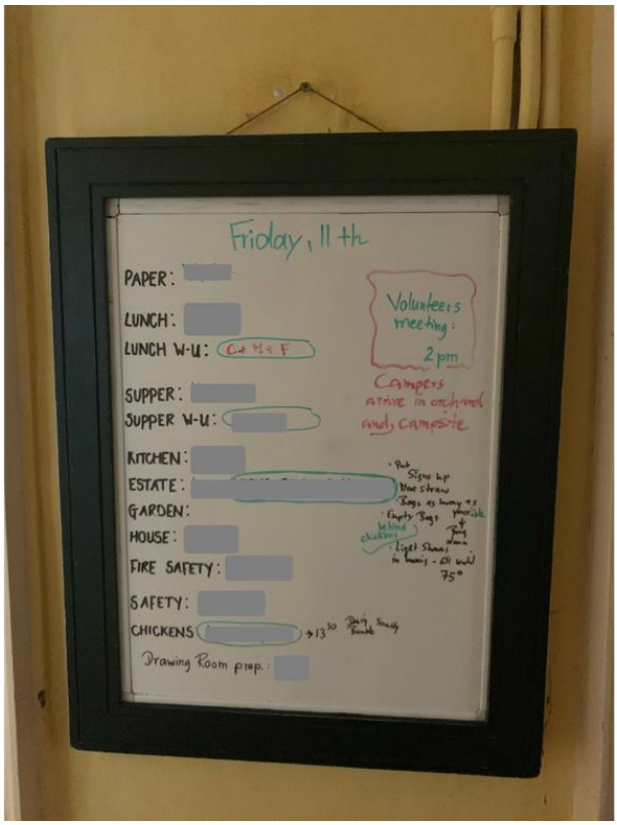


Table 4.5.1. The work and residency responsibilities of different community roles

	Onsite resident?	**Employed by the community?**	**Receive salaries from the community?**	**Obligated to the additional community hours?**	**Pay rent to the community?**
Employed resident	Yes	Yes, work 16 hours per week; some also take on part-time jobs outside	Yes	Yes, 8 hours per week	Yes
Volunteer	Yes	Yes, work five days per week	No	No	No
Lodger	Yes	No, all have jobs outside	No	Yes, 8 hours per week	Yes
Tenant	Yes	No, all have jobs outside	No	Yes, 8 hours per week	Yes
Visitor/Guests	No	No	No	No, on a voluntary basis	No
Trustees	Mostly No	No	No	No, on a voluntary basis	No

The community's sources of income relied on running venue businesses (e.g., renting out space for events such as weddings and festivals) and educational workshops (e.g., hosting yoga retreats and permaculture workshops) and receiving rent from the residents. The community itself was registered as a charity with the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) in the UK, thus its incomes were designated for the community to afford expenses on bills, maintenance, food, salaries, etc.

In terms of the community's endeavours in endorsing sustainability, it subscribed to environmental-friendly suppliers such as Ecotricity and FairShare for electricity and food, respectively. The community usually followed vegetarian diets and receives ample seasonal vegetable supplies from its garden. Sharing was also encouraged by the community's culture. Most residents in the community shared communal spaces such as bathrooms and living rooms, meals, working tools, clothes, and even recreational items such as board games and sports equipment.

I joined the community in June 2021 as a research lodger. This means that I lived there the same as other community residents, paying rent and participating in community work and activities, and every once in a while, sharing my research progress with others in the community. My fieldwork was fully known and had attained consent from CoM and the community's residents. According to Van Maanen (2011), researchers in fieldwork must subject their bodies, personalities, emotions, and cognitions to a set of contingencies to understand why participants express particular responses in those situations. Therefore, I endeavoured to get to know people in the community and made continuous observation through participating in formal and informal conversations and mundane and festive events, as well as through understanding the interpersonal and political dynamics among community residents.

4.5.3. Data Collection and Reflexivity

When it comes to the practice of documenting research materials, Watson (2011) recommends incorporating multiple research methods to supplement observations in the field. The beginning phase of my ethnographic fieldwork majorly involved methods including onsite participant observation and taking field notes. Near the end of the fieldwork, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 community members of diverse demographics who maintained different

relationships with the community. The following sections present methods used in this ethnographic fieldwork, followed by reflexive discussions on them respectively.

4.5.3.1. Participant Observation

As one core activity in ethnographic fieldwork (Emerson et al., 2001), participant observation accounted for an essential and irreplaceable part of my research. It is said that ethnography in its nature represents a humanistic and interpretive approach to knowledge (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1998), and participant observation departs from the tradition of simply positioning the researcher as an observer of the field but instead encourages researchers to actively participate in the construction of accounts and representations (Turner, 2007). I carried out six-month participant observation in the community, immersing in the daily routine, the cultural and symbolic meaning systems, and the political and ethical dynamics of the place (Emerson et al., 2001), as well as observing activities, asking questions, and collecting relevant documents about the studied community (Watson, 2011). Differing from some ethnographic studies where the researcher's interaction with the field is periodic or on a visiting basis (e.g., Cappellini and Yen, 2016), my presence in the field was a comparatively continuous exercise. Apart from taking several breaks from work, I rarely left the community in those six months and thus spent a considerable amount of time in the field. Such continuous participation means that this fieldwork also became an embodied experience to me, as I used to reside, eat, work, and spend leisure time within the studied setting and with my research participants.

Accordingly, such embodiment sometimes could be observed through my bodily changes and episodes of sensory experiences. In one early entry of the field notes, I recorded a trip with several community residents. We decided to walk to a river near the community one day in that Summer, and by that point, I only moved to the community for a few days and still viewed myself as an 'outsider'. I wrote my observation from the walk as,

> *The weather was really hot, [...] One by one everybody took off their shoes and walking with bare feet, except me.* (Field Notes, 13 June 2021)

At the time, walking with bare feet was interpreted by me as dangerous and unhygienic. Contemporary society has been described as a somatic society which is crucially structured around regulating bodies (Turner, 1992; Monaghan, 2006). My resistance to taking off shoes and walking with bare feet was seemingly an instinctive self-regulating of my body. Belk, in his work about extended self (1988), implies that infants distinguish objects that can be

controlled as parts of self and those that cannot be controlled as the environment, and perhaps explains my resistance in this circumstance. In my eyes, walking without shoes breaks the boundary between self and environment, between what is controllable and safe and what is dangerous and dirty. This perception was fostered throughout my upbringing and reinforced by the discourse of hygiene, which was incorporated as a part of the process of urbanisation and modernisation that took place since late nineteenth-century Europe (Kuo, 2013) and East Asia. including China (Rogaski, 2004), the country I grew up in; whereas everyone else from the community, as I learned later, either did not hold the same perception or was trying to unlearn perceptions taught and conditioned by the mainstream. However, recently when I scrolled through my phone album to review the photos I took during the fieldwork, I noticed a photo from August 2021 – two months after the trip – in which I was bare feet sitting in a chair on the community's campsite and looked comfortable and happy. I was surprised at how quickly and naturally my mind and body adapted to the culture and environment of the community. This bodily change in me, as Turner (2007: 56) implies, can inform us 'what we take for granted and do without reflection' about our bodies, thus providing further opportunities for applying embodied and ethnographic approaches to understanding culture.

Additionally, a researcher in the field plays a significant role in affecting what and how practices and activities are carried out and the construction of meanings that flows from them (Turner, 2007). As a resident of the community, I participated in the community's regular meetings and contributed opinions and viewpoints to those occasions, actively engaging in and shaping the development of the community. However, my participative endeavour to be a part of the community met obstacles. I noticed a degree of identity dissonance existing both inside me and in other community members. Both they and I were sometimes confused by my dual identities being a community resident and an external researcher at the same time. Often, when I had a conversation with someone or engaged in an activity, I questioned whether I was doing this for my personal interest or for the research, feeling confused and being in a liminal position switching back and forth between these two identities. Meanwhile, such confusion also existed within the participants. A participant in their interview responded to one of my questions with, "Do you want to know it for your study or in general?" (Oak), reflecting their ambiguous perception regarding my identities in the community, as well as implying an attitudinal difference towards me which varied based on whether they considered me as a member of the community or as a researcher.

4.5.3.2. Ethnographic Field Notes

Writing field notes on a daily basis was the major way I used to document my observation and experiences in the community. According to Emerson and colleagues (2001), field notes are a form of representation which reduces observed events to written accounts and subsequently produces proximity to the reality of the field. At the end of every day, while I was in the community, I used a word processor on my laptop to write down things that happened that day chronologically and my thoughts and feelings towards particular events and conversations. Occasionally, I had been involved in community activities that lasted late in the evening (e.g., festivals, bonfires gatherings) and thus could not complete the field notes of the day in time. I will then continue finishing them the next day, as it is endorsed by many researchers that field notes should be recorded as soon as possible after events are observed (Mulhall, 2003). In the end, I produced 148 field notes across 185 days of fieldwork. There were several occasions when I took breaks from work and thus did not take field notes on those days. Additionally, ten supplementary field notes were produced after I left the community, throughout 2022 and 2023, as the effect of the ethnography endures. Fragmentary pieces of memories that I recalled during analysing and writing and my reflections on them, as well as several entries concerning the ethics of the research, were considered relevant, significant, and worth noting to complement the whole ethnography journey.

There has always been a debate on what kinds of content should be included in fieldnotes. Some scholars believe that the writing should be objective, documenting the physical environment, dialogue, and people's actions in exact detail, and avoid explicit analysis (Emerson et al., 1995), while others suggest that the act of writing inevitably involves the researcher's subjectivity (Eriksson et al., 2012). In the case of my ethnographic experience, the meaning of field notes transformed from being descriptive accounts that simply 'mirror reality' (Atkinson, 1992: 17) to a medium that carried personal emotions, reflections, and experiences that incurred during the fieldwork. The significance of engaging the personal and the emotional in ethnographic writings has been emphasised in scholarship (e.g., Goffman, 1989; Ellis, 1991), as the personal emotional responses of researchers may mirror participants' natural responses in particular settings, as well as providing analytical leads and helping researchers recognise their changing attitudes towards events over time (Emerson et al., 2001).

Also, in practice, different occurrences happen simultaneously among different groups of people at multiple locations, and it is impossible for researchers to be present at all these

occurrences. Therefore, researchers have to be selective when it comes to what goes into the field notes, which results in involving the researcher's subjectivity to make those decisions. Additionally, though some literature advises the researcher to be as detailed as possible, I sometimes questioned if it is meaningful to note down repetition and routines such as every single meal I had in the community. Things that were novel at the beginning became normalised in the later phase of the study and, subsequently, appeared to be less significant or 'valuable' to be included in the field notes. For example, on the day of my arrival, I noted,

> *The dinner here is very interesting though somehow awkward to me because there were times when everybody just sat quietly and focused on eating.* (Field Notes, 10 June 2021)

In the beginning, I found being silent while eating with others awkward and unusual, but later I realised that I was judging this situation based on my interpretation and experience. As a non-native English researcher and a new entrant who had never lived communally before, I was brought up in and accustomed to the norms of mainstream societies in which not talking or socialising with each other in a public space is often considered awkward and strange. Hence, when I encountered silence during my first meal at the community, I found it novel and abnormal which led to me noting it down in the field notes. Later I learned that, in the community, there was no pressure for people to talk while eating. Conversations happened spontaneously and the same as silence. With my gradual adaptation to becoming a part of the community, the silence became a normal situation that I experienced almost every day over those six months. After a while, I no longer considered such silence as something novel or worth mentioning in the field notes.

4.5.3.3. Ethnographic Interviewing

Another method incorporated in this ethnography was semi-structured interviews. The interview questions were designed and distributed into four consecutive themes: 'relations with the community', 'community life', 'capitalism, life as a consumer, and post-consumerism' and 'luxury in the intentional community'. Each theme consisted of two to four primary questions followed by a few secondary questions which kept conversations lively and allowed me to delve deeper into each topic. The interview participants were recruited within the network of the community either in person or via email. In the end, I managed to interview twenty-five community residents, including trustees and CoM, employed residents, lodgers, tenants, volunteers, and former residents of the community. The panel of interview participants was diverse, with different demographic profiles.

All interviews took place between the 17th of November 2021 and the 8th of December 2021. Most of the interviews were conducted within the community in person, with three exceptions online via a video meeting tool (i.e., Zoom). As a result, the length of all the interviews added together was 31 hours 56 minutes, and the lengths of each interview ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours 13 minutes. Details about the demographics and the roles of each interview participant are detailed in Table 4.5.2. in which all the participants are presented under pseudonyms to protect their identities. Moreover, several participants' relations with the community changed during the course of six months, e.g., some employed residents resigned from their community jobs and became lodgers, and some left the community while I was there. However, the table below does not reflect those changes but only indicates the participants' roles at the point when the interviews took place. This is a part of the ethical considerations, which will be elaborated in a later section (see 4.5.6.).

Table 4.5.2. The demographics and the roles of interview participants

Respondent pseudonym	Known the community for... (years)	Relation to the community
Cypress	>10	CoM
Magnolia	>20	CoM
Rowan	>1	CoM / employed resident
Birch	>20	CoM / employed resident
Aspen	>1	Employed resident
Oak	<1	Resident
Pine	>10	Employed resident
Alder	>1	Employed resident
Juniper	>10	Employed resident
Ash	>10	Resident
Cedar	<1	Employed resident
Ginkgo	>1	Resident
Olive	>20	Resident
Holly	<1	Resident
Maple	>1	Resident
Elm	>10	Resident
Willow	>10	Resident
Poplar	>20	Resident
Hazel	>1	Resident
Beech	>1	Resident
Laurel	<1	Volunteer
Cherry	<1	Employed resident
Apple	>1	Former resident
Lindens	<1	Former volunteer
Acacia	<1	Former volunteer

Conducting ethnographic interviews is suggested to have distinctive advantages compared to conventional interviews, as the researched tend to be more confident and participative in shaping the conversation with the researcher after building their relationship through a series of quality interactions and contingencies (Heyl, 2001: 369; Watson, 2011). My interview experience echoed this argument. I interviewed twenty-five current and previous residents of the community in the last month of the fieldwork, asking about their views on the community, consumerism, and luxury. By the point interviews were conducted, I already had lived in the community for about five months. I was acquainted with or befriended all interviewees. As such, my interviews often appeared to be a combination of formal interviewing and casual conversation. It brought empowering and enlightening experiences, but meanwhile, it exposed both the researcher and the researched to the risk of feeling vulnerable.

A recurring feeling that I experienced after most interviews was a significant improvement in the relationship between the interviewees and me, i.e., we got to know each other at a deeper level as friends rather than as the researcher and the researched. More than once in the field notes, I wrote something similar to the following,

> *I feel like my relationship with [the interviewee] has become closer after the interview.* (Field Notes, 5 December 2021)

Interviewing with me was highly recommended by some respondents because they were – according to a participant's comment – 'therapeutic'. However, it has been argued that such a close and personal approach may result in discomfort and ethical dilemmas (Heyl, 2001: 374-375). I encountered a continuous identity dissonance throughout the interviewing process. My identities as a researcher and a community resident intertwined, which led to the difficulty of positioning myself if conversations became personal during interviews. Once, I noticed that my respondent had become emotional and vulnerable when talking about their romantic relationship – a topic rather personal and less relevant to the theme of my research. My instant response to their revealing at the interview was avoidance, i.e., I did not continue digging into those aspects and shifted our conversation to other topics. After the interview, my respondent was curious why I avoided the conversations. I commented in my field notes,

> *That was a hard question for me because deeply it is like an instinct that I always avoid asking personal questions as if I fear to get to know someone at a deep level. I tried to articulate my reasons thus I told [them] that I want to know those stories as a person, not as a researcher.* (Field Notes, 18 November 2021)

It is interesting to observe how I subconsciously positioned myself in the course of interviews. Even though I had endeavoured to make the interview as casual and conversational as possible, I still inevitably acted and responded in a way that I thought a 'professional' researcher should do – filtering out conversations that I considered 'unimportant' or 'irrelevant'. But meanwhile, as a person, a resident of the community, and a neighbour of this respondent, I felt empathetic and compassionate about their experience, as well as guilty and regretful for being selfish in using my power as the interviewer to steer away from those difficult conversations.

As redemption, I continued the conversation with my respondent after the interview. But this had exposed me to another kind of vulnerability many researchers have experienced – emotional fatigue/stress (Howard and Hammond, 2019; Jafari et al., 2013). Firstly, such fatigue came from listening to and empathising with the distressing feelings of my respondent. There were times when my respondent had to pause speaking and take deep breaths to calm down. I did not expect those moments to occur and was helplessly influenced and touched by them. I noted,

> *It is so touching to see a tough person like [the respondent's name] dropping tears in front of me.* (Field Notes, 18 November 2021)

I was overwhelmed by their openness and honesty. I commented in the field notes,

> *...for a long time, we – people from normal societies – have lived in superficial human relations for too long that when genuine emotions and honesty are revealed to us, we are scared and unsettled and don't know how to respond.* (Field Notes, 18 November 2021)

On the one hand, I admired and appreciated my respondent's ability and willingness of revealing their emotions to me. However, on the other hand, I also felt pressured to return equivalent emotional value as a response to their openness, i.e., revealing my vulnerability to them. Moreover, conducting interviews in ethnographic research means that the contact and interaction with my respondents continued after the interviews, and our relationship kept growing from there. In later field notes, I wrote,

> *Since the interview I have become the person to whom [the respondent] talks about [their] romantic relationship problems. I still feel a bit overwhelmed by this new 'position', but meanwhile, I wish that my accompany can give [them] supports though which might be very minor.* (Field Notes, 11 December 2021)

I started to feel a sense of responsibility for the respondent's difficulties. Therefore, I always tried to listen patiently and supported them whenever they experienced emotional breakdowns.

However, this brought me extra emotional labour and led to an ethical dilemma enquiring what degree of responsibility the researcher has for giving counselling and advice (Davison, 2004) in situations like the one I encountered.

4.5.4. Transcription

In the first place, the interviews were recorded in an audio recording device and saved as .MP3 files. Therefore, they needed to be transcribed into a text format before proceeding to analysis. Transcription is considered an interpretive representation of the recorded data, which slows down the conversations thus making it easier for researchers to capture details from conversations and for checking and reanalysis (Wood and Kroger, 2000). The process of my interview transcription comprised two stages. At first, I employed an online software, Panopto, to auto-generate captions from audio files. Then, I manually went through the auto-generated transcripts meanwhile listened to the interview audios to proofread and crosscheck the corpus, as well as trying to interpret parts that were marked inaudible by the software. Although the process of transcribing was labour-intensive and time-consuming, it was also essential, as repetitive reading and checking of the transcripts enabled me to familiarise with details of the conversations that were difficult to transfer into text (Tessier, 2012), such as moments of silence, laughter, intonation, and the overall atmospheres expressed through sounds. I also started listening to those interview recordings when I go out for walks or commuting, during which fragmented pieces of memories re-emerged from time to time, leading to an experience of re-living those interview moments thus evoking further thoughts and reflections on specific events and persons. I consider these practices – the transcribing and the relistening – as processes of initial reading which prepared me for formal analysis (Wood and Kroger, 2000).

4.5.5. Coding, Categorising and Analysing

In the coding process, only interview transcripts were coded and analysed, while field notes were placed in a supplementary position to confirm, support, and enhance findings from the interviews. The coding process incorporated a grounded theory approach by using open coding in the initial round of analysing, allowing codes naturally emerge from data rather than pre-designing codes (Glaser and Straus, 1967; Glaser, 1978). Each line of interview transcripts was read and examined. Whenever a chunk of the text of any length was ‘belonging to, representing, or being an example of some more general phenomenon’ (Spiggle, 1994: 493), it was specified, classified, sorted, summarised and synthesised into shorthand, active and specific codes

(Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001). At this stage, my focus on coding was not restricted to topics relevant to luxury, post-consumerism, and capitalist consumerism. Instead, I was trying to be inclusive and coded units of data even though they represented themes that seemed less relevant to this research. On many occasions, the same passage of text may contain multiple codes because it informed more than one type of information. For example, the table below shows an excerpt with three codes overlapping.

Table 4.5.3. Overlapping codes

Exemplary excerpt	**Codes**
I think I'm going to be too old to come back. I mean, this place needs young and fresh people.[1], [2] Now, when I go back to [...], I go to become a grandparent and then I want to... I need to be with the grandchildren for a while. And when the time when they don't need me anymore, then I'll be maybe too old to come back.[3] (Ash)	[1] What's good for the community [2] The community needs young people [3] Ageing

Once all the transcripts were coded, I then categorised the identified codes through a deductive and inductive combined approach (Rivas, 2012). Based on the research and interview questions, I set up three abstract constructs (Spiggle, 1994) – luxury, post-consumerism, and capitalist consumerism – and then located codes and passages that represent these constructs accordingly. Within the three abstract constructs, the categorisation of codes was conducted inductively, allowing unanticipated themes and secondary constructs to appear from the analysis itself (Spiggle, 1994). The identification of themes adopted the thematic analysis approach and a constructionist perspective, examining the underlying assumptions, ideologies, and sociocultural contexts that shaped the semantic content of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In doing so, the themes identified did not represent explicit meanings of the data but instead displayed patterns that were already theorised through interpretive work (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Comparison among emerging themes and categories was undertaken throughout the analysis to explore differences and similarities across occurrences within the data. When presenting the findings, further analysis of excerpts from interview accounts was conducted to exemplify and support specific findings and arguments. The analysis focused on examining how participants employed positioning and rhetorical devices such as metaphor and simile in speech and through which what purposes and discursive constructs were achieved.

4.5.6. Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

Ethics is an inevitable and a crucial topic that is worth highlighting in general social science research, and the nature of ethnography gives ethical issues a distinctive emphasis (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). In the practice of this ethnographic study, several procedures were implemented to ensure the protection of participants' anonymity and the confidentiality of their data. Before getting in contact with the community, ethical approval from my supervisors and the university was sought; and once approved, an email was sent to the targeted community attached with two documents (see Appendices): a copy of the university's Privacy Notice and an Information Sheet which detailed the purpose of the ethnography, data management plan, and the contact information of the researcher (i.e., myself) and the supervisors. After receiving a reply from the community, I then forwarded a consent form to the community's representatives (also known as gatekeepers) and soon received a signed copy from them, which signified the community's approval for me to conduct the ethnography there. A similar process was conducted for recruiting interview participants. I first sought informal consent from people in person or via email, given that several people do not live in the community. Most responded and agreed to participate. Each person was then given a copy of the Information Sheet and a Participant Consent Form (see Appendices) to read through and sign before the interview.

The protection of participants' anonymity is gaining more significance because of the widening dissemination of social science research (Murphy and Dingwall, 2001). To protect the community's identity, I anonymised its name, location, or any information that could be traced back to the community. Besides, even though the community had granted me permission to take photographs on the premises, I intentionally avoided including people and any details that might reveal the identity of the community (e.g., the name of a nearby village) on camera. In comparison, practices and considerations required to protect individual participants' identities were more sophisticated, as field notes and interview transcripts inevitably included details that may make participants identifiable within the single setting where ethnography was carried out (Murphy and Dingwall, 2001). This ethical issue was particularly significant in this study. The participants knew and were sometimes close with each other, increasing the difficulties in writing and presenting the analysis because any clues about a person could give away that person's identity to other community members. For this reason, I took several precautions in

designing Table 4.5.2. and decided to reduce information about the interview participants to a minimal level:

1. All participants were pseudonymised.
2. The participants' genders were omitted.
3. The information about the participants' ages and nationalities was omitted.
4. As mentioned, only the roles that the participants were undertaking at the point when the interviews took place were presented.
5. The distinction between 'tenants' and 'lodgers' was omitted. Both were simplified into 'resident'.

Furthermore, additional techniques were employed in the writing to prevent the participants from recognising each other. Third-party descriptors such as 'they/them' and 'an employed resident' were used to replace names and gender-indicative words such as 'he' or 'she'.

Many of these practices were developed in response to an incident I encountered one year after the fieldwork. In March 2023, the community contacted me to ask if I could share the interview transcripts with the community's archives. After consulting with my supervisors and the departmental committee of ethics, I was advised to proceed only if every interview participant gave consent to this proposal. I then started contacting the participants through email. Some replied with consent, while others expressed worries regarding the potential consequences of publicising conversations that were supposed to be kept private and confidential. Those voices of concern alerted me to the possible consequence of deductive disclosure (Kaiser, 2009) or internal confidentiality (Tolich, 2004), referring to situations when individuals or groups are made identifiable due to the traits exhibited in research reports (Sieber, 1992). I started to feel uneasy and guilty for concerning my participants, which subsequently led to further reflexivity on the power relation between the researcher and the researched.

The primary reflexivity was to rethink whether my conduct in this ethnography catalysed the exploitation of the participants. As stated previously, I maintained good relationships with most of my participants, which aligns with the feminist approach that attempts to subvert the conventional hierarchical researcher-researched relation and substitute it with genuineness and empathy (Patai, 1991). However, this approach also raised concerns regarding close relationships between the researcher and the researched might lead towards more subtle opportunities for exploitation and manipulation (Stacey, 1988). Reflecting on this research, I wondered if the close relationships between me and my participants and the empathic attitude

I expressed throughout the interviews had encouraged them to reveal more authentic and genuine thoughts that normally they would not share publicly. Such openness to me brought them vulnerabilities. Many aspects of their lives in the community, such as interpersonal dynamics, financial stability, and personal reputations, could be impacted by what they uttered in the interviews if the transcripts went public. The researcher has the privilege to eventually leave the field (Stacey, 1988; Murphy and Dingwall, 2001), while the researched often is not entitled to such privilege and has to cope with the consequences and aftermaths of ethnographic research.

Moreover, such reflexivity is also concerned with the potential of causing participant vulnerabilities when discussing sensitive topics in interviews. Dempsey and colleagues (2016) argue that participating in research and being involved in the discussion of certain – often perceived sensitive – topics may evoke emotions from the participant or even lead to positive or negative changes in themselves (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008). I recalled, more than once in the interview, discussing sensitive topics that may intimidate or discredit the participants (e.g., their views on the community) and encouraging them to talk about their vulnerabilities (e.g., being in a state of poverty) with me. I regret such actions later when I relistened to the interview recordings, as in the field notes I wrote,

> *I notice that I asked [a participant] some seemingly obvious questions, such as "why you don't do that much travelling anymore" while knowing that the person is in a state of poverty. I feel like I knew the answer, but I was making the person say their hardship out loud so that it can be recorded for my research. As if I was forcing the person to face their vulnerabilities and to show them to me. It is quite cruel, what I did to [them].* (Field Notes, 25 September 2022)

I remarked these exercises – in retrospect – were 'cruel', as I considered what I did to the participants was for a selfish purpose to collect material for the research. I was not aware that these sensitive questions may in fact impose the participants to confront and respond to hardship that they may have been avoiding. In doing so, I exposed them to the hardship and therefore intensified their feeling of being vulnerable or perceiving themselves as failures.

4.5.7. Member Checks

In response to the abovementioned incident in 4.5.6., member checks were included to ensure that the data gathered from the community was apprehended and presented correctly and appropriately. Initially, member checking is considered to contribute to producing credibility

and validity in qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1986; Creswell and Miller, 2000; Candela, 2019; Morse et al., 2002); however, some scholars argue that the power dynamic between the researcher and researched may impede the participants to express genuine opinions (Buchbinder, 2011) or even cause harm to them, especially to marginalised populations (Hallett, 2013). Member checking, therefore, has been suggested to be conducted judiciously and depending on individual participants' circumstances (Candela, 2019). In the context of this research, member checks were sought for various purposes. The first purpose was to ensure each participant was comfortable with how they were presented in the thesis and that details that may reveal their identities had been properly removed. The second purpose came from a reciprocal intention. As a researcher, I am very grateful for the community awarding me the opportunity to conduct the research there, thus in return, I hoped that my analysis could address practical issues regarding the operation of the community and provide an academic perspective to help the participants legitimise and validate their ways of alternative living.

4.6. Chapter Summary

This chapter presents the ontological and epistemological stance and the practical methods adopted in this research. It comprises two independent but interlinked studies focusing on how the notion of luxury is being constructed by alternative media and an intentional community. Meanwhile, this chapter includes the reflexivity of the researcher critically reflecting on the ethical tension, vulnerabilities, and interpersonal dilemmas that derived alongside the execution of these research methods. The findings from analysing the data will be presented in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 5:

THE PORTRAYALS OF LUXURY BY ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

5.1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on understanding how the notion of luxury is interpreted, presented, and constructed in the context of alternative media. As mentioned in the Methodology chapter, this study was initially designed as a response to the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, as lockdowns and social distancing implemented during the pandemic escalated inequality by dividing people into those who can afford to stay at home and who cannot, resulting the emergence of new conceptualisations of luxury. Both 'stay-at-home' and 'social-distancing' are considered luxuries by many who struggle during this pandemic (Huang et al., 2022). These emerging concepts, to some extent, share similarities with the idea of 'unconventional luxury' (Thomsen et al., 2020), which studies notions of luxury that are inconspicuous (Eckhardt et al., 2015), private-symbolic, ephemeral, inexpensive and consumer-defined (Thomsen et al., 2020). A highlight of this chapter, therefore, revolves around drawing on the findings of this study to advance current understandings of luxury in an unconventional manner, illuminating the transformation of luxury in an alternative context in which the notion of luxury often seemed incompatible and unwelcome.

To proceed, I chose alternative media – an under-researched category which critically challenges the mainstream and dominative society (Fuchs, 2010) – as the context of this study. Although conservative bottom-up media production also forms a part of the genre of alternative media (Sandoval and Fuchs, 2010), this study centres on those who are progressive, left-wing, and radical and aim to create alternative voices, discourses, and knowledge to mainstream capitalism. Following this, this article draws on a discourse analysis of content produced by these alternative media during the first outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

Building from these, this chapter firstly unravels two discursive constructs of luxury by alternative media – 'luxury as consumerist objects' and 'luxury assigned by social capital'. Secondly, I will discuss that these media typically employ two interpretive repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) to construct these versions of luxury. They 'moralise' luxury to synonymise it with injustice, value distortion, and degeneration, then 'other' luxury to alienate it from the majority population who are exploited by and struggle within the contemporary capitalist society. Meanwhile, I noticed that the data of this study suggest a reality differing from what existing unconventional luxury studies depict. These differences allude to three theoretical implications, which expand, encapsulate, and criticise the current conceptual

framework of luxury beyond consumerism. They are: (1) *resumption of moral critiques* in luxury studies, (2) a movement of *luxurising normality*, and (3) *shaping solidity in liquefied luxury*. Specifically, in the first implication, I discuss that alternative media are inclined to moralise luxury, resonating with the conventional criticism that luxury is morally problematic and societally harmful (e.g., Hemetsberger, 2018; Roberts, 2019). I present in the second implication that the state of normality and people's entitlement to basic rights (e.g., the right to access healthcare, the right to work safely, and the right to freedom of choice) are under threat of becoming the next luxury due to scarcity and unattainability. Owning to the delineation of unconventional luxury research that luxury is highly liquid and variable, qualities that used to associate with luxury appear to lose their validity as references for defining luxury. The data of this study suggest differently. In the third implication, I argue that two qualities – exclusivity and scarcity – remain untouched as the basis for characterising and defining luxury. Taken together, these implications mark distinctions between unconventional luxury and luxury constructed by alternative media, which thereafter motivates the emergence of 'post-consumerist luxury' – a third discourse of conceptualising luxury in parallel with unconventional and consumerist luxury.

5.2. Discursive Constructs of Luxury

After several rounds of iterative coding and analysis of selected alternative media's content, two constructs of luxury by alternative media – 'luxury as consumerist objects' and 'luxury assigned by social capital' – were identified, and together they unpack multiple discursive constructions of luxury. Among these, 'luxury as consumerist objects' appears to be more common, which comprises two subcategories that are 'luxury as material entities' and 'luxury as experiential activities'. This first construct resembles the conventional notion of luxury, associating luxury with material entities and consumerist activities. In comparison, the second construct, 'luxury assigned by social capital', is inherently different, which is also constituted by two aspects: 'luxury as privilege' and 'luxury entails unattainability'. It extends the meaning of luxury towards unorthodox notions, such as normality and freedom of choice, transcending the boundaries of capitalist consumerism and the marketplace. Table 5.2.1. presents a summary of these construct, and each of them will be critically discussed and exemplified below.

Table 5.2.1. Discursive construction of luxury by alternative media

Types of luxury		*Variants*	*Discursive constructions*	*Exemplar accounts*	*Freq. of accounts*
Luxury as consumerist objects (i.e., material entities and experiential activities)	A	Social injustice	Luxury intensifies social injustice.	Financiers working in plush offices or luxury homes make billions shorting stocks. Meanwhile, many Americans [...] doing the most essential and dangerous work.	31
	B	Elitist lifestyle	Luxury is associated to and consumed by elites.	The president instead chose to stay on his luxury golf course to announce unworkable, weak and narrow policy announcements.	18
	C	Value priorities	Luxury is excessive and not prioritised.	[...] mainly because the new generations are not interested in gaining power, a huge house, a luxury apartment, or a giant car.	8
	D	Counter-environmentalism	Contemporary forms of luxury are harmful to the environment.	Luxury cruise ships are floating cities powered by some of the dirtiest fuel possible.	4
Luxury assigned by social capital (i.e., privilege and unattainability)	E	Normality	Luxury is exclusively available to those who stay in the mainstream and normality.	The presumption of normality [...] is a luxury of privilege. [...] it's a luxury to be able to be home, work from home, and also order groceries online.	10
	F	Influence / power	Luxury comes with power and influence.	[...] it has the credibility and global influence necessary to battle any accusations of pimping – a luxury that others do not.	5
	G	Freedom of choice	Luxury is exclusively offered to those who are indulged but not to the oppressed.	[...] the choice to believe in an inevitable collapse is itself a luxury, [...] only available to those with the time and resources to plan for its consequences. [...] many individuals simply lack the luxury of choosing to stay home from work if they feel unsafe.	14
	H	Basic rights and necessities	Luxury was not supposed to represent basics and necessities.	[...] healthcare is guaranteed to all as "a basic human right, not a luxury."	15
	I	Time and energy	Luxury is unaffordable.	With so much at stake, we can't afford the luxury of devoting time and energy to endless arguments [...].	10

5.2.1. Luxury as Consumerist Objects

Although frequency *per se* is not necessarily part of discourse analysis, it does present an overview of the relative pattern of occurrence of the various categories of analysis. The type 'luxury as consumerist objects' appears to be the more common type used in the corpus (total frequency of accounts is 61). The word 'luxury' in the contents of this type is either used metaphorically to be coupled with specific material entities (e.g., luxury homes) or followed by intangible and experiential, yet consumerist, activities (e.g., a luxury cruise liner). To be more specific, when luxury is associated with material entities, it is found in accounts relating to the marketplace where luxury is accompanied by consumption, products, services, and brands (e.g., *that produces more and more luxury apartments*, Democracy Now!), or depicting the lifestyles of billionaires, politicians, and celebrities (e.g., *the president instead chose to stay on his luxury golf course to announce unworkable, weak and narrow policy announcements*, Common Dreams), or highlighting the value of things such as health over the value of luxury (e.g., *these are not markups for luxury condo views, they are for the most basic necessity of your life: your health*, Common Dreams). Correspondingly, when luxury is being used to characterise activities, experiences, or lifestyles, it is constructed either as practices of experiential consumption (e.g., *a luxury cruise liner*, Common Dreams) or as a stereotypical notion of which everybody shares the same understanding (e.g., *a lifestyle of absolute luxury*, Common Dreams). Besides, this type of luxury is majorly engaged to supplement arguments on subjects of social injustice, elitist lifestyle, value priorities, and accounts remarking on environmental issues. To this end, several discursive constructions of luxury unfold. Luxury – interpreted by alternative media – intensifies social injustice, is equipped to elites' extravagant lifestyles, is less prioritised in the value structure, and is harmful to the environment.

5.2.2. Luxury Assigned by Social Capital

With a slightly fewer frequency of occurrence (total frequency of accounts is 54), 'luxury assigned by social capital' is inherently different from the first. It departs from conventional, consumerist, and product-centric luxury and explores alternative, unorthodox notions of luxury beyond the logic of capitalist consumerism and the marketplace. The phrase 'social capital' in this context encapsulates two facets of meanings: 1) 'privilege' – the entitlement to luxury as a by-product of possessing adequate social capital; and 2) 'unattainability' – inadequate social capital hence no access to luxury. Content that relates to the facet of privilege reveal how social assets are disproportionately assigned, and thus only those with adequate social capital have

the privilege to access luxuries. Here, the term 'privilege' refers to advantages and/or entitlement which are granted – cannot be brought or earned – and exclusively benefit certain groups of people, who often are unaware of it (Black and Stone, 2005). The facet of unattainability uncovers a dystopian reality where things people used to take for granted (e.g., healthcare, work-from-home) become inaccessible as if they were luxuries in the crisis of this pandemic. Through examining accounts of this type, I also captured the emergence of new conceptualisations of luxury. Various themes – normality, freedom of choice, influence/power, basics and necessities, and time and energy – were implied as luxuries because they are becoming more exclusive and unapproachable in the contemporary societal environment. These themes and the ways they are presented in the corpus discursively construct luxury as a sort of freedom exclusively offered to those who live in mainstream societies with power and influence but is unaffordable and unattainable for those who are considered socially inferior and oppressed.

5.3. Two Repertoires for Constructing Luxury

Moving forward, the analysis also discovers that the alternative media studied appear to follow two discursive interpretive repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) – a moralising repertoire and an othering repertoire – in the construction of the two types of luxury presented above. When the word 'luxury' is used alongside consumerist objects and activities, the media are inclined to recruit the moralising repertoire, which adheres to the conventional criticism that luxury is morally problematic and societally harmful (e.g., Hemetsberger, 2018; Roberts, 2019). These two repertoires are interwoven and complemented by one another, i.e., a subject moralised is often at the same time othered. Besides, there appears to be a higher frequency of appearance of the othering repertoire in accounts concerning the unequal distribution of social capital, in which the notion of luxury represents privilege that is inaccessible to the masses. This repertoire also uncovers the emergence of new conceptualisations of luxury under the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g., being able to work from home), illustrating a divided society where luxury remains exclusive to the people of privilege but unattainable to people who experienced hardship in the pandemic. The workings of these two repertoires are exemplified below and supplemented with excerpts from the corpus.

5.3.1. Moralising

The notion that 'luxury is morally inferior' could be found in accounts which view luxury as consumerist objects and are concerned with issues regarding social injustice, elitist lifestyle, value priorities, and counter-environmentalism. Two exemplar extracts are presented and thoroughly analysed below.

Extract 1

> *The pandemic has illuminated how warped our economy and values have become. Financiers working in plush offices or luxury homes make billions shorting stocks. Meanwhile, many Americans doing the most essential and dangerous work, including health personnel, grocery workers, bus drivers, or delivery drivers, can't make ends meet or afford medical care.* (Common Dreams, April 29, 2020)

This extract compares the working conditions of different occupations during the Covid-19 pandemic. Firstly, it problematises contemporary economy and values then evidences it with a comparison between *financiers* and *many Americans*. The *financiers* represent people who are assigned more privilege and wealth due to their occupations. Their lifestyle is characterised by material and monetary indulgence – *plush offices, luxury homes,* and *billions shorting stocks*. In contrast, the life of *many Americans* represents a life of misery, differing *financiers* from *many Americans*, who are the majority of society. The extract then emphasises the importance of *many Americans* by describing their work as *the most essential* and *dangerous*, implying that the work of and the value created by financiers, in comparison, are considered less so. Following this, it raises its final argument that the majority is taking on essential and dangerous work but still *can't make ends meet or afford medical care*, whilst the financiers are entitled to luxuries when they only do work that is lesser essential and dangerous.

The key argument of this extract revolves around the issues of social injustice, discussing how different occupations determine people's social classes and assign them entitlement to social assets and benefits. The financiers in this context represent the social class of elites, who have disproportionate power and influence over social resources due to their wealth and privilege (Bourdieu, 1984). The extract sets up a binary social classification, implying the elite group (i.e., *financiers*) as 'them' and the majority population of America (i.e., *many Americans*) as 'us'. This classification reflects an underlying moral hierarchy that the othered group, i.e., the elites in this context, is often considered morally inferior (Schwalbe et al., 2000) and thus downgraded to stereotypical, dehumanised characters (Jensen, 2011). Here, financiers are no

longer specific, concrete individuals but constructed as a persona characterised by *plush offices*, *luxury homes*, and *billions shorting stock*s. It reinforces the conventional perception that luxury represents tangible, consumerist products and is associated with the elitist lifestyle. The moralising repertoire can also be found in debates on what occupation is essential and what is not. For example, financiers are criticised for doing less-essential jobs but receiving higher payback, which uncovers the author's value priorities that the majority population of Americans and their well-being are more important than the elite group and luxury. As such, luxury is reckoned excessive and less prioritised. The extract also constructs a causality between the elite's extravagant lifestyle and normal people's suffering to address the issue of social injustice. It illustrates a dystopian reality where essential workers cannot afford *medical care*, which is essential to their well-being, while the elites can spend money and time on luxury enjoyment. The elite's consumption of luxury deprives resources of the majority population, thus leading to various types of social injustice and hardship for normal people.

Extract 2

> *"Luxury cruise ships are floating cities powered by some of the dirtiest fuel possible," said Faig Abbasov, shipping policy manager at T&E when the report was released, according to EuroNews. "Cities are rightly banning dirty diesel cars but they're giving a free pass to cruise companies that spew out toxic fumes that do immeasurable harm both to those on board and on nearby shores. This is unacceptable."* (Common Dreams, August 21, 2020)

This account presents a quotation from an insider of the shipping industry. By highlighting the job title and affiliated institute (*manager*; *T&E*), this person is portrayed as an expert with high credibility and professionalism to enhance the reliability of arguments made in this extract. The person argues that luxury cruising is wasteful and environmental-harmful because its consequential harm is *immeasurable* and affects *those on board and on nearby shores*. He then takes this further, drawing on environmentalist rhetoric about cities *rightly banning* diesel cars, establishing a benchmark on what is righteous and encouraged. This statement is soon followed by a twist (*but*) that cruise companies are given the 'privilege' (*free pass*) of using diesel fuel, which, as a result, places luxury cruises in a position of countering environmentalists and being harmful to the environment, as well morally wrong. This extract exhibits luxury as a form of consumerist experience (i.e., *Luxury cruise ships*) and places it in the position of an enemy to environmental protection. Meanwhile, though implicitly, it implies there might be some extent of corruption existing between the *Cities* and luxury cruise companies, for the latter is given exclusive permission to dispose of toxic fumes that harm the environment. Therefore, the

notion of luxury in this context remains a partner of consumerist activities and is again associated with negative, immoral attributes such as corruption and degeneration (Featherstone, 2016).

5.3.2. Othering

Besides moralising, othering is another technique recruited by alternative media. It manifests in accounts concerning that luxury entails privilege and is unattainable. Three variants of privilege – living in normality, having freedom of choice, and possessing influence and power – were unpacked. Further, in accounts revolving around the unattainability of luxury, basics and necessities and freedom of choice – though this should never be the case – are labelled as a luxury, for they have become more unaffordable and inaccessible in the pandemic. These variants collectively achieve the discursive construction that luxury is exclusively offered to the 'others' – those who have the privilege of living in normality with power and influence – but not to the 'us' – the ones who are inferior in power and social capital. Multiple excerpts below exemplify these constructs.

Extract 3

> *And the people who are most at risk are low-income workers who are required to reopen the economy, who have to rely on public transport, who have to go to work, who have to serve people who want to have the luxuries of a normal society.* (Novara Media, July 22, 2020)

Extract 4

> *If richer people decide to eat too much unhealthy food and drink a lot of alcohol, it is often and in no small part through choice. Under corporate capitalism, poor people are not afforded that same luxury.* (The Canary, July 29, 2020)

Extract 5

> *The luxuries of paid time off and premium health insurance afforded to senators is of little help to the millions of Americans who lost their jobs during this crisis, [...]* (Common Dreams, August 14, 2020)

The discursive construction of luxury in these extracts is built upon a series of comparisons which divide people into two categories based on their social assets, e.g., wealth and occupations. For example, in Extract 3, the comparison is built between *low-income workers* and *people who want to have the luxuries of a normal society*. The extract depicts the poor working condition of low-income workers, indicating an unequal power relation: all contributions and sacrifices made by the low-income workers are to *serve* those who want to maintain their lives in normality. It also suggests the oppression of low-income workers, as

they are passively imposed (*required to*; *have to*) to take risks to *reopen the economy*. Therefore, it is a privilege to live in a normal society where all the *luxuries* provided are built on the sacrifices of lower-income workers. Similar inequalities can also be found in the other two extracts, where *richer people* and *senators* are granted the freedom of eating unhealthily and health insurance, but *poor people* and *Americans who lost their jobs* are not. Extract 4 centres on freedom of choice. It argues that eating unhealthily by choice is a luxury *afforded* only to the richer but not the poor. Likewise, Extract 5 argues that people in different power positions are treated differently in crisis. *Senators* – the ones with more power and influence – are well supported with luxuries (i.e., *paid time off* and *premium health insurance*), while *the millions of Americans* – the ones inferior in power – lost their jobs.

These three extracts exhibit how the othering repertoire plays a role in constructing the notion of luxury. Like Extract 1, binary social classifications were once again set up between each pair in these extracts, i.e., *low-income workers* versus *people who want to have the luxuries of a normal society, poor people versus richer people, and Senators versus the millions of Americans*, separating them into the ones with luxury (the 'other') and the ones without (the 'us'). Although the notion of luxury was given various meanings in these contexts (e.g., *the luxuries of a normal society, choice, paid time off and premium health insurance*), it essentially represents privileges that are exclusively offered to the 'other' but not the 'us'. Further, even though it has been made clear that low-income workers, poor people, and unemployed Americans (i.e., the 'us') are situated in an oppressed position, the speakers of these three extracts have never indicated that the oppression directly resulted by those with privilege (i.e., the 'other'). Alternatively, several traces hint that such privilege and oppression are both consequences of systematic and structural inequalities. The usage of passive voices (*are required to*; *afforded to*) removes the actors of those actions, leaving the question of who requires low-income workers to reopen the economy; and who affords paid time off and premium health insurance for senators. The answer to these questions is indicated in Extract 4, where the speaker draws on a capitalist repertoire (*corporate capitalism*) to suggest that the inherent flaws of the capitalist system cause the polarisation between the oppressed and the privileged.

Moving forward, apart from viewing luxury as a privilege of the 'others', alternative media also portray luxury as something unattainable for the 'us'. In many accounts, the word 'luxury' repeatedly appears alongside words and phrases referring to basic needs and necessities, which

constructs recurring rhetoric of '[something] is a basic need, not a luxury', e.g., *healthcare is guaranteed to all as "a basic human right, not a luxury."*, A4. I capture a sense of indignation of the media from this rhetoric because what they regard as basics and necessities have become so inaccessible and thus luxurious for many people to afford. Of those accounts, themes including *health, healthcare, social distancing, and avoiding crowds* seem to have the highest frequency of being considered a luxury during the pandemic. An excerpt is provided below to shed light on this construction.

Extract 6

> *As a way by which to protect the lives of those trapped in Libya from virus and conflict, all refugees and migrants must be immediately released from arbitrary and illegal detention. Access to health care must not be perceived as optional or a luxury, rather it is a fundamental right, equating to the right to life. The Libyan authorities have a legal obligation to ensure access to all.* (openDemocracy, May 18, 2020)

This excerpt urges Libyan authorities to take action to protect refugees and migrants from the Covid-19 virus. The tone of this account sounds profoundly demanding (*all*; *must be*; *must not be*) and urgent (*immediately*). The word 'luxury' is engaged in a sentence highlighting the necessity of healthcare. It begins by assertively defining (*must not be*) what healthcare is not, i.e., *optional* and *luxury*, then deploys the technique of simile, establishing proximity between healthcare and the *right of life* to signify the importance and essentiality of healthcare (*a fundamental right*). By doing so, luxury is situated in a contrary position to essentials. Such positioning is reinforced by *perceived as optional or a luxury*, where *luxury* sits by the side of *optional*. It, to some extent, alienates, and others, luxury from the concept of basics and necessities and therefore completes the construction that basic needs such as healthcare should never be perceived as a luxury. This extract also reflects another construct of luxury based on the way it profiles refugees and migrants. These people are portrayed as passive victims, are threatened by the risk of the virus, are kept in detention, and need support from the authorities. Their access to healthcare is restricted, and therefore healthcare is considered a luxury to them, leading us to the next discursive construction – socially inferior people are not entitled to luxury, supplemented by the excerpt below.

Extract 7

> *Frontline, essential workers are disproportionately people of color, with many sectors staffed predominantly by immigrants. [...] Few have the luxury*

> *to decide to work from home. They don't have sick days, or access to affordable health care.* (Common Dreams, September 06, 2020)

Luxury, in this context, refers to the freedom to work from home during the pandemic. However, frontline and essential workers are not granted such freedom. In enquiring the reason behind this, the author draws on a broader social subject of the ethnic inequality in the labour market (*disproportionately*; *predominantly*), implicitly indicating that these workers' ethnic background (*people of color*; *immigrants*) also plays a part in resulting to their hardship at work. These workers are situated in an inferior and oppressed position. They are not entitled to the luxury of work-from-home, sick days, and affordable healthcare simply because their ethnicities and occupations are considered socially inferior. As a result, this extract, again, consolidates the construct that luxury is not available to the oppressed and socially inferior, to whom the alternative media feel compassionate (i.e., the 'us').

In sum, the five extracts presented in this section collectively showcase the workings of the 'othering' repertoire. Through it, the rich, the elite, and the authorities are portrayed as the 'other', whereas the oppressed, the poor, and the social minorities are gathered on the side of the alternative media and become the 'us'. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the process of othering, as such, is often a projection of real-life power dynamics, where the 'subordinate' groups and their social identities are offered, constructed, and relegated to positions as others by groups with greater political power and social resources (Larsen, 2017; see also Jensen, 2011). This study, on the contrary, exhibits a reversed scenario in which the powerful groups are othered. Here, Alternative media create an alternative field of discourse, which subverts mainstream power relations by reframing the value structure to prioritise morals over wealth, occupations, and social status. The mainstream powerful groups, therefore, are disempowered and relegated because they are morally inferior to the subordinate groups. Correspondingly, this alternative field also provides an inclusive space for alternative media to empower and give voice to the subordinate groups (Holt, 2018), creating and legitimising a different power relation in which the mainstream powerful groups are situated as others.

5.4. Discussion: Post-Consumerist Luxury in Theory

Comparing the findings of this chapter with literature in regard to how consumerist discourses and unconventional luxury studies construct luxury, distinctions were found, which could be

encapsulated in three implications: (1) *resumption of moral critiques* in luxury studies, (2) a movement of *luxurising normality*, and (3) *shaping solidity in liquefied luxury*. These implications are independent but coexist in accounts of alternative media, adding to the continuing conceptual development of luxury beyond consumerist discourses. Moreover, these distinctions signal an alternative discourse to conceptualise luxury, which presents different connotations of luxury from consumerist and unconventional luxury. This alternative discourse is termed 'post-consumerist luxury' in the context of this thesis, though it is worth noting that this chapter only suggests the possible existence of post-consumerist luxury on a theoretical level based on the findings and analysis of this chapter. In a subsequent chapter (i.e., Chapter 8), the concept of post-consumerist luxury will be studied in the everyday practice of an intentional community, from which insights regarding the praxis of post-consumerist luxury will be drawn. Table 5.4.1. categorises existing conceptualisations of luxury into 'consumerist luxury', 'unconventional luxury', and 'post-consumerist luxury' and outlines the distinctions between them.

Table 5.4.1. Three discourses of conceptualising luxury

Discourse	***Underpinning assumptions***	***Relationship with capitalism***	***Constructs of luxury***
Consumerist luxury	Economic growth, consumer culture	Endorse capitalism	Luxury is demoralised. Luxury is priced, branded, and traded as consumer goods and services.
Unconventional luxury	Consumer emancipation, post-modernism, liquid modernity	Reform capitalism	Luxury is ephemeral, inexpensive, consumer-defined, and inconspicuous. Luxury should be accessible to anyone in principle. Luxury is inspiring, caring, celebratory, and playful.
Post-consumerist luxury	Pessimism on growth, social justice, and the environment	Anti-capitalism	Luxury should be moralised. Luxury represents the shrinking availability of natural resources and human rights. Luxury remains exclusive and scarce.

The table above differentiates the discourses on three dimensions. First, it specifies the underpinning assumptions of society for each. The second dimension underscores each discourse's attitude towards capitalism, and the third dimension presents the different meanings that luxury has been given under the construction of each discourse. Unlike consumerist luxury, which educates consumers to enjoy and seek pleasure from luxury (Tamari, 2016), or unconventional luxury, which encourages consumers to actively search emancipatory moments of luxury from trivial and mundane everyday life (Thomsen et al., 2020), post-consumerist luxury is established upon pessimism. It responds to the recession of societies and the intensification of global crises such as climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic. The pessimistic undertone of societies triggers the will to eradicate capitalism. Therefore, post-consumerist luxury naturally aligns with anti-capitalism, while consumerist and unconventional luxury aims to maintain (i.e., endorse or reform) the foundation of capitalism. Consequently, post-consumerist luxury encompasses a certain degree of bitterness, as it refers to things that are essential but unattainable (e.g., natural resources and human rights). This forms a significant contrast to the hedonistic and emancipatory luxury experiences depicted by consumerist and unconventional luxury. The following sections 5.4.1. to 5.4.3. provide explanations of the three implications of post-consumerist luxury, to further distinguish this discourse from the others.

5.4.1. Resumption of the Moral Critique

The existing literature on unconventional luxury is emancipatory in its nature. It celebrates the democratisation of luxury to an advanced extent, moving beyond the boundaries of the market and considering luxury inexpensive and accessible to many (Thomsen et al., 2020). Studies in this vein tend to marry the notion of luxury with positive implications, associating luxury with practices that are empowering (Turunen et al., 2020), caring (Kreuzer et al., 2020), and hedonic and liberating (Holmqvist et al., 2020). However, this benevolent approach to conceptualising luxury overlooks the moral dimension, or as Berry (1994, 2016) coins, it 'demoralises' luxury: separating luxury from negative connotations and associating it with positive, playful, and hedonistic entities and experiences. The data, correspondingly, suggests that unconventional concepts of luxury still confront moral critiques and are labelled as morally inferior by the alternative media. Luxury, of their construction, intensifies social injustice, threatens the environment, is unaffordable to the oppressed, and is only offered to the elites or those with privilege, thus morally problematic. This reinforces the conventional perception that luxury is

associated with negative traits such as degeneration, corruption, and weakness (Featherstone, 2016).

Following the previous phase of de-moralisation (Berry, 1994, 2016), contemporary luxury now faces a new round of moral scrutiny. The portrayals of luxury constructed in the moralising repertoire resemble what is concluded by Berry (2016) as the 're-moralisation of luxury', categorising contemporary critiques of luxury into ethical, social, and environmental aspects. Concerning the ethical aspect, the alternative media imply that having access to luxury *per se* is unethical because it reflects the uneven distribution of social resources and may result in immoral activities (Roberts, 2019), such as the exploitation of normal people. This concern is echoed in Extract 1, which exhibits a scenario of inequality in that financiers were safe in plush offices and luxury homes during the pandemic, while many Americans work in dangerous conditions yet still cannot afford medical care. Critiques of the social aspect are concerned with luxury corrupting society's value structure (Berry, 2016). This concern can also be found in Extract 1. The author uses the moralising repertoire to restore the value structure, meanwhile, relegate luxury to the position of being excessive and less prioritised. Lastly, the environmental aspect is centred on criticising the environmental damages caused by luxury-related activities (e.g., Roberts, 2019), and the case of luxury cruising in Extract 2 reinforces such criticism by demonstrating how luxury activities harm the environment.

5.4.2. Luxurising Normality

Based on the data and the literature, I would like to suggest that the overarching theme among many works in unconventional luxury centres on luxurising normality. This is to say that studies of unconventional luxury have shown a particular interest in discovering the luxuriousness of trivial, mundane experiences and everyday practices, such as having a bath, eating chocolate, reading a book, dancing, or watching a film. Banister and colleagues (2020) encapsulate these practices as 'everyday luxury'. Participating in these practices allows consumers to transiently escape from routines and have moments of pleasure (Banister et al., 2020; Holmqvist et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the term 'normality' entails a second layer of meanings. In contrast to the self-nurturing and hedonic essence of luxurising everyday practices, the data illustrate a gloomy reality that the normality of our everyday life is destabilised. At the micro level, this manifests in a series of episodes where basic elements and rights are at stake of becoming luxuries due to limited availability. Traditionally, basic needs such as food, water,

warmth, and safety are broadly considered the foundation of human being (Maslow, 1943). These elements are seemingly far away from our impression of luxury, for luxury traditionally links with extravagance, excess, and the antonym of necessity (Berry, 1994; Dubois et al., 2005). However, the distance between them is narrowing. Reportedly, even the very prerequisites of human existence – clean air, water, land, and food – are becoming luxuries to many due to human exploitation of natural resources and the ecosystem (Cristini and Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2020). Here, the concept of 'basics' extends from tangible material needs to intangible human rights.

This phenomenon is captured in the analysis, especially where the othering repertoire is discussed. I noticed that several basic rights in life are at stake of becoming luxuries because of their limited availability. Firstly, the basics of well-being – health and healthcare – have been equated with luxury. In Extract 6, healthcare was treated as a resource by the Libyan authorities, which control and decide who can access it, and because of this, the nature of healthcare changes. It is no longer a basic right accessible to any individual, regardless of social identity and status. Instead, it has become an entitlement available only to some but not all. Hence, to refugees and migrants – the ones whose access to healthcare is controlled by the authorities, healthcare means luxury. Secondly, some basic rights at work (e.g., paid time off) are also recognised as an unaffordable luxury by workers who had to risk their health to go out and work over the course of the pandemic. Extract 3, 5, and 7 give examples of this – essential and low-income workers do not have the type of jobs that provides them sufficient security and welfare; thus, they have no choice but to work under risky and exploitative conditions (e.g., *They don't have sick days*, see Extract 7). To them, staying at home is a luxury far beyond their reach (Huang et al., 2022). Lastly, what triggers these rights to become luxury comes alongside the shrinking space for freedom of choice, which is restricted by the decreasing availability and unequal distribution of natural and social resources. Many do not have the choice to live in the way they are comfortable with, nor can afford or have access to clean air and organic food, which often are labelled at high prices. The *status quo* is evidenced in Extract 4, in which *poor people* are not given the same freedom as *richer people* in choosing whether or not to consume unhealthy food. Therefore, such freedom of choice is called luxury.

Taken together, it can be argued that normality – or being able to live in a state of normality – has become a luxury, though the luxuriousness of which differs based on individuals' possession of social capital. For those who possess adequate capital, normality is a privilege,

which refers to advantages and/or entitlement granted – cannot be brought or earned – and exclusively benefit certain groups of people, who often are unaware of it (Black and Stone, 2005). The excerpts above exhibit how social assets are disproportionately assigned, and thus only those with adequate social capital are privileged to access luxuries (in this context, luxuries refer to basics and normality). On the contrary, for those unable to afford equivalent social capital, the luxuriousness of normality comes from unattainability. Those excerpts uncover that things people used to take for granted (e.g., healthcare, work-from-home) become inaccessible as if they were luxuries. Thus, the taken-for-granted – also known as the normality – is constructed as a luxury exclusively offered to those with power, influence, and privilege but is unaffordable and unattainable for the socially inferior and oppressed.

5.4.3. Shaping Solidity in Liquefied Luxury

Unconventional luxury research embodies liquidity by focusing on accessible-to-many, ephemeral, and consumer-defined luxury (Thomsen et al., 2020). This chapter aligns with these focal aspects, although the data indicate a contradiction which signifies the existence of solidity in liquefied luxury.

Scholars of unconventional luxury studies believe that the meaning of luxury is subject to consumers' interpretation. Even things that appear to be common and ordinary could mean luxury (e.g., Banister et al., 2020). Extract 3, for example, exhibits that even living in a normal society is considered a luxury by many low-income workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. It not only reflects the dystopian attribute of the pandemic but also is differed from the liberating spirit diffused by unconventional luxury studies, which suggests that luxury is perceptual and 'accessible to many as long as they are mindful of it' (Thomsen et al., 2020: 443). In fact, it reveals a rather pessimistic reality where unconventional notions of luxury are formed to reflect the oppressiveness and exploitation of societies. In the previous excerpts, the sense of luxury generated from vulnerable people's suffering, i.e., their limited access to social recourses (e.g., healthcare; the right to work from home) and little to no freedom or power to choose how they want to live. It, therefore, implies that individual consumers' perception and interpretation is not the only factor at work and highlights the significant role societies and external sociocultural contexts play in the construction of luxury.

Following this argument, it is, therefore, worthwhile to encourage scholars to pause and think about whether the 'liquidification' of luxury (Bardhi et al., 2020: 28) or the idea of luxury becoming subjective, contextual, relative, and consumer-defined means that all the characteristics that used to associate with luxury have lost validity as the references in recognising and defining luxury. Presently, the focus of many luxury studies centres on answering the question of 'what could define as luxury?'. Scholars adopt critical, liquid, and unconventional approaches (e.g., Armitage and Roberts, 2016; Bardhi et al., 2020; Thomsen et al., 2020) to explore the variable manifestations and alternative conceptualisations of luxury, broadening our understanding of what luxury is (or could be). Luxury could mean escapist moments from everyday life (Banister et al., 2020) or the prerequisites of human existence (Cristini and Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2020); likewise, the previous excerpts present circumstances where basics and normality are interpreted as luxury. This chapter wishes to take the discussion further, enquiring what qualities those escapist moments, the prerequisites of human existence, and basics and normality possess that make them appear luxurious. This enquiry leads me to return to the classic – yet never fully addressed – question of 'what defines and characterises luxury?'. Adapting this question into the context of this study, this chapter enquires what qualities or criteria were used by the alternative media to define something as luxury. Previous research has suggested a high relevance of luxury with excellence, creativity, and exclusivity (Cristini et al., 2017). Similarly, the findings of this chapter indicate that two characteristics – exclusivity and scarcity – remain the bedrock of luxury, even when luxury is liquefied and given unconventional meanings.

Existing literature reckons that with the prevalence of counterfeit and democratised luxury, luxury's symbolic value of signalling exclusivity is weakening (Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2019; Kapferer and Laurent, 2016), though, as Bardhi and colleagues (2020) argue, consumer's desire for exclusivity never goes away. Naturally, it leads to the question of 'how exclusivity can be achieved, if not through luxury consumption and possession?'. Holmqvist and colleagues (2020) propose an alternative means – they indicate that exclusivity could be attained through accomplishing mastery of certain skills, such as salsa dancing. Likewise, this chapter captures a different approach to constructing exclusivity from accounts of alternative media. As mentioned, the othering repertoire illustrates a polarised social reality, where the powerful groups can access luxury, but the subordinate groups are excluded. Here, access to luxury is exclusive, and such exclusivity is not achieved by displaying the ability to spend high prices on luxury products but instead based on the possession of social resources. Reflecting

on Extract 7, people are excluded from the luxury of working from home due to their ethnic and social identities as *people of colour* and *immigrants*. The excerpt showcases that when the alternative media regard something as a luxury, the rationale behind often rooted in the logic of exclusivity. Things are considered luxurious because access to them is limited and exclusive.

The conventional perception of what constructs the scarcity of luxury faces challenges from unconventional luxury studies. Traditionally, access to luxury is what Thomsen et al. (2020) term 'ontologically scarce'. Luxury represents things that are widely recognisable and desirable but can only be attained through private ownership and only by those who can afford the high price (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009). In contrast, unconventional luxury studies consider the scarcity of luxury epistemological. In other words, what is luxurious is dependent on consumers' interpretation, and thus the scarcity of luxury is constructed and restrained by their perceptual abilities (Thomsen et al., 2020). As such, things that appear to be common and ordinary could be interpreted as luxury (e.g., Banister et al., 2020), and luxury, in theory, is accessible to anyone as long as people are mindful of it (Thomsen et al., 2020). However, I notice that for the unconventional notions of luxury discussed in this chapter, their scarcity is still partially caused by ontological reasons. For example, being able to work from home is implied as a luxury in Extract 7 because it is factually unavailable and unaffordable to many ethnic minority workers. Especially in a post-pandemic world, what is traditionally deemed fundamental and mundane now may become a luxury for many due to its ontological scarcity and unattainability.

5.5. Chapter Summary

To sum up, this chapter presents the findings of the first study of this thesis and critically examines the transforming meanings of luxury constructed by alternative media. It contributes in various ways to the growing body of literature that explores beyond-consumerist notions of luxury. Firstly, it sheds light on the under-researched subject of alternative media, elucidating repertoires of moralising and othering as well as how they discursively reinforce and construct certain discourses of luxury. Secondly, it adds another empirical piece to the ongoing advancement of unconventional luxury studies, highlighting the increasing scarcity and luxuriousness of normality and basic rights in a world destabilised by the pandemic. Theoretically, it furthers the discussion about what fundamentally constitutes luxury and

whether the liquidification of luxury means depriving it of all its orthodox characteristics. Finally, it proposes ‘post-consumerist luxury’ as a new discourse to conceptualise luxury.

CHAPTER 6:

IN-BETWEEN MAINSTREAM AND ALTERNATIVE: LIVING IN AN INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

6.1. Introduction

The following chapter presents findings from conversations with the community members regarding their views on mainstream capitalist societies, their relations with the community, and the challenges they face when living on the margin of the mainstream. The chapter begins by revealing a culture of anti-capitalism among the community residents who, to different extents, had unpleasant encounters in the mainstream capitalist society and thus desired to explore alternative forms of living. Coming to the community was described by these people as coming to a sanctuary where they could escape from all the norms of the mainstream. However, after joining the community, many residents, including me, discovered that they and the community were still inescapably entangled in the web of capitalist consumerism. This chapter therefore investigates how these people respond and react to this dilemma and find an equilibrium between their practice of alternative living and their inevitable entanglement with the capitalist society.

One may argue that this chapter appears to be less relevant to the focus of this thesis because it does not directly revolve around luxury and post-consumerism. However, it is essential. Through this chapter, readers will discover the in-betweenness, or liminality (Van Gennep, 1909, 1960), that inhabits the community and its residents, which is a significant factor determining how these people view luxury and how they construct their versions of post-consumerism. Therefore, this chapter provides a contextual foundation, justifying and legitimising the findings and arguments that will be presented in the chapters that follow by detailing how residents of this intentional community view their consumer identity and their relationships with mainstream consumerism.

6.2. An Anti-Capitalist Consensus

When I asked the participants to describe their involvement with the capitalist society, I noticed a consensus of anti-capitalism. Many claimed to be against, despising, and endeavouring to withdraw from the capitalist consumerist society. A moral presupposition, that is, capitalism and consumerism are morally problematic and inferior, operates as an underlying agreement and – almost coincidentally – concurred by all the community members, including those who self-identified as "a complete consumer" (Acacia). These people's utterances from the

interviews discursively constructed four collective impressions of capitalism and consumerism: 1) what capitalism and consumerism promise is a mirage, 2) capitalism and consumerism are pervasive and endless, 3) capitalism and consumerism shape the way people think and behave, and 4) capitalism and consumerism reflect the inequality between the rich and the poor. The table below presents a summary of these constructs.

Table 6.2.1. Constructs of capitalism and consumerism

Construct	**Freq. of accounts**	**Description**	**Exemplar accounts**
"It's a mirage"	6	What promised by the capitalist system, such as happiness and security, often is a delusion or never delivered.	I think the safety offered by conforming might turn out to be an incredibly strong delusion. [...] They can follow the rules as much as they like, they could work as hard as they like, they still might not be safe and happy, and at that point, everything breaks down a lot. (Birch)
Pervasive & endless	9	Everything is capitalised and consumerised; there is no way out.	I mean, what they say is, you don't give people a thing, you give them an experience now, so that... but often the experience is also – to my mind – consumerist. (Olive) When I think of the system... It's a bit scary because it has so much momentum that if it's going to get off the rails that it's on, there's going to be a big crash. (Aspen)
Shaping behaviour & mindset	22	The system shapes the way people think and imposes them to follow certain patterns of behaviour.	Whereas I think with consumerism, we try to deny growing old. We try to deny that things are going to pass away and they're temporary. [...] But I think consumerism is our… trying to hold on to something when you're going to have to let go sometimes. (Poplar) They can switch your phone off remotely, then just you need to buy a new one. And you keep doing that to people, and they will just get into the function of rebuying, rebuying, rebuying, and then you make it fashionable, so then they want to rebuy, rebuy, rebuy... (Acacia)
Causing inequality	14	Societies are led and controlled by big corporations; the rich are indulged, and the poor are exploited.	The capitalist system: the one who has money can get things, while who hasn't don't get the things. (Cherry)

6.2.1. "It's a Mirage"

The construct of 'what capitalism and consumerism promise is a mirage' was brought up a handful of times by a few participants who appear to be more senior and have engaged with the community and alternative living for years. They remarked on a common belief among consumers that happiness, safety, and success will be awarded to those who conform and engage in paths provided and advocated by capitalism and consumerism, arguing that such a belief is illusional. An example to support this could be found in Extract a. below, where the topic of the freedom of choosing one's career path was invoked.

Extract a.

> ***Birch:*** *All sorts of things, and I enjoy that my career is like that. I use something that's physical, some are mental, some are emotional, some organisational, some artistic and... Yeah, I get to play with different parts of myself.*
>
> ***Researcher:*** *Yeah, that's really cool. I guess not everyone can achieve something like that.*
>
> ***Birch:*** *Why not?*
>
> ***Researcher:*** *Because in a capitalist society, the ordinary pattern is that you go to a nine to five work.*
>
> ***Birch:*** *But people don't have to choose it. I think my life is out of my choices. And I think most people have far more choices than they realise. But again, think about trauma, most people are scared, so they will conform and follow a path that people have told them is safe, even if it is not, rather than risking a different path. And I think the safety offered by conforming might turn out to be an incredibly strong delusion. If the society proves incapable of dealing with the crises it's now facing, it could be that everybody in conformal society discovers that there is no contract whereby if they follow the rules and work hard, they'll be safe and happy. They can follow the rules as much as they like, they could work as hard as they like, they still might not be safe and happy, and at that point, everything breaks down a lot.* (Birch)

Extract b.

> *Well, and this is why some people have this, you know, are into alternative lifestyle. And this is more to do with the general spiritual and mental well-being, because just imagine you've invested all of your energy and attention to building up a life on the assumption that you'll have security, even if you're doing this competitively, and you get into a situation whereby it just doesn't deliver. It just isn't there. It's a mirage.* (Maple)

The conversation in the first extract above begins with me – coming from a conventional point of view – praising the multiplicity of work that Birch has taken throughout their career and

comparing that to a normative career path in capitalist society ("the ordinary pattern is that you go to a nine to five work"). Birch objects to my opinion by drawing on the discourse of freedom of choice. They believe that everybody has the choice to jump out of normality and choose jobs based on their preferences. The reason why most people are not doing so but instead conforming to the norms of capitalist societies ascribes to the sense of fear ("think about trauma, most people are scared"). They fear that their action of taking an unorthodox path may lead to losing the stability and safety provided in the capitalist society. However, in Birch's opinion, the so-called stability and safety "might turn out to be an incredibly strong delusion". When people come to the realisation that conforming does not necessarily deliver safety and happiness, a sense of disappointment occurs, and their belief in the prospect of capitalist society is destabilised ("everything breaks down a lot"). A similar view is shared by another community member. Maple draws a disappointing scenario when people discover that their expectation of obtaining security by investing their whole life in the capitalist society may never be delivered. They attribute people's motives for joining alternative communities to such disappointment and express disbelief in the delusion depicted by capitalism. "It's a mirage", they conclude. Both extracts resonate with the criticism regarding capitalist consumerism's incapability of delivering consumer authentic happiness and 'freedom of choice' as promised (Alvesson, 1994; Ellis et al., 2011; Featherstone, 2010; Gabriel and Lang, 2008).

6.2.2. Being Pervasive and Endless

The idea of capitalism and consumerism being pervasive and endless was expressed by multiple participants across different demographics. These people reckon that the logic of capitalism and consumerism has penetrated every inch of society, and it has the power to capitalise and commercialise not only material entities but also intangible experiences. For example, in the first extract below, Alder draws on notions of *water* and *air* to characterise capitalism. To them, capitalism is so permeating and essential to human survival that when I asked what their involvement with the capitalist society is, their first response – as shown below – was to describe it as water and air, implicitly telling the inevitability of their involvement with capitalism. Following this, Olive shares their observation on the commodification of experiences, which consolidates the construct of capitalist consumerism being pervasive. They note the trend that even intangibles like experience can now be given and served as consumer goods in contemporary societies, marking that anything – either tangible or intangible – can be capitalised and commoditised for consumerist purposes.

Extract c.

> *...because it's like water, isn't it, capitalism everywhere, isn't it? It's like air, you know.* (Alder)
>
> *I mean, what they say is, you know, you don't give people a thing, you give them an experience now. So that... but often the experience is also, to my mind, consumerist.* (Olive)

Extract d.

> *I know, but that's why money is the worst drug in the world. It's a drug, it is a drug, absolutely. But it's true that sometimes one person or we cannot change the world.* (Beech)
>
> *It's just really like, I don't think we want it to stop as a, uh, it's an addiction. Well, if you say to people, "Don't consume stuff. Don't buy stuff for the next year", to people that's like fucking mind-blowing.* (Juniper)
>
> *It's like we're so on this speedy fast train that is so scary to jump of that.* (Aspen)

However, although the people have acknowledged the pervasiveness of capitalism and consumerism, they also believe there is no way out and that capitalism will continue living endlessly. This is evidenced in Extract d., in which three community members discretely recruit metaphors including "drug", "addiction", and "speedy fast train" to describe the absolute power and momentum of capitalist consumerism and the uttermost difficulty to ending it. They see consumers – often referred to as *we* in their utterances – as the victims of the capitalist system who are drugged with money, addicted to constant buying and consuming, and being held on this fastmoving train of capitalism and jumping off it "looks like death" (Aspen). As such, some of them conclude that the endlessness of capitalism is sustained by consumers' fear of withdrawing from the capitalist system (e.g., "...is so scary to jump off that", Aspen) and human greed that drives consumers to keep wanting more and never satisfied (e.g., "there's plenty for everyone, but because people are so greedy and so endlessly, and they're so dissatisfied", Poplar).

6.2.3. Shaping Behaviour and Mindset

Another compelling construct is the idea that capitalist consumerism has the power to condition people to think and act in certain ways. The consumer society is characterised to be "toxic" (Beech), anti-natural, and intensifying insecurity. Several community residents suggest that an anti-nature mindset underpins people's obsession with consumerism. As Bauman (1998) contends, the process of modernisation is also a process of humans conquering nature. This

attitude has deeply penetrated contemporary consumer culture, and consumers are fostered to believe that consumerist products are superior to nature and those that are naturally produced. As one participant expresses, "We've got into a world where we think that McDonald's is better than your man making burgers with his own cows" (Juniper). Besides, a few community residents assert that consumers are in constant pursuit of "unobtainable" (Juniper) dreams and images depicted by consumerism; however, all the purchases they make and luxuries they obtain on the way of such pursuit do not "actually address their needs for security" (Birch), but instead exacerbating their feeling of insecurity.

Moreover, the capitalist system is constructed by these participants as a mechanism that is capable of stealthily manipulating and conditioning the behaviour of consumers. A few participants in the interviews drew on examples of technological products to showcase how consumers are conditioned to adapt to the fast-pacing cycle of capitalist consumerism.

> *The amount of products we've had has been thrown at us in such a fast way, typically technology-wise, and it's been forced on us. And you have to keep replacing it. The mobile phone is the big issue, [...] you know, have a phone device you can deliberately break remotely. They can switch your phone off remotely, then just you need to buy a new one. And you keep doing that to people, and they will just get into the function of rebuying, rebuying, rebuying, and then you make it fashionable, so then they want to rebuy, rebuy, rebuy, then you tell them it's cheap when it isn't, and they more want to rebuy, rebuy, rebuy...* (Acacia)

In Acacia's accounts, there seems to be an external authority that they reckon as other (implied by the third-party descriptor *they*), who has the power and will (*deliberately*) to *break* the products that consumers are using and thus compel them to develop the habit of rebuying. They also refer to several marketing techniques (e.g., *make it fashionable*; *it's cheap*) that they believe are used to maintain and reinforce the habit. Approaching from a different perspective, some other participants turn to observations of themselves or people they are close to so as to delineate the coercive culture of consumerism and how it shapes individuals' behaviour and mindset. For example, one participant utters what they observed from their brother's life, which, described by the participant, is a vicious cycle of buying and constantly feeling unsatisfied.

> *He likes his car and holidays, so he feels like he has to work hard in order to afford the things he wants in his life, but then his life is so affected by his work. He doesn't really fully enjoy it, and then he thinks the answer is to spend more and it's like...* (Rowan)

Similarly, two other participants reflect on their own experience as consumers, delineating the consumer society as a "comfortable bubble" (Cedar) in which spending money is like an "instant nature" (Ginkgo).

6.2.4. Causing Inequality

The last construct centres on the unequal distribution of wealth and power among different social groups. The community residents construct their arguments around three subjects. Firstly, they express opinions on capitalist corporates, asserting that the world is in fact, not capitalist, but a "corporate-controlled society" (Birch). Some of them talk about how international corporates and conglomerates manipulate the developing trajectory of societies by posing impacts on technology industries and legislation, e.g., "Apple managed to get put in some kind of law [...] where you couldn't go to a repair specialist unless they were licenced repair specialists" (Acacia).

Besides, a handful of community residents connect capitalist consumerism with the tension between the indulgence of the rich and the exploitation of the poor population. These people think that the rich are "disconnected from the world" because they distribute the resources they possess to do "all these magics", such as "flying rockets" to space (Juniper) or employing craftsmen to build "amazing boats" (Elm). They express an inaptitude to comprehend and empathise with those extravagant activities but are more concerned with how capitalist consumerism exploits workers and intensifies poverty. For instance,

> *I've got loads of friends in poverty. So, they're not going out and saying like, "Well, I need a coat, I'm going to go and buy that £500 coat, and it's going to last me like 20 years". They can't afford to do that, so every year, they buy a shit coat, and it's year after year.* (Juniper)

In these utterances, Juniper shares the poverty situation of some of their friends, disclosing a gloomy reality of consumerism in which prices and money monopolise and decide the quality of life. Here, Juniper suggests a correlation between the price of a product and its quality. People who are unable to afford expensive items therefore have no choice but to keep rebuying low-quality products *year after year*. This example shows that the way consumerism operates in fact maintains the poverty of individual consumers. It allows the rich to indulge in opulence while oppressing the poor and depriving them of the enjoyment and warmth of a good quality coat. One participant concludes their understanding of capitalism as,

The capitalist system: the one who has money can get things, while who hasn't don't get the things. (Cherry)

6.3. Coming to the Community for Alternatives

Following such an anti-capitalist consensus, it is hence not difficult to understand why these people eventually gathered in this community – to experience ways of living different from their lives in mainstream capitalist societies. These people, for all kinds of reasons, had dissatisfactions with their lives in the mainstream and thus came to the community to – in my first impression – escape. This view was later recurrently questioned and challenged in the interviews because the participants disagreed that their acts of joining the community should be simply equivalent to escaping. In their opinions, the term 'escape' is a "criticism" which is not "entirely justified" (Pine), and it hints that their action of joining the community was a decision made passively because they "couldn't function" (Holly) in the outside world ascribe to "a high level of incompetency" (Alder). Instead, they assured that the decision was of their choice (e.g., "I'm not running away. I'm running towards something that I've longed for", Poplar), and even though escapism exists among some members of the community, "that's not a bad thing" (Cypress), and there is nothing wrong with escaping places that make them feel "anxious" because "humans aren't designed to live in, like cities" (Oak). The debate on whether coming to the community is an escape or not triggered my further interest in understanding the nuanced reasons people came to this community. In the interviews, I asked how they came to get involved with the community in the first place, and the answers I received diversified into four types which are also intertwined and interrelated to each other: being – or to be – different from the mainstream; to heal from traumas; to experience and practise alternative forms of living; and, to live a better/easier life.

6.3.1. Being or To Be Different

In my pursuit of why those people joined the community, the narrative of 'conventionality does not fit me' appeared recurrently and became a salient pattern in their responses. Here, the term 'conventionality' encapsulates various notions (e.g., urban life; traditional work culture; meritocracy; material abundance; anthropocentrism; consumerism; and the nuclear family structure) which are reckoned mainstream-oriented and thus disapproved by the people in the community. According to some, joining the community was almost an inevitable choice

determined by the nature of who they were. To evidence this, they discursively drew on repertoires of personality traits (e.g., "[the community] attracts introverts", Holly), past experiences (e.g., "I have tried convention, it doesn't work for me", Pine), and self-identity (e.g., "I don't do well in corporate employment style environments. [...]I'm not a worker like that.", Acacia) in reasoning their motives of coming to the community. It has been suggested that community members may view their involvement with communities as a way of constructing and reinforcing their self-identity (Wells et al., 2019). However, this process seems reversed in this context. Some participants employed utterances related to self-identity to validate their action of joining the community. An example is given in the following extract, in which the participant works discursively to construct themselves (see the repeated use of the pronoun *I*) as someone who is persistently (*for a long time*; *never*) insensitive (*poor relationship*; *don't quite get it*) to the pleasure brought by conventional consumerist activities (e.g., shopping). They recalled their childhood memories to indicate that such insensitivity is innate and has never been changed (*never understood*) by socialisation while they grew up, thus presenting themselves as a born misfit of mainstream society.

> *I have a poor relationship with city centres which are based on shops and things that I don't quite get it. I haven't got it for a long time. When I was a child, I was taken shopping as a recreational activity and like many other things about my childhood, I never understood it, and then I don't believe I've ever done it [...]* (Magnolia)

Through these, they harmonise their self-identity (as a social misfit) with the identity of the community (as an alternative to the mainstream), establishing a sense of shared identity between the community and its members and thereafter legitimatising their involvement with the community, for they both are different from the mainstream.

Although being innately different may be part of the reasons, a larger number of the participants tend to view coming to the community as an intentional act to retreat from mainstream society. Some people had the initiative to step back from the mainstream and the freedom to choose to live differently. To them, the community represents ideologies (e.g., sustainability, counter-meritocracy) aligned to what they pursue and how they want to present themselves (e.g., "[the community] as my chosen self-sustaining community", Maple). They intentionally chose to join the community and often associated their acts of 'stepping back' with emancipatory purposes. For example, a couple of participants state that living in the community allows them to withdraw from the "rat race" of getting "rich in material goods" (Magnolia) and to explore

alternative forms of value exchanges such as paying the rent with labour instead of money ("I don't really investigate in the notion of home and paying for rent, and that's something that I would like to not pay for anymore", Apple). However, not every person joined the community for ideological, emancipatory reasons. A sense of dissatisfaction (e.g., *unhappy*; *frustrated*) was discursively expressed by various participants in the interviews when talking about their lives before coming to the community. As exhibited in below extracts, some struggle with their relationships with family ("not being appreciated"); some disapprove of the destructive and exploitative nature of capitalist societies ("destroying the environment"; "I realise how the capitalism required me to do so much more effort"); and some find themselves "unhealthy" and "unhappy" working in a regular job. These people attribute their suffering and unhappiness to the conventional capitalist environment and hope that changing the environment would provide them with a getaway from their bitterness.

> *Yeah, I guess I was looking for a new way of living because I was just unhappy with how I was existing. It was always kind of... There were some family issues and not being appreciated and feeling like all the work that I did just wasn't enough*. (Acacia)

> *I mean, I'm certainly frustrated with the outside world, but I don't think that's... I don't think that's an unreasonable position to take, either. I think there's quite a lot of things to be frustrated about. I mean, living in a sort of typical modern consumer capitalist sort of way, destroying the environment, I don't think it makes people particularly happy.* (Holly)

> *I had so many dissatisfactions in my previous life. [...] I had a burnout [...], I realised, "oh, you're [...] a working class", and I realise how the capitalism required me to do so much more effort. It required me so much more energy than I actually had.* (Lindens)

> *I was feeling unhappy, at least functioning in a regular job. So, for me, I guess you could say I'm avoiding those kinds of relationships, because I wasn't able to function well, I wasn't able to get sucked in, trapped and go get into negative patterns that were making me unhealthy*. (Aspen)

Among all the responses, the answer from one participant struck me the most. It is about losing a close family member before the person joining the community. In my interview with the participant, they told me that back in time, they had a happy, fulfilling life with their family in mainstream society. However, things did not go well for long. In their own words – "suddenly everything was broken". They lost a family member and had been trying to flee from everything and refused to allow themselves to feel happy again ("I just don't want the happiness without him") ever since. I felt great sorrow watching when they calmly told me this with a bitter smile in the interview. I could not imagine the extent of sadness they overcame that made them able

to talk about this experience in peace. Knowing this backdrop made me truly understand their response at a later point of the interview when the topic of 'escape' was brought up.

> *I think what the media, the television, and the society have made to us is like, "you have to be successful. If you're not successful, you're a loser". So, in life, you finish school, go to college, find a partner, and start your master, get married, get your PhD, good kid, successful. But sometimes that is not the life that you want, or sometimes you just get your heartbreak, or something like losing a child, losing a partner, losing someone, get you not in that place, or sometimes you just don't know, but you just don't fit, so you start to look for something different because everybody wants to be accepted.* (Cherry)

I asked whether they thought the community was an escape for people, and they answered, "Definitely". Same as the other four respondents (i.e., Acacia, Holly, Lindens, and Aspen), this participant's painful experience in the past drove them off the track of the mainstream and began their journey of exploring alternatives. Their response in the above extract offers further insights into my enquiry of why people came to the community. They begin by referring to the discourse of meritocracy to delineate a culture where the idea of being successful is widely worshipped and advocated by mainstream media and societies. They then outline a life path that is conventionally considered successful ("you finish school, go to college, find a partner, and start your master, get married, get your PhD") and soon follow it with a conjunction *But* and a series of incidents that could divert people from this so-called 'successful' life path. What they state in the extract underscores the fact that it is not always the case that people voluntarily choose to leave the mainstream for alternatives. Sometimes unfortunate things happen, which make people no longer able to bear their lives in the mainstream and thus choose to marginalise themselves from the majority. Building up from these, they finally disclose the answer to why people joined the community – these people, marginalised from the mainstream, want to find a sense of belonging in this alternative community ("everybody wants to be accepted") (also suggested by Wells et al., 2019). Meanwhile, this extract also reflects the next reason that drove people to the community – to heal from traumas.

6.3.2. To Heal from Traumas

As noted above, the community has been reckoned a getaway by those who are unhappy or have experienced heartbreaks in mainstream society. Many of these people came to the community when they were vulnerable and searching for a place to heal, to pause from troubles, and to recover from traumas. As admitted by Cherry in another part of the interview, their dedication to the community was their strategy for "just running away from [their] own

conflicts". They are not alone – throughout the months I spent there, similar opinions and the term 'trauma' had been brought up in various occurrences. The notion of trauma, in this context, had appeared in various forms in my conversations with the participants (e.g., "scarred people", "the mental health stuff", "alcohol or gambling", and "marriage broke up"). Except for Cherry and a few others whose utterances centre on their own traumatic experience (e.g., "I see myself as going through a process of healing, you know, a traumatic childhood", Aspen), most of the participants tend to discuss the issue from a third-party perspective and use the pronoun *they* to refer to those in the community whom they reckon traumatised. An example is given below, in which Juniper – someone who has been engaged with the community for many years – suggests that unresolved traumas inhabit many community members.

> *I think it's a lot of... we were... there's a lot of childhood trauma, like unresolved childhood trauma here in a lot of people. And yes, so I think to come here, to live, there's some degree of peripheral living because you can't cope with something or because you can't function in this way – in the way that the world is working. So generally, there's a lot of mental health... Like, I don't want to make it sound dramatic, not like illnesses, but the mental health stuff is going on with everybody, and I think that's more what's going on here.* (Juniper)

Like Magnolia in a previous extract believing that their insensitivity to the mainstream was innate since they were a child, Juniper also regards the traumas carried by the people were formed in their childhood and later affected their mental health when they turned adults and contributed to their incompatibility with mainstream society. Juniper draws on the experience of living in the community ("there's some degree of peripheral living") to imply the inability of some community residents to live in the mainstream ("[...] because you can't cope with something or because you can't function in this way – in the way that the world is working"). The same opinion is shared by other participants, who note that some people come to the community with a mind already traumatised, or in Magnolia's terms – "scarred". Building up from this, their utterances discursively establish causality between traumas and the decision to join the community. The traumatic experiences encountered in the mainstream disable some residents to continue living in normal society, thus driving them towards the community for alternatives ("And they cannot live in society, because they don't, they cannot cope. I mean this is the only place that they can just do their own thing", Beech). Consequently, it appears that the issue of trauma is universal and permeates among the community's members, just like what Juniper concludes: "the mental health stuff is going on with everybody". Therefore, people regard the community as a hideout for them to heal from traumas.

6.3.3. To Practise Alternative Living

Another important reason for people to join the community was the interest to experience alternative ways of living – whether it was about communal living in general, the culture and history of the community, or an imagination of the community being a hippy space. Some are drawn by the "ethos and the culture" (Cypress) of the community, viewing it as "a sort of paradise in the English countryside" with "an ideal that has been left to people as long as they want to be in the community" (Alder), whereas most of the residents' responses revolve about their interest in communal living and their desire to practise it somewhere. Such a desire has been recurringly expressed in the interviews through discursive utterances such as "I was looking for a sense of community" (Lindens), "I really liked the idea of making collective decisions" (Pine), "I've been interested in intentional communities for ages and ages" (Holly). Naturally, the community becomes an ideal destination to accommodate these desires. An excerpt is presented below to give further explanation.

> *I didn't want to live on my own anymore. Like when I was one of those single people in a single household. And my job was very [...] demanding. It demands a lot of your time. So, my social life almost died. I only went to work, and then I met my friends once a week for a few hours. That's all I could do. And I just like the idea of living in a community where you are not on... you share things and you eat together, and you can spend time together, and you don't need to.* (Ash)

Ash recalls their life before joining the community and expresses an aversion to it (*didn't want to live on my own anymore*; *demanding*; *almost died*). They then illustrate the idea of communal living, forming a significant contrast to their previous life patterns. Certain words and phrases with contrary connotations that are used in this excerpt reinforce such a contrast, e.g., *on my own* and *single* versus *share* and *together*. Moreover, compared to the previous reason suggesting that people come to the community to heal from traumas, Ash's utterances and others' responses around this theme mostly employ a first-person descriptor *I* when telling their reasons for joining the community. In addition, the first-person descriptor is often presented in combinations such as "I want", "I was curious", and "I've been interested", indicating that the speakers play active roles in deciding on joining the community. This appears to be congruent with what is discussed in the beginning of 6.3. that the community residents insist that they made conscious decisions to join the community, rather than escaping from the mainstream. Ash's utterances also shed light on the next reason people joining the community – to seek a better/easier life.

6.3.4. To Live a Better/Easier Life

Compared with other reasons discussed thus far, the last reason appears to come from a rather pragmatic perspective. I perceive from the interviews that many people choose to move to the community because it is easier for them to achieve what they reckon is 'a good life'. Many community residents share their experience of being "a lot happier" (Apple) and "very content" (Holly) while living in the community or describe their time there as "an incredibly rich life [...] and abundant" (Ginkgo). However, the definition of 'good life' varies across each individual.

One group of interview participants told me they were coming to the community to ease their loneliness and find company. From my fieldwork, I observed that being single was almost the default for the community residents. From my casual conversations with the residents, I remember that some of them had occasionally mentioned their children but rarely anything about their partners or marital statuses. Only one participant spoke about this in the interview.

> *I am divorced, so I'm kind of a free person do whatever I want. But after so long you get lonely, so you kind of want to spend time with people and community.* (Acacia)

This response illuminates one of the many possible reasons to explain why most people are single in the community. Although one should never arbitrarily assume that partners and family are the major sources for people to obtain company, Acacia's utterances here indeed establish a sequence of causality (*so*) between divorce, loneliness, and the intention to seek company from the community. Similarly, if revisiting Ash's words from the previous section (see 6.3.3.), they also express a loss of company (*my social life almost died*) and their expectation to recover that loss in the community. To this end, it appears that the community provides an alternative source, which substitutes the conventional approaches of obtaining company from partners, family, and friends as well as eases people's loneliness caused by the absence of conventional social connections. It is also worth mentioning that a small number of residents do not solely seek company but instead a balance between company and solitude. One example is from Willow, who spoke in the interview, "[The community] satisfies my need for company, but also my need for solitude. It does both". This suggests that these residents not only desire company from the community; solitude is equally important, implicitly reflecting the dynamic and equivocal nature of people's definition of 'a good life'.

Another group of residents believe that, by their definition, a good life means being close to nature and the countryside. These people often also identify themselves as nature lovers and are closer to "elements and adversity than human beings" (Juniper). In their utterances, the Covid-19 pandemic played a significant role in making them realise the importance of nature, "space" (Beech), and being able to be "outside" (Ginkgo). Naturally, the community for these people is an ideal habitat, as it provides abundant space and opportunities for people to be in nature.

The last group of residents consider living in the community a good way to maintain life stability. The community as a living space, reportedly, keeps its residents "a baseline of healthiness" (Birch). When asking what motivates them to move to the community, to 'find a permanent/secure base' is a recurring answer from this group of participants. Due to the abovementioned feelings of being misfits and traumatised in the mainstream (see 6.3.1 and 6.3.2.), many community residents' lives involve a high level of mobility, e.g., "Living in [the community], I stayed for three years besides for a few months where I didn't, is the longest time I had ever been lived anywhere in my adult life", (Apple). Therefore, the community sometimes is reckoned as a temporary but relatively stable 'base' for these mobile people to settle and rest.

Nonetheless, the people who come to the community for better lives are criticised by other residents who argue that their intentions to join the community are ingenuine. The critics suggest that some community residents are not really "interested in [the community] itself and its philosophy" nor committed enough to make "sacrifices" for it (Rowan). Another stream of opinion indicates permeating laziness among the community, e.g., "Some people are here just because it's an easy place to live. [It is] cheap in the middle of nowhere and not many hours working" (Hazel) and "They are using the place because they have a happy life and sit there and do nothing" (Ash). These criticisms implicate a potential tension among the community residents. It appears that some residents think that coming to the community simply for better lives shows a resident's ingenuine, or a lower degree of, commitment to the community, which has been regarded as nonsensical (e.g. "I think it's just bullshit", Hazel) and unwanted (e.g. "I also wish that everyone was interested in [the community] itself and its philosophy and trying to make the world a better place, and not just wanted to have an easy life or a quiet life", Rowan). Like the mainstream, 'work ethic' (Bauman, 1998) also exists in the culture of the community. Laziness and incompetence are deemed unethical and unacceptable in the

community, as a person being lazy and uncommitted means that the person may make less contribution, or fewer "sacrifices" (Rowan), to the greater good of the community.

6.3.5. The Residents' Impressions of the Community

Taken together, the community residents perceive the community in two major ways. On the one hand, some participants sanctify the place, describing it as a "sanctuary" (Cypress; Maple) which welcomes misfits and provides an emancipatory environment where rules from the mainstream no longer have impacts. On the other hand, others see the community as a post-capitalist playground. They assert that the community is a space where they can think and practise alternative and post-capitalist ideas. These two perceptions of the community are elaborated respectively in the following paragraphs.

6.3.5.1. Community as a Sanctuary

Considering its location and how it connects with mainstream society, the community is indeed socially and geographically isolated from the outside world. Some community residents appreciate such isolation and employ terms such as a sanctuary, haven (Maple), paradise and Shangri-La (Beech) to characterise the community, portraying it as "a place quite far away from [their] actual life" (Ginkgo).

Such a portrayal reflects a belief among some members that the community is a place where social standards and pressures from mainstream capitalist consumerism are filtered out. People share that they are less concerned about their financial situations while living in the community because they "don't need very much here" (Holly). Except for that, the community has also been depicted as "a little backwater for weirdos" (Magnolia), which allows the "slight misfits" (Magnolia) to function and work together comfortably without feeling the urge to "live up to an expectation of how we have to be" (Juniper). As what Cherry summarises,

> *Everybody wants to be part of the society, and I think [being in the community] is like being a part of the society without being a part of the society. Here, everybody's happy with really low incomes, and people don't care because they feel safe. They don't care to only work 16 hours and [earn] – I don't know – £200 a month. Just because they feel safe and they say, "OK, I don't need to look for anything else". I think it's a really comfortable place to be without making too much effort.* (Cherry)

The first sentence of this excerpt tells how Cherry sees the relationship between the community and the mainstream: the community is a part of the wider society but meanwhile distinct from

it (*being a part of the society without being a part of the society*). The distinction is built upon the community culture in terms of how people feel *happy*, *safe*, and *comfortable* even with *really low incomes*, which resonates with works (e.g., Gabriel and Lang, 2008; Bauman, 1998; Chancellor and Lyubomirsky, 2014) that critically challenge and subvert mainstream work ethics and the consumerist discourse that happiness can only be achieved through hard work and purchasing. Stemming from this excerpt, it is also worth noting that the construction of the community being a sanctuary is established based on a constant comparison between characteristics of the community and the mainstream. The sacredness of the community originates from its ability to provide a "completely different" (Beech) space where "a lot of these rules from the mainstream just don't apply" (Alder), thus people find it "so refreshing and so energising and inspiring" (Maple) and can live in a "more calm rhythm of life" (Beech). Lastly, although it has been denied by many community residents (refer to the beginning of 6.3.), there appears to be a degree of escapism expressed by accounts of this construction. Some people explicitly feature their time in the community as an "escape of all the noises" (Beech) from work; or sometimes the escapism is implicitly suggested: when working in the community, one "never has to think outside of [the community]" (Acacia).

6.3.5.2. Community as a 'Post-Capitalist' Playground

Beyond its role as a sanctuary, the community is also perceived by the residents as a 'post-capitalist' playground where individuals can practise and experiment with alternative ways of knowing and living. The term post-capitalism is described by one of the participants as "a sort of exchange of labour and exchange of goods with local people where the money isn't always involved" (Alder). This experimental feature manifests through two levels. On the individual level, the community is considered to facilitate personal growth. It is a place that is safe for people to "be a true nature" (Juniper), that "provides opportunities to do things that [they] hadn't imagined" (Ginkgo) and allows enough time and space for self-reflection (Aspen). On the second level, a large body of accounts around this construct is evoked in conversations about the venue business run by the community. It has been a controversial topic among the members, as it is suspected that the business changes the educational and charitable nature of the community, e.g., "the guests were the only reason we had nice things" (Apple). However, other residents believe that the business is a vehicle for communicating and advertising the idea of alternative living to a broader audience.

> *So, I always used to get cross when a lot of people who say, "We've just become a hotel", and I say, "No, we're not a hotel at all, and we're introducing people who would never choose to experience community". Some people come here like, "Oh my god, I'm so excited of this community", and other people are like, "What is this?" But those are the people you want to attract, people that would never choose to come into a different kind of setup. You know, it's out of their comfort zone, but they experience it because they come on a yoga retreat or…, you know. And so, I think it's really valuable for people to see that, whether they like it or not doesn't matter, is the fact that they've seen another way of life, and they've had to share meals together and they've to, you know, engage with people that are living in different life.* (Poplar)

To Poplar and many like-minded others, the venue business is educational, introducing people "who otherwise won't come here" (Birch) to alternative living through experiencing it in person. In this excerpt, Poplar also expresses an irritation (*No, we're not a hotel at all*) towards the criticism regarding the community is turning into *a hotel* because of the business. They emphasise that the value of the business is not to gain approval from the public (*whether they like it or not doesn't matter*) but to educate and showcase to them the existence of alternative ways of life. This educational intention can be observed from not only the business aspect but also the internal management of the community. Among all relevant accounts, one caught my attention. It says,

> *Although we're still, you know, very much connected with society in terms of our money, we pay our bills and stuff, but volunteer comes here and volunteers are here for three months, and they live without money. But they could do it here technically, which is what I did – two months I lived without money, you know. And I got literally without money because I just work, I'm just living. I'm working with the community. You can say it's work, but you know you're just doing the things you need to do to live, and it's an exchange – you're getting food and my room boarding. That was an experience for me. For many volunteers, it's an experience just to have a little space. It could be just a month or less like without using any exchange of money.* (Aspen)

Here, Aspen internalises the educational nature of the community, stating that being a resident of the community *per se* offers opportunities for experiments with withdrawing from the mainstream societies and live without money or any sorts of consumption. They draw on their own experience of being a community volunteer in the past, proving that the community, to some extent, performs like a 'playground', which creates a micro vacuum of capitalism to allow individuals to *live without money*. Their utterances also suggest an alternative logic (i.e., *exchange*) to interpret the relationship between production and consumption, abandoning the capitalist mindset that money is the medium that facilitates transactions (Ingham, 1996).

6.4. Challenges of Living in the Alternative

Admittedly, many people – including me – were looking at the community through rose-tinted glasses at first. People, especially those who have just arrived at the community, tend to view the place as a synonym for "utopian paradise" (Apple) and think, "[the community] is great!" (Rowan). However, soon this impression evaporates as they start noticing the "contradiction" (Apple; Willow) between what the community presents to the outside and the actuality for the insiders. The sense of contradiction reoccurred in the interviews when people recalled their impressions of the community before and after their arrival. For example, Acacia reflects,

> *I mean, have you seen the [community] documentary? So, you know what happens in that documentary where they say they spend all that time talking and whatnot and having those discussions, yeah? which doesn't happen.*

For Acacia, myself, and many others like us, our perceptions to the community underwent processes of de-romanticisation ever since the moments we arrived. We started to realise that living in an alternative community comes with unexpected challenges and sometimes even sacrifices. In particular, we were facing the challenge of navigating our consumer identity in a seemingly post-capitalist and post-consumerist context. The following sections present a sequence of observations concerning how these residents negotiate their consumer identity in relation to the mainstream consumer society and the alternative community. Of these, some people are involuntarily involved in frugality and become vulnerable consumers; others feel guilty for helplessly desiring consumerist hedonism; and the rest, though intended to escape, still find themselves inevitably entangled within the web of consumerism.

6.4.1. Involuntary Frugality

The "austerity narrative" (Apple) within the community members is noticeable from the beginning. On the day before my departure, I noted down some information about the community learnt beforehand including the community's frugal tradition of sharing necessities.

> *People in [the community] share most things, including beddings, cutlery, bikes, and even some outdoor clothes. They told me that they have clothes and walking shoes for volunteers, so there is no need for me to bring too much stuff.* (Field Notes, 9 June 2021)

For this reason, I expected to observe a certain extent of frugality within the community and had a rather romanticised presupposition in the beginning that all the community residents were voluntarily and actively living frugally for ethical and sustainable purposes. However, soon

after my arrival, this preposition was overturned, as I was exposed to the tension of low wages, heavy workload, and "poverty mentality" (Birch), which consequently led to cases of involuntary frugality.

Initially, it was a sequence of discrete conversations I had with different people made me start to be aware of the issue. In the beginning, while I was still trying to understand the structure of the community, I was involved in a conversation with a volunteer and a resident. The volunteer asked the resident about the meaning of the community role 'employed resident', and the latter explained,

> *"They are people who are hired to work here and live here. They still pay rent here and which is deducted from their wages. But they are paid so little and it's not enough to live, and that's why many of them have a second job outside."* (Field Notes, 26 June 2021)

What it was said was consolidated the following day when I volunteered to help one of the employed residents with some community work, who expressed their dissatisfaction with working in the community as,

> *"You work for the community, but you also live here. And the money they pay you is so low. I mean, even if I want to go somewhere else, it'll be a big money for paying the deposit of renting a place, like £4000."* (Field Notes, 27 June 2021)

These utterances disclose an unexpected facet of lives in the community, reflecting a dismal scenario where an individual's freedom of mobility is restrained due to short of finance. With my time in the community proceeding, similar situations were observed in a few other residents and became an even more salient theme in the interviews. Through reflecting on themselves and the life experiences of others, the participants discursively achieved a phrase to encapsulate this situation – being 'stuck' in the community – and further divided it into two scenarios: being stuck financially and/or mentally. The interview accounts also suggest that the structure and culture of the community facilitate the 'stuck'. In the excerpts above, there is a reflection – and perhaps even confusion – regarding the dual identities of some people as employees and residents of the community simultaneously. On the one hand, these people maintain an employer-employee relationship with the community that is money-oriented, contractual, and based on the principles of capitalism. On the other hand, their well-being and lives as residents are based and dependent on the community, and the relationship between them is meant to be

emotional, organic, caring, and supportive. As such, the community embeds dual functions as both a unit of capitalism and a unit of life.

6.4.1.1. Being Financially Stuck and the Community as a Unit of Capitalism

Being financially stuck entails scenarios in which community residents either are "not in the financial situation to be able to engage with the true capitalists" (Pine) or have fallen into "a poverty trap" (Alder) which makes it financially problematic for them to leave the community. My conversation with the employed resident presented above sheds light on how people get financially stuck in the community. The same topic is revisited and elucidated further in the interview by another resident.

> *Um, there is a bit of a poverty trap for some of us because, um, although I did very interesting work throughout my life, it was never, um, I never sort of bought properties of my own or um… So, I mean, I would be, you know, to… It'd be quite difficult for me to leave [the community]. I probably need to have social housing, and to have social housing, I'd need to talk to a social worker and… [sigh] It's difficult because I do have some health conditions as well.* (Alder)

In the beginning, Alder's use of the phrase "some of us" rather than the first-person 'I' implies that the poverty trap is not uncommon within the community. Following this, they implicitly compare "very interesting work" and "properties of my own" by placing them in a transition sentence connected with the conjunction *although*. This comparison reminds me of what they utter in another part of the interview: after deciding not to purchase any properties in life, Alder spent most money on travelling. It appears that, to Alder, 'owning properties' represents conforming to tradition; and instead of doing so, they choose to do interesting work and travelling to gain exceptional life experiences. However, when recalling this choice in the interview ("although I did very interesting work throughout my life [...] I never sort of bought properties of my own"), Alder seems to have suggested that there is a causal relation (*So*) between the choice and the hardship that they are currently in ("It'd be quite difficult for me to leave [the community]"). As if, in retrospect, it was a 'wrong' decision for them to choose exceptional experiences over conforming to tradition, and in consequence, they are 'punished' by the capitalist system to be stuck in the community.

Stemming from Alder's story, the issue of poverty naturally emerged alongside the conversations about being financially stuck. In the beginning, I hesitated whether to bring up this topic in the interviews, for it is relatively sensitive and felt, as I noted in the field notes,

"quite cruel" (25 September 2022) to ask about one's financial situation when knowing their state of poverty. "As if I was forcing [the respondents] to face [their] vulnerabilities and to show them to me" (Field Notes, 25 September 2022). However, to my surprise, most of my respondents were very frank about this, as if the one-on-one interviews offer a safe and confidential environment enabling them to openly talk about private and sensitive topics, such as their financial situations, and as if the rapports I established through the ethnography encourage genuine exchange of views and openness from the respondents (Heyl, 2001). In their talks, some reflect on their personal histories and admit that they were once "completely broke" (Elm) or presently "underneath the poverty level" (Alder), whereas others highlight the universality that there is "a lot of poverty" (Pine) within the community which is underpinned by "a great poverty mentality" that people "feel impoverished and scared about spending money" (Birch). I greatly appreciate such honesty from the respondents, but meanwhile, I also noticed the causality that the state of poverty, in many cases, appears to overlap with the roles of community employees. Seemingly, some residents were impoverished under the employment with the community (e.g., "And then I took the job [in the community], which is a lot less money than I used to earn [...] – I never had any money issues before [...]", Ash), which therefore triggers the enquiry of whether the community plays a role in resulting these people's financial hardship. The excerpt from Elm illuminates this.

> *But I think generally speaking, I think that if there were more full-time roles here and people could actually benefit financially from being at [the community]. I'm looking at it as sort of like, you know, their ability to save money for new cars, for to go on a nice holiday or to buy any of those kind of like luxury items. I think that you would see a different commitment to the course. I think it's only due to the fact that everybody's on part-time. Part-time, minimum wage, that then there's a huge segment of their lives that removes them from society automatically. They're really put into the lower edge of society, and then find it hard to then come back into society because they haven't got the modes to be able to access half of what the rest of society are doing. So, within itself, it cuts people off from society. I don't know if those people were wanting to be cut off, but it still makes it hard to then into back in again or harder to into back in.* (Elm)

At first, Elm imagines a hypothetical reality (*if*) in which people "actually benefit financially from being at the community" and thus have the financial capacity to afford consumerist activities like those in the mainstream ("their ability to save money for new cars, for to go on a nice holiday or to buy any of those kinds of like luxury items"). However, such a 'dream' is followed by a sharp turn to reality (*the fact*). Working "part-time" with a "minimum wage" in the community, as Elm indicates, prohibit those employees from making both social and

financial contacts with the mainstream world ("there's a huge segment of their lives that removes them from society automatically"). As a result, these people are marginalised (*cut off*) and downgraded to "the lower edge of society". Going back to the mainstream for them thus becomes difficult. In this excerpt, the community is delineated as a capitalistic employer that provides part-time jobs and minimum wages to its workers and consequently causes these people to be cut off from society.

The community, as a unit of capitalism, has long been criticised for paying the employees low wages (e.g., see the extract from Elm). The employed resident's story presented in the beginning of 6.4.1. was the first revealing to me of the "exploitation of people and injustice in [the community]'s structure" (Field Notes, 27 June 2021). Coincidentally, it was suggested multiple times in the interviews (see the extracts below) that the community once was uncovered only paying its workers under the UK national minimum wage. To this, some residents – based on the standards of capitalist societies (*it's illegal*; *the national minimum wage*) – consider the community exploitative and that what it does to its employees fits in "the sort of capitalist scenario".

> *And I thought, hang on a minute, you know, we were being paid £24 a week, and it's illegal with… we're supposed having the national minimum wage. [...] Um, unfortunately, [the community] doesn't have the principle of, you know, paying the workers, even the national standard rate. So, there's a bit of exploitation going on here. I think that can be written into the sort of capitalist scenario*. (Alder)

> *[...] the approach is like full of contradictions. There's a whole... will only pay the people that live here quite minimally, and you don't need any more money because you know your food and shelter and things are covered*. (Apple)

> *We weren't paid at the beginning – we only got some pocket money. It was like £24 a week, and that was just so people could buy new clothes or something, because the idea was [the community] provides everything that was essential, and you just, yeah, your clothes and shoes wear out, so you need some money in travel. It's like people would have time off, but they couldn't afford, couldn't go anywhere, so... And that's changed massively now.* (Rowan)

There is a rationale behind the £24 weekly wage – the community's narrative of frugality. It is said that individual needs for spending money should be minimalised as "everything that was essential", such as "food and shelter", are covered by the community. The weekly £24 is therefore not a wage but "pocket money" – as if the community is a parent who controls to

what extent the people are allowed to participate in the consumer society – given to satisfy other needs of the residents (e.g., "your clothes and shoes wear out"; "you need some money in travel"). By doing so, in principle, the community can achieve collective frugality as a group but, in practice, it overlooks individuals' other social identities outside of their working hours, thus limiting their capacity to participate in social activities such as buying and travelling ("couldn't afford, couldn't go anywhere"). Although such a situation has "changed massively now", financial hardship still exists in some people as the wages remain minimum. As a result, such a frugal approach to living as a community impoverishes, rather than enriches, its residents and may make them involuntarily live in frugality. Nevertheless, it is also worth highlighting that the impression of the community being a unit of capitalism is constructed based on some participants' perception, which is shaped by their personal experience in and relationships with the community. Thus, readers of this thesis should be aware that what has been uttered about the community here may differ from what is factually implemented and executed by the community in real life.

6.4.1.2. Being Mentally Stuck and the Community as a Unit of Life

Meanwhile, the community as a unit of life may slowly – though unintentionally – drain out people's ambitions and capacities to leave the place and eventually result in people getting mentally stuck. Instead of seeing it resulting from financial reasons, many respondents draw on repertoires of mentality (e.g., "mental concept", "the psychological ability", and "mind") to convince that being stuck is the result of a weakened mind. Life in the community is so simple and comfortable. There, people are socially isolated from the outside. They can "shut down from the rest of the world" (Poplar) and "don't need to do anything else" (Cherry), but over time, such an easy environment could "cut people off society" (Elm), make them "lose the psychological ability to go do something else" (Birch), and eventually, stuck in the community. As a response, several participants who either already left or recently (re-)joined the community express their fear of getting stuck in the community through uses of forceful languages, such as calling the potential of getting stuck a "danger" (Birch) or declaring to "fire against [it] really hard" (Cherry). On top of these, a few respondents also reflect on how the cultural and structural environments of the community condition people to the state of being mentally stuck.

Some draw on management repertoires (e.g., "We've stopped really assessing people", Rowan) to interpret the issue of being mentally stuck as a flaw of the community's management. People have argued that the community fails to provide managerial supervision and support to its residents, like Olive suggests below.

> *No, I mean, again, it's a management thing, and basically, if somebody… you know, that there hasn't been a regular review system. "How are you doing? Do you need more training? What's your next step? What do you think you're going to be doing in a year or two?" That would be helpful for people. And I think that's what they want to do now.* (Olive)

Olive believes that a structural and "regular review system" will effectively help prevent people from "curling up in their holes" (Olive) and getting mentally stuck in the end. Without supervision from the community, it becomes the individual residents' sole responsibility to look after their well-being and make progress in life. As a result, it is remarked to be "quite sad" to witness people who have spent long years in the community not "appear rested or happier or well, necessarily" (Apple). People feel unsatisfied living in the community but meanwhile lack incentives to leave. One resident mentions that even though they have intended to leave the place for years, they still find it hard to make the actual move because they "never really felt pushed" (Rowan) by the community.

In sum, being mentally and financially stuck collectively leads to the involuntary frugality of the residents, especially those who are employed by the community. Ascribes to low wages and lack of mental support in the community, some residents are either short of finance or mentally unprepared to leave the place. Therefore, they are stuck in the community and disengaged from normal consumer activities. To take this further, I would like to draw on the concept of 'the new poor' (Bauman, 1998) to understand how such disengagement happens. As Bauman states, the poor in a consumer society refers to those who have no access to a 'normal life' of consumers, which is "preoccupied with making [...] choices among the panoply of publicly displayed opportunities for pleasurable sensations and lively experiences" (Bauman, 1998: 38). In this community, many residents quit, or retire from, their well-paid jobs in the mainstream and come to work for the community. According to the participants, many of them have the capacity to earn high salaries in the mainstream (e.g., "If we all wanted to just make money and do the jobs really well, we do go out and get forty grand doing other jobs, you know what I mean?", Juniper), but instead, they chose to take on roles in the community with lower wages. What they did, essentially, is withdraw their productivity from the capitalist society,

which appears to be unnatural to, and incompatible with, the work ethic of modern societies, which advocates a full extent of engagement of the population in the production process (Bauman, 1998). As a result, the withdrawal could backfire and deprive the people of the security the mainstream provides because even though these people no longer – or at a reduced level – participate in the production of the mainstream society, they are still bounded by the role of consumer and obliged to be involved in consumption activities to a certain level (e.g., "I've even got an Amazon account because, you know, where else am I going to get the boots that I wear around the estate?", Pine). However, when they wish to re-join the mainstream consumer society, they often find out that their reduced productivity fails to keep up with their obligation as consumers – in other words – they become financially inadequate to regain access to the mainstream capitalist and consumerist society (e.g., as presented previously, "even if I want to go somewhere else, it'll be a big money for paying the deposit of renting a place, like £4000", Field Notes, 27 June 2021). To this end, these people are relegated to a vulnerable position of, as Bauman (1998) coins, the 'flawed consumers' and ultimately stuck in the community.

6.4.2. Temptation, Guilt, and Morality

The community residents' attitude towards consumerist consumption is an ambivalent composition of temptation, guilt, and morality. When asked about their involvement with the consumerist society in the interviews, several respondents of various demographics express their enthusiasm – and even "addiction" (Oak; Aspen) – for buying and spending. They agree that it is "easy" (Cypress; Alder) to indulge in consumerism as it grants them excitement ("I was very excited", Apple), convenience ("If you buy from Amazon, you'll get it almost immediately", Magnolia), and an outlet to release "consumerist ideals" (Elm). I could sense genuine fondness from the respondents when they talked about their purchases and possessions in the interviews (e.g., "I take a lot of joy from the possessions that I have", Apple), especially as many of them employ words such as "love", "joy", "pleasure", and "uplifting" to describe their relationships with their possessions. However, in some cases, there seems to be more nuances to such fondness – it is not generated from the purchase *per se* but from the caring relationship created between the people and the possessions through using and maintaining. This resonates with Miller (1998), who suggests that shopping (or purchasing) is primarily a practice through which love and care are reflected, manifested, and reproduced. Such

manifestation of love can be found in the interview with Beech in which they talk about their bike.

> *My bike is very expensive. But I buy it once, and I was saving money for that bike. And then as soon as I spend [the money], I look after [the bike], and when I'm riding my bike, it is free. So, it's an investment, as for me, it's an experience. It's an experience and investment because that bike is going to make me live good experiences.* (Beech)

Beech's utterances suggest a reciprocal relationship between them and the bike ("I look after it, and when I'm riding my bike, it is free"). They metaphorise the bike as *an investment*. Although it is *expensive* and needs Beech to *save money*, such an investment offers them something that they deem worthy – *good experiences*. Like Beech, many other respondents also interpret their purchases and possessions as vehicle for achieving more-than-consumerist experiences. Namely, purchasing is merely the instrument for accessing those good experiences.

Even so, as members of a community in which the consensus of anti-capitalism and the principle of frugality reside, these people nevertheless often end up feeling guilty for their indulgence in consumerist activities. The emotion of guilt could be triggered for various reasons. For example, Hazel feels guilty ("regret") for spending money in the 'wrong' place (i.e., buying things in supermarkets rather than from local farms and shops), whereas Elm and Alder feel guilty about not treating the things they purchased respectfully (i.e., they feel guilty when "buying something cheap", feel "depressed" when they "don't use something" they bought, and "struggle with chucking things away"). Additionally, Magnolia, in the extract below, exhibits a different type of guilt. They feel guilty when they detect themselves enjoying products of consumer society (i.e., Diet Coke). In the opening sentence, they employ a few religion-connotated terms – *confession* and *weakness* – to imply that their enjoyment of drinking Diet Coke is a sin of yielding to consumerist indulgence. They then spend the subsequent sentences explaining the reasoning behind their fondness ("water somehow just doesn't do it like Diet Coke does"; "A little bit of acid, a little bit of fizz") and highlight that it is the *only* beverage they drink. By doing so, they complete their confession and thereafter feel eased about the guilt ("I think that's it").

> *I have to confess, to that weakness, I also buy Diet Coke, especially in the summer, and that also is a weakness. [laugh] It's the only beverage I do drink. Yes, I like Diet Coke because as I said, especially in the summer, if I've been working out on the land or the sheep and things, and then I'm really thirsty, and water somehow just doesn't do it like Diet Coke does, does it? The fizz. A little bit of acid, a little bit of fizz. So yeah, that's probably my main*

> *confession. [laugh] Do I have any other purchasing choices that I'm maybe not proud of... I think that's it.* (Magnolia)

However, not everyone deals with their guilty feeling the way Magnolia does. Observed from the interviews, what often comes alongside the emotion of guilt is episodes of the participants self-reflecting on their roles as consumers. These people's self-reflecting appears to follow a trajectory of realising, criticising, and evaluating. Some reflect on their rights of choice as consumers, realising that their choices are responsible for accelerating the deterioration of the ecosystem ("I realised the interconnectivity of all of the system breakdown on the planet, and I'm a part in it, you know, like, I use plastic", Cedar). Following this realisation, they then criticise their consumer identity ("I've always been a very consumerist person", Beech) and behaviours ("That's some pretty serious consumption there", Ginkgo) and regret the purchases they made ("I shouldn't buy that", Cherry). Beyond these, some residents advance their self-reflecting practices to the next level – assessing the value of themselves and their labour. Acacia's utterances below exemplify a journey of how the sense of guilt triggers self-reflecting and eventually self-evaluating.

> *Oh gosh, I'm terrible. I'm a complete consumer. Like, I just spend money all the time. You know, and then I start to feel guilty, say, "should I have spent that money?" [...] Did I really need to spend like £4 on eight coffee pods when I could spend £4 on a bag of coffee that would have done 50 cups of coffee? Well, who cares when I'm spending £700 a month to live in a room? And so, when you look at that way, it's like, "Yeah, I'm awful because I just spend money, because I don't care". [...] But then it's like, "Hang on, if you don't care, does it matter if it's worth the money?" I was like, "Well, if I've got a work to get that money, then how much am I valued in my work?" ok? So, so bad [...]* (Acacia)

As suggested in 6.2., the community members concur with the moral presupposition that 'capitalism and consumerism are morally problematic and inferior'. Based on it, Acacia makes a moral judgement at the beginning of their utterances, reflectively degrading ("I'm terrible") and labelling themselves as *a complete consumer*. The reflection of the self triggers their guilt for spending ("Should I have spent that money?"). From there, the journey of reflecting continues as they then draw on their extravagance of living *(£4 on eight coffee pods*; *£700 a month to live in a room*), signalling their contempt for spending money (*who cares*; *don't care*) even though they regard it morally wrong ("I'm awful"). However, they soon counter their own words with a conjunction *But* and a pause *Hang on* and start self-evaluating by comparing the worth of things they spend on and the worth of their labour ("How much am I valued in my work?"). To Acacia, there is a price on everything – the coffee pods, the room, as well as their

labour. They measure the value of a consumer product or activity by calculating how long it takes for them to earn the same amount of money at work. Therefore, at the end of the utterances, they realise that their insensitivity to spending money also means that they are disregarding and disrespecting the value of themselves – a seemingly harmful thought to them (*so bad*).

To this end, the utterances of these respondents discursively exhibit their ambivalent emotions of simultaneously feeling pleasure and guilt for their consumerist desires. The reason behind such ambivalence is the incompatibility between the community's principles of frugality and sustainability and the hedonistic culture of consumerism (as suggested by Featherstone, 2018). For individual respondents, being a part of the community and a part of the consumer society at the same time means that they face dilemmas between their morality and their desires for material and consumerist enjoyment. Being pulled by these two countering forces, they feel guilty for desiring, though meanwhile finding it hard to resist the temptation.

6.4.3. Inevitable Entanglement

The community residents have discursively expressed their contempt for capitalist consumerism, which – as indicated in 6.2. and 6.3. – is one of the reasons that drive people to the community to experiment with alternative ways of living. Even so, many admit that engagements with the consumer society are inevitable, and their lives in the community – as Pine suggests – "can only be alternative to a certain level". When being asked about the reasons behind, these people either suggest that they have no choice but "need to" (Beech; Oak) spend in mainstream consumer society to fulfil certain purposes or regard purchasing in the mainstream as a more affordable, albeit unethical, way of living.

In scenarios of the first theme, participants with different backgrounds and demographics almost all agree that a large portion of their lives is still dependent on provisions from mainstream society. Most materials needed for work, living, and even sustainable practices, can only be attained through purchasing (e.g., "You still have to get money to purchase the tools to grow your own food", Acacia). Therefore, despite their reluctance, these people describe their engagement with consumerism as a "necessity" (Beech) because they still have "needs for money" (Oak) and "have to pay" (Pine) to get certain things. As such, the first reason that prohibits the fulfilment of alternative living outside the consumer society is the dilemma

between intention and practicality. The participants' intentions of living alternatively and ethically, in practice, are constrained by the practitioner's knowledge and skills. Being immersed in the consumer culture in which the mentality of 'buying new' overshadows that of 'amending old' (e.g., Cohen, 2004), we – the participants and I – are substantially disabled in terms of our skills of making and maintaining. This thought was initially illuminated by the interview with Ginkgo, in which they told a story about a pair of boots and how they were damaged when Ginkgo intended to look after them.

> *I have this pair of boots. When I bought them, I bought these really expensive ones that are meant to be guaranteed for life and I had them resoled. I've actually really buggered up the leather on them because I was trying to feed them really carefully, and I put too much stuff on them, and then it made the leather crack. So, I've actually broken them or damaged them by trying to look after them. [...] And it was weird because when I was polishing them – like trying to look after them – I was like, 'I don't have anybody who can tell me how to look after these items, you know?'* (Ginkgo)

The stanza above firstly portrays Ginkgo's persona as an ethical consumer who intentionally seeks long lifespan products (*guaranteed for life*) and prefers to obtain them through sustainable means (*resold*) even though that may be more expensive. To achieve the sustainable use of the boots, Ginkgo performed caretaking practices to them (*feed them carefully*; *polishing*; *look after*), which resembles what Banister and colleagues (2020) suggest that the luxury status of an object could be maintained through ritualistic practices of caretaking by consumers. Hence, it might be worth considering here that this pair of boots is given a sense of preciousness through Ginkgo's caretaking practices, even though they were doing so for sustainable and ethical purposes and not because of expensiveness. However – coming back to the stanza – such an act did not lead to a positive outcome. Ascribing to a lack of knowledge in caring for leather, Ginkgo ended up damaging the boots. When recalling this experience, they attribute it to the loss of knowledge and skills across individuals and generations ("I don't have anybody who can tell me how to look after these items"). In other words, the education and training they received from the mainstream consumer society did not teach them how to caretake possessions. Later in the interview, they added that after damaging the boots, their first response was to seek solutions from the market with more purchases ("then I go online, and I buy leather filler"). They use the phrase "relatively automatic" to reflectively suggest that it is instinctive for them to think of purchasing and consumption as the solution to problems.

Beyond these, living on provisions outside of the mainstream, described by the participants, is the "more expensive" (Hazel) option that some of them are unable to afford. Due to lack of time or lack of money, the participants have encountered occasions when they had to purchase in mainstream supermarkets rather than buying organic produce in local farm shops or had to use overdraft – something they "don't want" (Juniper) – to afford costly expenses such as rent. All these stories shed light on the reality that these people's abilities and intentions of practising ethical consumption, as Coffin and Egan-Wyer (2022) suggest, are restrained within the psychological, sociological, economic, political, ideological, technological, and material frameworks of capitalist consumerism. Their intentions of living alternatively, ethically, and sustainably are incompatible with and thus limited by the consumerist market.

In response, some interview respondents tend to reconcile with the capitalist consumerist system. When reflecting on their identity in relation to the system, some metaphorise themselves as "a cog in the machine" (Elm) or "a healthy child" of it (Cherry; Cypress), for they are still involved in the value creation of the system and benefit from it. Especially for those who are more senior or socially vulnerable, the system acts as a safety net which guarantees them the basics of living ("I get a pension now, not a big one, and I get my rent paid by the government", Willow); and for those who attempt to practise alternative living at the community, it provides a last resort for them to return to if ever the experiment fails.

> ***Aspen:*** *[...]It's like we're so on this speedy fast train that is so scary to jump off that. It's like there's a man behind us with a dagger. It's like, we still don't want to jump off because jumping off looks like death as well.*
>
> ***Researcher:*** *I feel like you jumped off, because I was going to ask... were you scared when you left what you had in your home country?*
>
> ***Aspen:*** *See, I didn't totally jump. [...] Like, if I really needed help from my parents, I either go back to my parents, or ask them for money, you know. And I've been on benefits while I've been here for a part of my time [...]. I've quite easily been integrated into the system, and when I need extra income, [the government] is giving to me, and that's been amazing actually. [...] And so here I have free health care, people giving me extra money, you know, if I need it, if I don't have enough from my job.*

The conversation in the excerpt above happened in the interview when we were discussing capitalism. Aspen metaphorises it as a "speedy fast train" that jumps off it seems fatal. I respond to this opinion by drawing on their experience ("I feel like you jumped off"). To me, what Aspen did – leaving their job and family to seek an alternative living in a foreign country – is courageous and seemingly a jump. However, they correct me – "I didn't totally jump". In fact,

they are still psychologically and financially secured by their family and the mainstream capitalist system (*free health care*; *extra money*) while pursuing alternative ways of life. As such, experimenting with alternative living is viable for Aspen, as they can afford the price of failure. More importantly, this conversation with Aspen discloses their ambivalent attitude towards and relationship with the mainstream capitalist system. The language they employ to describe the system (e.g., *scary*; *dagger*; *death*) exhibits their fear of its influence and the possible consequences of escaping from it. Such fear discouraged Aspen from daring to 'totally jump off' and instead prompted them to reconcile with the capitalist system. Their attempt at reconciling could be seen in the last paragraph of the extract, in which they gratefully compliment the system (*easily*; *amazing*) for all the benefits they have received ("I've been on benefits [...]").

Further, some community residents also construct the discourse of 'balance' to achieve a moral justification for their submission to the inescapable capitalist consumerism. Utterances of this discourse revolve around the respondents discursively going back and forth to harmonise their anti-capitalist identity with their engagements with money, consumption, and capitalism. The extract below by Beech exemplifies this.

> *But that's why I'm always honest with this. I'm not saying that I don't like to be a capitalist a little bit. No. I'm saying that I found my balance, and each person has their own balance of life. And my balance now is that I'm still a capitalist but much lesser than the rest of the world, probably… But I'm still a capitalist, BUT I have that balance. So, it's kind of more than 50-50's, maybe 80% of my life, or 60, 70% of my life is not capitalist, but 30% of my life is like a cheat day. You know what I mean, it's like a cheat percentage of being a little bit capitalist.* (Beech)

At the beginning of the extract, Beech employs the virtue of honesty ("I'm always honest with this") and the structure of a double negative when admitting their fondness for capitalism. Seemingly, these techniques provide them with a sense of self-righteousness that being honest helps alleviate the stigma of being a capitalist. However, according to themselves, they are not a complete but partial capitalist. At the end of the second sentence, they suggest that they enjoy being a capitalist to a limited extent (*a little bit*), and in the sentence that follows, they describe themselves as someone who has achieved a "balance" of their capitalist and non-capitalist selves. Then, they try to articulate the stated balance through a series of techniques, including comparison (i.e., "much lesser than the rest of the world"), self-identification (i.e., "But I'm still a capitalist, BUT I have that balance"), and numbers (e.g., "60, 70% of my life is not

capitalist"), implying that they are aware of the extent of their participation in capitalism. In the end, they also deploy the rhetorical device of metaphor to describe their limited participation (*30% of my life*) as "a cheat day" – a dietary practice in that a person briefly departs from established diets to consume foods that are normally prohibited (Ganson et al., 2022). Through constructing the discourse of 'balance', Beech reconciles with and morally justifies their inevitable involvement with capitalist consumerism.

6.5. Why Can't They Escape?

> *If you can't be happy in utopian paradise as [the community], how would you be happy anywhere else in the world?* (Apple)

Through revisiting a series of phenomena observed from the ethnography and the interviews, this chapter progressively reveals the community members' ambivalence towards capitalist consumerism and their identities as consumers. It was unforeseen that even those who reside in an alternative, anti-capitalist community have failed to escape the mainstream capitalist and consumerist society. Many of the residents describe the place as a sanctuary (Cypress), a Shangri-La (Beech), and what Apple terms a "utopian paradise". Therefore, it was disappointing, and perhaps even damaging, when some realise that the happiness they expected to find outside the mainstream does not exist in this community. Naturally, this triggers my interest to take a closer look at the interplay among the community, its residents, and the external mainstream society, addressing why individual community members cannot escape capitalist consumerism and obtain greater happiness.

In the following sections, I draw on the concept of liminality (Van Gennep, 1909, 1960) to elucidate the ambiguous, uncertain, and precarious state the residents experience when they live in the community. Existing literature understands the notion of liminality as an unstable state of 'being out of space and out of time' (Cappellini and Yen, 2016: 1262), where individuals 'are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, conventions and ceremonial' (Turner, 1967: 94). My observations presented in the previous sections (e.g., see 6.4.) reflect the liminality of the individual residents in the community. These people view themselves as practitioners of alternative, ethical, and anti-consumerist living. However, simultaneously, they are inevitably attached to, and interact with, entities and activities of the mainstream capitalist and consumerist society. Such in-betweenness exists not

only among the individual residents but also the community at a group level. As such, the following sections firstly examine the in-betweenness, or the "edginess" (Birch), of the community, suggesting that the community is a liminal space where alternative ideologies and capitalist mindsets coexist. Van Gennep (1909, 1960) outlines three stages of liminality: separation (pre-liminal), transition (liminal), and re-integration (post-liminal). Section 6.5.2. hence focuses on the separation and transition states of the community residents, arguing that the challenges these individuals face (see 6.4.) are resulted from transitioning from the mainstream social structure to the alternative – but undeveloped – structure of the community. Lastly, section 6.5.3. takes this investigation further, in which I contend that the liminal experience of the residents is also a by-product of the interplay between discourses of individualism and collectivism. Namely, the residents negotiate and endeavour to find an equilibrium in the constant battle between their individualistic desires and the collectivist ethos of the community.

6.5.1. The In-Betweenness of the Community – A Liminal Space

Previous sections in 6.4. showcase the difficulty for individual residents to escape from the mainstream capitalist system, whereas this section discloses that such difficulty also exists for the community at the collective level. Even though some residents believe that the community creates an environment where people can temporarily reduce or withdraw their interaction with the outside society (see 6.3.5.), many counter that, in practice, the community acts as an extension of the mainstream and is closely dependent on, constrained by, and inheriting from the capitalist system. One resident describes the community as "a liminal space" that,

> *[...] it is not within the mainstream but is actually heavily influenced and attached to the mainstream, and neither it is heavily embedded in any other obvious subset of society. [...] it has threads connecting to other parts of society.* (Birch)

However, when these connections with the capitalist system encounter the community's ethos of being intentional, ethical, sustainable, and anti-capitalist, tension emerges. The following sections thus unpack the liminal, nuanced, and ambivalent relationships between the community and the mainstream, illustrating how the community as a whole responds and reacts to the pervasive influence of capitalist consumerism.

6.5.1.1. <u>Dependent-on and Constrained-by</u>

Similar to the situation presented in 6.4.1., where individual residents are stuck in the community due to financial difficulties, the community is permeated with the "fear of closure through lack of money" (Rowan). This fear is mostly expressed by residents who either work for the community or have engaged with it for years, typically when they are asked about their opinions on the venue business run by the community. They often draw on a 'maintenance' narrative, asserting that the business is essential, as the community "has to be financially viable" (Cypress) because the houses and lands it owns are a historical heritage and require "massive amount of money to maintain" (Poplar). Some also turn to historical episodes of financial crises the community has been through to elucidate the necessity for the community to run a business. From the conversations with several participants, I learnt that a few years ago, the community had to sell a couple of cottages to afford a "huge fire precaution enforcement" (Olive) to meet the country's new regulations. Regarding this incident, some residents believe that it showcases the constraint and the amount of "burdens that are placed upon [the community], from society, from capitalism" (Aspen). This idea is echoed by another resident's utterances, which detail the community's dependence on, and the constraint placed by, the outside capitalist system.

> *Well, despite what it wants to believe, I think [the community] has a very strong relationship with the capitalist system. There's an interesting thing where the people who want a quite easy life pretend that there's less of a relationship in there than there is because they don't have to be involved in the buying of things. Things just appear and you think, "oh well, [the community] is amazing. It has, let's say, toilet paper", but it's like someone has to buy us toilet paper from somebody. So, it's difficult, I always want to find ways to um... Well, being totally independent is impossible. We're not anarchists; we're not radicals; we can't operate outside the system. And the reason we have trustees is because we have to have them by law and stuff. So, there's all the legal stuff, but I suppose in terms of... and yeah, that's linked to the financial stuff. Like our governing body is the Financial Services – Financial Conduct Authority. So, it's even in the name, even though it's about being charity and stuff.* (Rowan)

This excerpt discloses the relationship between the community and the outside system. It first adopts a perspective from the individual residents of the community. Through the example of toilet paper, Rowan suggests that the environment constructed by the community enables its residents to *pretend* to live in "a bubble that doesn't interact with the outside world" (Cypress). To some extent, the community interacts with the capitalist system on behalf of its people (e.g., by buying toilet paper), which creates an impression to the residents that the place is independent of the outside world. However, as Rowan utters, *being totally independent is impossible*. The operation of the community complies with law and legal requirements. At the

end of the excerpt, Rowan makes fun of the name of the community's governing body (*Financial Conduct Authority*), as it sounded finance-orientated for a charitable community. This evidences that the community itself is incorporated as a part of the mainstream legal system, and the community acts under the discipline and constraints set by this system (e.g., "the reason we have trustees is because we have to have them by law and stuff"). Additionally, the community's dependence on the mainstream is supported by the fact that the place still obtains provisions such as electricity, water, and toilet paper through purchasing from external suppliers as well as receives weekly supplies from a food bank. Thus, the community's interaction with the capitalist system is "inevitable" (Poplar), albeit reluctant, resonating with what Rowan utters in another part of their interview,

> *We still need to eat, we still need to clean, so it's like, well, if you can't make those, then we have to buy them.* (Rowan)

6.5.1.2. Extending and Inheriting

Furthermore, some other community members exhibit more radical and critical attitudes toward the community and its relationship with the capitalist system. Some people think that the community is an inseparable part of the system, while some describe the community as a "microcosm" (Cedar; Birch) which extends and inherits from the outside world.

As an extension of the capitalist society, the community is equipped with facilities such as electricity, internet, and boiler, which creates a modern, up-to-standard living environment that is not much different to the living condition of the mainstream society (e.g., "They are not away – they still need petrol; they still need light; they need WIFI.", Cherry). Meanwhile, the venue business that the community runs has also been remarked as "an extension of well-being tourism" (Alder). Some residents believe that the business accommodates the desire of affluent – but often unhappy (Ginkgo) – guests to "get out of [their] life" and "go to this other place" (Ginkgo). Thus, the business *per se* is selling escapist, exceptional, and touristy experiences of alternative living to consumers, signifying that the community is an integrated part of the capitalist and consumerist system. Among all the relevant stories told, Amazon deliveries arriving at the doorstep of the community is a reoccurring and representative topic supporting the argument that the community is fundamentally an extension of the capitalist system.

> *Look at all the Amazon Prime boxes that arrived. You know, you could get just the same here as you can anywhere else.* (Olive)

> *I think... I think ideologically [the community is post-consumerist], but maybe not in practise. The reason, the thing that always comes to mind for me is the fact that everybody... not everybody, but a lot of people order things on Amazon Prime.* (Ginkgo)

In the excerpts above, Olive views the community as *the same* as *anywhere else* because the residents there can enjoy the same quality of services and convenience as what is provided by mainstream society. Ginkgo compares the community's ideology and reality. They believe that if the community was running in congruence with its ideology (*ideologically*), it should be a place which embraces an antimarket spirit and is isolated from the consumer society. However, Ginkgo remarks that, *in practice*, consumerist consumption and purchases remain common in the community, as *a lot of people* still order from Amazon. It appears that Amazon – the company itself and the appearance of its products – is symbolic of capitalist consumerism to Ginkgo and many others in the community. Seeing Amazon deliveries arriving at the community is an epiphany, which exposes (e.g., "the thing that always comes to mind for me") the inconsistency between the community's ideology and reality as well as highlights the community's extensive connection with the consumerist society.

Despite extending, the community also inherits from the capitalist system. One representative example is an ethical debate among the residents regarding the community's usage of food banks. The food bank that the community subscribes to is FareShare, and the debate about it centres on whether the community's subscription to it is ethical for the greater environment and society. In the field notes, I describe FareShare as,

> *FareShare sells leftover food from supermarkets. [Ordering from FareShare] is how we get most of our food. Normally, [the kitchen coordinator] submits a list of things they'd like to get, and next time FareShare will try to deliver what they order. It is never guaranteed we will get what we need, and sometimes we get things we didn't order, for example, all the meat we have here.* (Field Notes, 11th August 2021)

Some residents, especially the ones from younger generations, think that using FareShare causes not less but more ethical concerns. They reckon that using foodbank means using – or inheriting – the "waste from that system" (Ginkgo). Instead of reducing food waste, some criticise that the community's alliance with FareShare in fact "justifies" (Rowan) and "encourages big companies to just carry on overproducing" (Hazel), which consequently leads to more food being produced and wasted. Moreover, as stated in the field notes, FareShare often delivers unwanted items (e.g., *meat*) to the community. It appears that the community does not have freedom to choose what they receive from the food bank. This limited extent of

choice implicitly reflects an unequal power relation between the community (as the beneficiary) and the food bank (as the donator), reminding me of the idiom of 'beggars can't be choosers'. Specifically, the act of the community subscribing to foodbank initially comes from an ethical and sustainable intention to reduce food waste. However, this results in the community being incorporated as a part of the food industry, which is embedded in capitalist consumerism and thus subverts the power relation between these two parties. Consequently, the community becomes the 'beggar', being designated as a destination of waste, which receives, inherits, and digests the consequences of the overproduction of the consumerist societies rather than effectively accomplishing its intention of reducing food waste.

6.5.2. The Loss of Stability for Individuals – A Risky Attempt

Subsequently, the liminal state of the community leads to individual residents feeling insecure and experiencing a loss of social stability when they are there. On the one hand, withdrawing from mainstream society signifies the loss of a stable social structure. Traditionally, mainstream societies provide stable social structures, offering guidelines and references of life for people to follow and to evaluate whether what they are doing in life is socially acceptable or advocated (Gane, 2001). In contrast, choosing to live in an alternative social setting means losing those life references and abandoning the stable social and life structures secured by mainstream society. As a result of such a loss of structure, the participants sometimes draw on standards of the outside mainstream society to evaluate their performance in life while in the community. For example, a few senior residents describe themselves as 'failed baby boomers' who "at the end of [their lives]" possess neither a "large pot of money" (Pine) nor a "beautiful house in Islington which is now worth several million" (Magnolia), and thus on the face of it, are failed to meet the standards of outside societies. This phenomenon is even more salient among younger residents. Some of them show signs of anxiety when talking about their prospects for the future, for example:

> *I definitely need a good 5-10 years away from the place to really kind of grow properly. Some of me feels like I could be giving my best years of my life to the place, which really kind of like irritates me because I don't see growing into this sort of amazing thing for my CV, or for me to be part of this kind of – I don't know – the Manchester United of communities or sort of like the Premier League of people.* (Elm)

> *I used to think that I wasn't doing enough with my life while I was at [the community] because [the work] was part time, and it all depends very much on how you present yourself or you write it on a CV. It can look amazing, or*

> *it can look terrible like this guy is just a loser. "He's just dropped out of society", you know. "He's just messing around." So, I always wanted – well, not always – but when I was younger, I wanted to do other stuff at the same time.* (Rowan)

Elm and Rowan both emphasise how the prosperity of the community affects their personal growth, though their focuses are nuanced. Elm expresses disappointment to the community and thus their desire to leave, as they think that the development of the place cannot fulfil their goals for self-accomplishment ("I don't see growing into this sort of amazing thing for my CV"). Their use of football terminology, including *the Manchester United of communities* and *the Premier League of people*, also indicates their desire to achieve merit with the community and ultimately contribute to his CV. In contrast, Rowan shows anxiety regarding how their experience in the community will shape their social identity and image of the outside world. Like Elm, they are also concerned with the presentation of their CV and feeling "wasn't doing enough with [their] life". These thoughts reflect their fear of failing to meet mainstream standards and being considered *a loser*. Taking these two examples together, I wish to shed light on the consequences that happen to individuals who withdraw from the stable social structure of capitalist consumerism. Emotions of disappointment and anxiety are captured from these people, as they feel insecure and uncertain about whether what they do within the community is meaningful in accordance with the norms and tradition of mainstream societies, even when they are situated in a place where alternative meanings and values of life were supposed to be constructed and guiding people.

More importantly, the residents' feeling of insecurity is also a result of the lack of stable social and value structures within the community. Mainstream societies offer guidance to, and templates of, 'good' lives (e.g., "So, in life, you finish school, go to college, find a partner, and start your master, get married, get your PhD, good kid, successful", Cherry). People refer to this guidance to evaluate whether what they are doing in life is socially considered meaningful and 'correct'. However, once they move to the community, they discover that the place does not provide alternative structures and standards to evaluate, credit, and reward themselves – or at least none that is communally acknowledged. There is no consensus that a person would be more reputational or respectful if their ways of life were more – for example – ethical and sustainable than the other. On many occasions, individual members' intentions to improve the community are not appreciated and sometimes even criticised and challenged. Some have expressed that their efforts and devotions to improve the community have been

underappreciated (e.g., “I felt that I was very undervalued, under-encouraged”, Alder), questioned, and even resisted (e.g., “there had to be changed, but a lot of people don’t like changes”, Poplar).

The lack of structures in the community is also reflected through the residents’ discursive positioning of the community in relation to other intentional communities. In the interviews, the participants sometimes compare the community with communities that – considered by them – are more ‘successful’ in aspects of being either more ethical or more reputational. The two excerpts below illustrate such comparisons.

> *I bought a new pair of roller skates. I don’t need to roller skate. That's some pretty serious consumption there. [...] You know, there are people like the... there’re people at [the name of a different community]. I feel like if you bought something from Amazon Prime, if you were living there, then people would be like... you know.* (Ginkgo)

> *What are the best minds on permaculture in the country? Who are the best speakers on sustainability? And it’s not just somebody down the road knows this bit, and they’re going to come and talk to us. That’s OK. It keeps things going. But you know, you say, “Actually in the next city, there’s somebody who’s an international..., whatever. And let’s give them a base here where they can develop courses” or, you know, some of the real players… [Community 1] does that, [Community 2] does that. Um, and it’s just missing that opportunity for [us] to develop, it can start from anywhere.* (Alder)

In the first excerpt, Ginkgo compares the community with another intentional community which operates at a more frugal, sustainable, and ethical extent. Once again, they draw on Amazon as an example and imagine how this other community would react if Amazon – the symbol of capitalism – delivered products there. Although the sentence in the utterances is unfinished (“then people would be like...”), it implies Ginkgo's imagination that the other community would show strong resistance and condemnation to consumerist activities if someone there purchased from sources like Amazon. By doing so, Ginkgo expresses their viewpoint that the community where they live is not radical and ethical enough, positioning the community at a lower rank of the spectrum of ethics due to its tolerance of Amazon Prime. This also suggests the emergence of an alternative value structure based on ethics rather than capitalist criteria such as wealth and social classes.

The second excerpt adds another spectrum to this alternative value structure. Alder also employs the technique of comparison to suggest that the community is less impactful and reputational compared to other educational institutes of intentional living. This reflects how

they interpret the notion of ‘success’ in the context of intentional communities. Being successful, to them, means that the community is capable of providing professional and impactful education about intentional living and be known for it (see his use of phrases such as *international* and *the real players*). Both Ginkgo and Alder’s utterances contribute to constructing an alternative value structure of the community. However, these constructs are not yet communally acknowledged and shared by everyone in the community, thus most residents there still suffer from the lack of structures and feel uncertain and insecure. The community’s residents cannot find alternative structures to substitute the social structures of mainstream societies. The loss of stable structures from both ends subsequently intensifies the residents’ feeling of insecurity when they live in the community, which explains why many of them choose to reconcile with the capitalist system (see 6.4.3.), describing their lives in the community momentary (e.g., “I don't see myself living here forever”, Ash) and viewing the mainstream as a safe destination to return to, if ever their experiments with alternative living did not go well.

6.5.3. The Interplay of Individualism and Collectivism – Liminal Individuals

The community residents being in the liminal space of the community but meanwhile not feeling secure or comfortable to commit to either way of living corners them to a position of liminal individuals. The liminality of these people first manifests through their constant battle against the temptation of consumerism. As presented in 6.4.2., the community residents are tempted by material fulfilment, though at the same time, feeling guilty for that. As Coffin and Egan-Wyer (2022) suggest, such a feeling of guilt may be evoked when consumers fail to achieve the ethical standards that they set for themselves. Consumerist means of purchasing and consuming are unable to provide these people guilt-free happiness, as they intend to align their lifestyles with principles of ethics, sustainability, and anti-capitalism. Also, previous findings have suggested that it is unrealistic in practice for these people to avoid, or completely withdraw from, the mainstream (see 6.4.3.). The lingering individualism inside these people and their intention of establishing a collectivist community intertwine and contribute to their state of liminality. People come together aiming to form a community operating with collectivist and egalitarian principle; however, the mindset of individualism, such as desires for private possession and ownership, remains insidious.

Through conversations with people in the community, I apprehend that the experience of communal living is a process of unlearning individualism and adapting to collectivism (e.g., "Maybe I'm still learning how to live in this way", Ginkgo). During this process, individualistic thoughts emerge every now and then (e.g., "If I had a self-contained space [...]", Maple), as people are not accustomed to, or even fear, collectivist ways of thinking and practices, such as sharing space with others and "open[ing] up" (Birch) in front of a group.

6.5.3.1. Desires for Privacy and Ownership

Signs of individualism in the community are captured in various aspects. One of the signs noticed from the interviews revolves around the limited degree of privacy and autonomy within the community. Most accounts relevant to this subject are uttered by participants from a relatively younger generation with jobs outside the community. These people criticise the lack of privacy and autonomy in the community ("We don't have a full range of privacy", Maple) and recurringly express the feeling of being "judged and watched all the time" (Apple). For example,

> ***Hazel:*** *Yeah, there's nothing I want to hide. And I love to share, and you know, we help as much as we can, with everything we can. We always offer our place, and we always try to help if someone needs help. But there is a point where it's like... I don't want to give any explanation of what I do or what don't do; if I go to bed late, if I watch TV loud..., you know.*
>
> ***Researcher:*** *I feel like there's a parent...*
>
> ***Hazel:*** *Yes, yes, since I moved out from my parents' house, and now I came to another one.*

In the first half of their speech, Hazel tries to establish their persona as an endorser of communal living (e.g., *I love to share*; *we always try to help*). They then use a conjunction *But* to stress that their willingness to share has a limit (*there is a point*), which should be built upon the premise that their needs for privacy and autonomy are satisfied. This is not the case for Hazel because they then complain about feeling constrained in terms of what they can and cannot do while living in the community. Their utterances to this point trigger my participation. I suggest that the community seemingly acts like a 'parent' who oversees and controls the behaviours of individuals in the community in response to Hazel's expression of not wanting to "*give any explanation of what I do"*. A similar observation of the community's parenting behaviour was brought up previously at the end of 6.4.1.1. This conversation with Hazel exhibits a limited degree of autonomy and privacy of the residents in the community. A person's life routines

and habits have to be coherent with other community residents'. Otherwise, any unordinary activity could cause disturbance to others. As such, one's autonomy is, to some extent, restricted within the community. Meanwhile, Hazel's experience also indicates a lack of privacy due to poor condition of housing and the shortage of private space (Beech). At one point in the interview, Hazel uttered, "they can actually hear me while I'm talking now".

In addition, some residents also express their desires for ownership of private space and material entities because they feel uncomfortable sharing with others in certain circumstances. A community resident talks about their dissatisfaction with sharing bathrooms, and the thoughts below flows from it,

> *So, you know, after a year I was just like, "maybe it'll be nice not have to share". Yeah, so I was thinking, you know, maybe I'll sort that out, but then another part of me felt really like if I invest in that space, it's just it's so much work, it's just a massive amount of work for what? You know, then you get this place, but it's not your place.* (Ginkgo)

The uncomfortable experience of sharing precipitates Ginkgo's idea to pay for the installation of a private bathroom, but this idea is soon denied by themselves (*but*) because they do not view the community as a part of their possession (*it's not your place*) and thus they do not see the value to "invest in that space". This illuminates an individualistic sequence of thinking. In the first place, Ginkgo's desire for a private bathroom is triggered by their dissatisfaction with the collective practice of sharing space, and their objection to this idea is also coming from an individualistic perspective – they do not want to invest in things that they do not claim ownership of. This excerpt, therefore, is representative of the insidious mindset of individualism among the community residents. Even though being situated in a community with collectivist principles, individualism remains an instinct which guides people's mindset and behaviour on many occasions.

6.5.3.2. Indifference to the Place

Besides, another sign of the permeating individualism could be observed from people's occasional criticism about other community residents' indifference to committing to and maintaining the condition of the community (e.g., "They are far interested in their own personal survival – psychological survival – and not being trusting of others or generous to others in terms of sharing basic things", Birch). A participant recalled in the interview about how

shocked they were when visiting the community for the first time and discovered that the place was a mess. They remark that,

> *I wasn't surprised by the work. I was surprised that the work was there, that was kind of my..., "OK. Why is this like that?" Because you're all supposed to be, at least, the residents and the people that want to live there were supposed to be kind of high academic, high-end professors and stuff, and that's what they kind of claim to be, and yet you've allowed this amazing building to fall in such a poor state.* (Acacia)

Acacia's words indicate how they, as a new joiner at the time, imagined the community. Their use of phrases including *high academic* and *high-end professors* suggests their high expectations of the community. Thus, when they discovered that the reality of the place was the complete opposite, they were *surprised* – and even a little angry – about the indifference of the residents to the place, which – they believe – results in the deterioration of *this amazing building*. More importantly, their utterances reveal the fact that many community residents do not feel responsible for, or committed to, caring for the community property as their own. This recalls me another piece of words uttered by another resident, which says,

> *I was doing some maintenance jobs to the drawing room, to which they said, "[the speaker's name], that's you fixing your living room", and I said that "I never use that as my living room". [...] I'm doing this for the house, for the business.* (Alder)

This excerpt exhibits a situation when the discourse of collectivism encounters the discourse of individualism. The word *they* in this excerpt represents the perspective of collectivism, which constructs a discourse that a resident working for the community they live in is equivalent to working for their own home. However, this claim is refuted by Alder, who presents a clear separation between what belongs to the community and what belongs to them. In their opinion, maintaining a communal space in the community benefits the community as it is *for the business*, rather than for improving individual residents' living conditions (*I never use that as my living room*).

6.5.3.3. Identity Dissonance

What Alder utters here reflects another facet of the individual's liminality. It appears that the meaning of the community not only refers to a group of people who live communally but also an organisation which requires workers to run the business. Hence, it could be argued that the way the community operates intensifies the liminality of its residents. Many people there are simultaneously employees and residents of the community whose work and life activities take

place in the same space. On the one hand, these people engage in capitalist logic to run a business, earn salaries, and provide services to the guests, while on the other hand, they attempt to explore lifestyles that are reciprocal, not money-oriented, and based on sharing and gifting. Their lives alternate between two different social environments and the same as their self-perception. Cedar's utterances below capture this.

> *My first thought when I saw [the community's business] was like, "Oh gosh, that could make things very complicated in terms of where people feel they are", you know. So, am I an employee? And do I have a set number of hours and set duties that I do? And where is my allegiance? Is it to my fellow community members, or are we just staff working for an estate manager to run an event business, in the other way – extreme way – of looking at it? You know. Or are we working as a community to run events so that we can be together as a community? So, you can look at it from two very, very different viewpoints.* (Cedar)

What Cedar describes here resembles the identity dissonance discussed in the Methodology chapter in which I expressed the intertwinement of my dual identities as a researcher and a community resident at the same time and the confusion that follows. Likewise, other residents in the community encounter their version of identity dissonance. Simultaneously being employees and residents makes individuals in the community confused about how they should position themselves and perceive others in the community, eventually contributing to the liminality of these people.

6.6. Chapter Summary

This chapter revolves around the dynamics between the community, its residents, and the capitalist consumerist system, revealing how pervasive the contemporary system is that even people who retreat to this alternative community are still deeply trapped, constrained, and influenced by it. The chapter itself might not seem to directly contribute to answering the research questions of this thesis. However, it sheds light on how individual residents, as liminal beings, navigate between the alternative dreamland and the capitalist reality. This resonates with the interest of Consumer Culture Theory research to explore 'the relationship between consumers' identity projects and the structuring influence of the marketplace' (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: 871). The liminality uncovered in this chapter contributes to unpacking and understanding the conceptualisations of post-consumerism and post-consumerist luxury, which will be the focus of the next two analysis chapters.

CHAPTER 7:

THE COMMUNITY'S CONCEPTUALISATION AND PRACTICES OF POST-CONSUMERISM

7.1. Introduction

This chapter addresses the research question outlined in the Methodology chapter, seeking to understand *how alternative communities and consumers construct the concept of post-consumerism*. The analysis presented in this chapter is based on data gathered from interviews with the community members. It firstly exhibits three characteristics of post-consumerism constructed by the community residents. These people suggest that post-consumerism is equivocal, elusive, and even apocalyptic. In the second part of this chapter, the analysis examines the extent to which post-consumerist practices have been implemented in the community through a sequence of degrowth goals outlined by Latouche (2009) and Chatzidakis and colleagues (2014). These eventually lead to the final discussion in which I propose that post-consumerism is better conceived of as a sensibility that encompasses contradictory but patterned consumption discourses and consumer liminality.

7.2. Characterising Post-Consumerism

The sections below present three characteristics of post-consumerism discursively constructed by the community members. Based on their accounts, post-consumerism is an equivocal concept. Some community members consider it a countervailing logic to consumerism, while others perceive it as a set of principles intertwining with the everyday life of consumerism. Secondly, some participants describe post-consumerism as elusive because they disbelieve the end of consumerism, uttering opinions such as "I don't think it will change unless it really has to" (Rowan). The last characteristic constructed by the community members offers an apocalyptic perspective to interpret post-consumerism, envisioning breakdowns of the social system and the ecosystem as well as the acceleration of consumerism.

7.2.1. It is Equivocal

The term 'post-consumerism' is foreign to the people in the community as it has not yet been widely acknowledged outside of academia nor practised by many social groups (this is mentioned previously in 3.5.). Thus, the meaning of post-consumerism is open to interpretation. In the interviews, I asked my participants, "What comes to your mind when I say post-consumerism?" and invited them to describe their understanding of this term. Literature on post-consumerism to date tends to interpret it as an imperative for a brighter future for societies.

For instance, Chatzidakis and colleagues (2014) marry post-consumerism with degrowth discourses to illustrate a society where social and community participation replace consumption to become the focus of people's everyday lives. However, responses from the community residents appear to suggest post-consumerism as an equivocal concept.

A few participants are confused about "what is it meant by post-consumerism really" (Rowan). They either feel that their experience and knowledge about the consumer culture and society are insufficient for them to envision post-consumerism (e.g., "I don't have that much experience to be able to say after the consumer thing", Pine) or think the term is not shared and supported by many residents of the community because they are unaware of it (e.g., "they actually haven't thought about it", Hazel). In addition, one participant also remarks that post-consumerism is not an appropriate term to capture the positive future transcending consumerism, as the term still refers to, and thus confined by, the notion of 'consumerism' (Apple). Beyond these, most of the participants perceive post-consumerism as a concept in congruence with escapist (e.g., "a break from consumerism", Beech) and anti-consumerist beliefs (e.g., "[The community] only consumes things it needs", Ash). For example, Holly's interpretation of post-consumerism is expressed when they tried positioning the community in relation to post-consumerism in the interview.

> *This is not going to come up in your recording because this is a gesture, but if you have like consumer society here and post-consumerist here, [the community] is somewhere in between.* (Holly)

This positioning by Holly places consumerism and post-consumerism on the opposite end of an imaginary spectrum, suggesting that post-consumerism, in their interpretation, should represent ideas and principles that countervail consumerism. This approach to understanding draws a clear separation between consumerism and post-consumerism. Namely, post-consumerism is constructed as a countervailing logic to consumerism, and the two have no overlap or entanglement with one another. In comparison, Maple's utterances add more nuances to this subject.

> *Post-consumerism is this movement that people in self-sustaining communities of different styles. Some of them are living a total, sort of quite profoundly ecological lifestyle, which is, you know, is off-grid, you know, and others are kind of intermediate, and others are very much kind of still mainstream. But it's the principle that count – you don't have to be committed to a total sort of off grid lifestyle and to shun, you'll be part of the post-consumer[ist] principles.* (Maple)

Maple describes post-consumerism as a *movement* with various manifestations (*of different styles*). They contend that post-consumerism can be practised regardless of whether a person's way of living is *off-grid*, *intermediate*, or *mainstream*. To them, how and where one lives do not necessarily define the person's allegiance to post-consumerism, instead, *it's the principles that count*. These utterances present a different kind of relationship between post-consumerist and consumerist logic: they are not completely separated but intertwined with each other. According to Maple, post-consumerist ideas can be practised even in mainstream consumerist societies. It is, therefore, plausible to presume that post-consumerism represents a set of *principles* of living rather than referring to a particular lifestyle, a social context, or a chronological era of human societies.

7.2.2. It is Elusive

Another recurring theme constructed by the participants is the disbelief in the existence of post-consumerism; in other words, many community residents do not believe that post-consumerism can and will eventually happen based on two reasons: the endlessness of consumerism and their distrust in human nature. Juniper and Magnolia's speeches below offer examples.

> *Well, no I mean, I don't think there is a post-consumerism. I think it's just going to keep being consumerism. And as long as there's insecure people and people who are desperate to make money and advertising companies and businesses, I don't see that being anything but this misery of everyone working really hard, earning money, and then spending on things that they believe will make them happy about – it won't. I think we're all just in this thing of confusion, you know what I mean, then it's just, I don't... It's a quite horrible thought.* (Juniper)

> *But I mean, we'll never get there, we'll never get that while the world is basically led by greedy men. We've got to get rid of greedy people, you know, and it's very, very difficult because there was a study – you probably have heard of it – where some monkeys discovered that they could open this conch shells by whacking them with a rock, or maybe they were taught by humans... I don't know, but they found this new food source, and they basically exploited it to the point that the shellfish were becoming extinct where the monkeys were, you know. They had no capacity to stop eating this fleshy that inner of these things that they could now bash open, for somebody have given them the hammer. So, it does seem very, very innate to the species to exploit everything to the limit.* (Magnolia)

In both excerpts, Juniper and Magnolia begin by expressing their doubts about the unattainability of post-consumerism (i.e., *I don't think there is a post-consumerism*; *we'll never get there*) and then explain their reasons. Juniper's reasoning focuses on the pervasiveness and

endlessness of capitalist consumerism discussed in 6.2.2., stating that continuing consumerism will prevent the emergence of post-consumerism. Meanwhile, they also draw on the conditioning effect of capitalist consumerism (see 6.2.3.) to illustrate societies in which people are conditioned to feel (*insecure*; *desperate*) and behave (*working really hard*; *earning money*; *spending on things*) in certain ways. However, in the end, as Juniper concludes, these consumerist activities do not necessarily lead to happiness (*it won't*). Being aware of the endless nature of consumerism, consequently, forms Juniper's pessimistic vision that post-consumerism will never come true because consumerism will never end.

Magnolia's reasoning comes from a different perspective, presenting a strong disbelief in human nature, particularly, human greed. They believe that it is *very, very difficult* to extract greed out of humans. They draw the analogy between humans and monkeys – a species which is genetically closely related to human beings – to evidence that the greedy and exploitive features of humans are *innate*. In doing so, Magnolia attributes the elusiveness of post-consumerism to the defects of human beings. Both Magnolia and Juniper's utterances represent how some members of the community view post-consumerism. They describe it as an ideal that has not yet happened, distinguishing it from the *misery* of consumerism they live in. This, to some extent, also reflects a perception of these people that they do not reckon the community as a configuration of post-consumerism.

7.2.3. It Embodies Apocalyptic Envisioning

In line with the equivocality of post-consumerism presented in 7.2.1., a number of community residents differ from viewing post-consumerism as the remedy of consumerism as many scholars suggest (e.g., Soper, 2017; Chatzidakis et al., 2014), interpreting the term symbolising an "apocalyptic" future (Juniper). For example, one participant uttered in the interview, "I think, if we've got to the point of this post-consumerism, then we're pretty much looking at the end anyway" (Pine). In these people's envisioning, apocalyptic post-consumerism comprises three phenomena: the breakdown of the social system, the breakdown of the ecosystem, and the acceleration of consumerism.

The breakdown of the social system, anticipated by a few residents, will entail the polarisation of wealth ("the gap between the rich and the poor and so on", Laurel), unemployment ("A lot of people will be out of their jobs", Ash), and depriving normal people of their consumer

statuses ("The society doesn't actually service the consumer", Maple). The excerpt below from Maple reflects these elements.

> *That's the post-consumer[ist] society because the post-industrial society hasn't cascaded wealth; it hasn't shared, hasn't broadened economy. So, now we have poverty in areas that years ago were unimaginable, absolutely. So, we have teachers, you know, double jobbing, so on and so forth. In the UK, we have teachers who are homeless. They've got the job, they've got their profession, their career, but they don't have the same economic status. So, that's where the post-consumer[ist] society is. It's the consumer doesn't exist any longer. People aspire to be consumers, and they're relying on the fact that they would need to have a job and economic status to be the consumer, and that would fulfil their aspiration in terms of lifestyle, in terms of well-being and so on. But because it's driven by manipulative and exploitative economies, you know, they've been short-changed.* (Maple)

Maple establishes a causal relationship (*because*) between the emergence of post-consumerism and the post-industrial society. In their accounts, the post-industrial society does not distribute wealth equally ([...] *hasn't cascaded wealth; it hasn't shared, hasn't broadened economy*), which results in (*So*) the wide spreading poverty in societies. They further this argument by calling on the example of teachers in the UK, suggesting that even teachers, who are conventionally considered a noble and stable profession, are *double jobbing* and *homeless*. By connecting a symbol of stability (*teachers*) with a precarious state (*homeless*), Maple delivers a pessimistic scene of societies in which having a job and a career is insufficient to qualify for the economic status of consumers. To this point, they conclude (*So*) that pessimism is the undertone of post-consumerism (*that's where the post-consumer[ist] society is*), where many people lose the economic capacity to merely maintain their statuses as consumers.

The second envisioning concerning the apocalyptic aspect of post-consumerism depicts a breakdown of the global ecosystem. A handful of accounts by residents coming from different parts of the world address this concern. These people believe that humans are "trashing" (Willow) natural resources and the environment so much. Eventually – in their own words – "there's going to be no water" (Cherry) and "probably there won't be any forest, any tree up, no primary resources left... Everyone [is] dead" (Hazel). Meanwhile, these community residents share a consensus that human beings are the culprits behind the breakdown of the ecosystem.

> *[...] because we need more things, more gold, more silver, the mines are chopping everything, taking all the water. They are pulling their trees away, so I made my promise that I'm not going to use anything made of gold or*

> *silver or these things ever in my life. Yeah, I have made my promise. I will try to live with the less I can. Yeah, and I'm going to be really conscious even with the food I eat, because also the food now, they put so much chemical that in ten years we are not going to be able to grow anything. And, you know, the avocado that everybody loves, they're... Because avocado doesn't need too much water, they're pouring chemicals into the sky to make the rain go, so they're changing all the ecosystems. Yeah, I'm really, really into this kind of thing.* (Cherry)

For example, in the beginning of the excerpt above, Cherry uses the pronoun *we* to refer to, not themselves, but the totality of human beings. They list several examples of how humans exploit natural resources to fulfil needs for themselves (e.g., *chopping everything*; *taking all the water*; *pulling their trees away*), and in response, Cherry expresses their determination (*promise*; *try*; *really conscious*) to be mindful with what they consume. By this point, I noticed a change in their use of pronouns. There is now a clear separation between *they* – the exploiter of the ecosystem – and *I* – the conscious consumer (e.g., *They are pulling their trees away, so I made my promise [...]*). To reinforce their argument, Cherry also raises the issue of humans' intervention in agriculture. Through telling the story of how chemicals are used in assisting the growth of certain crops (i.e., avocado), they demonstrate their knowledge of and dedication to ethical consumption (*I'm really, really into this kind of thing*) and meanwhile, criticise that such interventions are irresponsible and unsustainable. If humans continue doing so, "they're changing all the ecosystems" and "in ten years we are not going to be able to grow anything".

The last apocalyptic envisioning is similar to what Juniper utters in 7.2.2., "It's just going to keep being consumerism". A small number of community residents envision post-consumerism as a state of being "even more consumerist" (Lindens). The post-consumerist society imagined by these people is an accelerated version of consumerism, as Lindens explains,

> *Maybe like when they bought the brand-new shoes in order to [make them] last longer, [they were] consumerist; when you buy a pair of shoes each week, that is post-consumerist.* (Lindens)

Besides the acceleration, another participant employs a sequence of phrases including "mostly unhealthy", "excess", and "out of balance" (Laurel), further characterising their understanding of post-consumerism as an intensification of present consumerism. These apocalyptic approaches to interpreting post-consumerism resonate with the term's feature of being equivocal, as discussed in 7.2.1. In the meantime, this apocalyptic perspective provides an alternative, dismal lens to explore the ambivalent, inconclusive meaning of post-consumerism. Instead of dichotomising imaginary societies into binary divisions of 'good' and 'bad',

‘desirable’ and ‘undesirable’, post-consumerism, constructed by accounts of the community members, is a medium to which these people project their diverse, discursive envisioning of the future of human societies. Thus, it embodies both dystopic and optimistic perspectives, echoing what Cohen (2021) suggests there is a polarisation regarding how people foresee what might replace consumer society. However, the current conceptualisation of post-consumerism by existing literature seems to centre on the optimistic side, marrying the term with positive implications and ideologies such as degrowth (Chatzidakis et al., 2014; Schneider et al., 2010; Kallis et al., 2012) and ‘alternative hedonism’ (Soper, 2000, 2017). Hence, in the next section, I will follow this vein of thought, exploring how post-consumerism, interpreted as a salve of consumer society, is practised by the participants in the setting of the community.

7.3. Post-Consumerism in Practice

Although a pessimistic envisioning is expressed, a significant number of accounts from the community members interpret the term ‘post-consumerism’ optimistically. The participants associate post-consumerism with a future that is “good for the planet, for the animals, for nature” (Ash) and where they “want to head for” (Cedar). To take a further look at these accounts, I refer to Latouche (2009) (also see Chatzidakis et al., 2014), who outlines seven independent goals to transform into a degrowth society and post-consumerist citizenship. In Table 7.3.1. below, the framework of these goals is employed to examine post-consumerist practices in the community. Next, each goal and the practices of the community members will be discussed and analysed.

Table 7.3.1. Practices and principles for achieving post-consumerist goals

Goals	Description of each goal	Practices	Underpinning principles	Exemplar accounts
Re-evaluate	Re-evaluating the values of societies	Appreciation of nature, human crafts and well-being	Alternative hedonism; altruism	[...]it's like nature's so bountiful and so beautiful. [...] So, after consumerism, I think we should turn to nature. (Poplar)
Reconceptualise	Reconceptualising concepts of wealth, poverty, scarcity, and abundance	Mental abundance	Gift economy; anarchism	So, if we get rid of the notion of money meaning success, [...] (Magnolia)

Restructure	Restructuring production and social relations	Communal living; reforming the monetary system; halting unsustainable production	Non-total-anarchism	I see post-consumerism as a place where we do come back to community, where we move away from the monetary system completely. We don't actually need money. (Cedar)
Redistribute	Redistributing access to resources	Sharing	Reciprocity; coexisting	I would like to open a community school with everybody learning from everybody. If you have a skill, you could just come and share it, and somebody will bring another skill and they come and share it. (Cherry)
Re-localise	Localising production, commodities, and capital	Self-sufficiency	Localism; neo-peasant movement	I suppose a totally post-consumerist society would have to be a lot more self-sufficient and would have to be a lot more local. (Holly)
Reduce	Reducing production and consumption to neutralise the environmental impact	Conscious buying; making than buying	Voluntary simplicity	[...] you can be happier, and you can have more quality with more careful decisions about what you consume. (Alder)
Reuse/Recycle	Reusing and recycling to reduce	Fixing; transferring ownership of items	Ethical and sustainable consumption	[...] trying to get more second hand or vintage things that have been used, and trying to recycle more, [...] (Hazel)

7.3.1. Re-Evaluate

The goal of re-evaluating is described as a series of changes in terms of the values of societies. For example, it has been suggested that in a degrowth economy, altruism will replace egoism, cooperation will replace competition, the pleasure of leisure will replace the obligation of work, nature and craftsmanship will replace manufactured and technology, and social life will replace consumerism (Latouche, 2009; Chatzidakis et al., 2014). Accounts from the community residents share similarities with these implications.

> *So, post-consumerism, I suppose, was a mixture of several things. It would be a concentration on either producing quality products that designed to last a long time or to repair things that have already been made and to recycle things, but also like on a fundamental level being like – from the consumer point of view – the kind of a change in values, I suppose, from one seeks validation by being a consumer and having what you think you should base on what other people think – I think all the messages that you're being given by the media and society [and] big companies are very cliche, but, you know – [to] finding out what's really meaningful to you and other ways to be*

> *fulfilled in your life that isn't through objects, or the needs for things aren't really necessary.* (Rowan)

Rowan, in the excerpt above, first tells that post-consumerism should be "a mixture of several things", which aligns with Cohen (2013) that a post-consumerist future should encompass a combination of social innovation. In Rowan's opinion, the first component of post-consumerism, which adheres to the goal of 'reuse/recycle', is to *repair* and *recycle* things and make them more enduring (*last a long time*), whereas the second component is more closely related to the focus of this section – *a change in values*. Rowan believes that people should abandon their consumer identities, which are constructed by agencies of mainstream capitalist consumerism (i.e., *the media*, *society*, and *big companies*), and should re-evaluate *what's really meaningful to you* and find alternative fulfilments in life. This implies the existence of a general intention of 're-evaluation' in the community; accounts from other community members below offer more insights.

One significant practice related to the re-evaluation is the community resident's appreciation of craftmanship and interpersonal engagement. Several participants foresee post-consumerism as "a renaissance of creativity" (Elm), where advancements in technology will motivate more creativity in art production and appreciation in craftsmanship (e.g., furniture-making, Pine). Such appreciation of human participation in creating and producing not only refers to the makings of physical pieces. The community residents also prefer intangible items and experiences that comprise human elements. For example, Holly expresses that,

> *When I'm listening to music, I would always prefer to listen to something played badly by someone I know than to listen to something that was recorded perfectly by someone in a studio. [...] Or, if I'm watching a film, I kind of want to watch a film with a couple of other people so we can discuss what we've seen, and I want that to be that kind of participatory element that you don't often get if you're just the consumer.* (Holly)

Holly's second example about watching films reminds me of what Bauman suggests in his book *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (1998). He contends that consumption in consumer society is deemed private; even though people sometimes shop together, their satisfaction with consumption remains private to themselves and not to be shared with others. However, Holly sharing leisure time with other community members represents a different value system from what consumerism upholds. Here, happiness and pleasure no longer derive from private, consumerist activities but from sharing and participatory acts, resonating with the

idea of 'alternative hedonism', which advocates that pleasure could be sought through less-acquisitive, moral and ecological means (Soper, 2000; Caruana et al., 2020).

Other forms of materialisation of the re-evaluation goal observed in the community include the residents' affection for nature (e.g., "after consumerism, I think we should turn to nature", Poplar), their will to abolish the "money brain" and be altruistic, (e.g., "actually, it shouldn't always about me", Magnolia), and their inclination towards a society that emphasises on well-being (e.g., "I think what would really resonate with me about... yeah, about well-being", Apple).

7.3.2. Reconceptualise

Following the re-evaluation, the goal of reconceptualisation centres on reconstructing and resizing the notion of wealth and poverty and deconstructing the couple of scarcity/abundance (Latouche, 2009; Chatzidakis et al., 2014). To my surprise, accounts that are related to this aspect are very few, and all of them focus on subverting the orthodox meaning of money, depriving of its conventional associations with the notion of success (e.g., "So, if we get rid of the notion of money meaning success, and...", Magnolia) and the notion of abundance.

> *We don't actually need money. We do not need banks if we work together in gift. If everything's gift and true gift without obligation of repayment, suddenly everything shifts and becomes… everybody's full of abundance. You can't help but feel abundant when you're able to give, because that immediately lifts something inside you. But when you're buying, it's, it's like this "I'm trying to get the best I can for this amount of money". There's an element of kind of, I would put it as a negative energy to do with that money exchange. But with giving and receiving, there's truly about that… And I believe that's the post-consumerism.* (Cedar)

Here, Cedar reconceptualises the notion of abundance by comparing the experience of gifting and buying. Gifting, in Cedar's account, is rewarding (*You can't help but feel abundant*), altruistic (*true gift without obligation of repayment*), and inspiring (*immediately lifts something inside you*). On the contrary, buying and money exchange, suggested by them, connotes egoism (*I'm trying to get the best I can for this amount of money*) and brings *negative energy*. This comparison is made to support what they utter at the beginning of the excerpt that money and banks are not necessary for a post-consumerist society, as abundance is created through reciprocal acts such as gifting rather than buying. In doing so, Cedar overturns the conventional

norms that money means abundance and instead hooks humanistic acts of gifting to the notion of abundance.

7.3.3. Restructure

The process of restructuring is predicted to entail a radical adaptation of production and social relations (Latouche, 2009; Chatzidakis et al., 2014). In terms of restructuring production, the participants appear to follow a quasi-anarchist approach of thinking, as some of them want to reform the monetary system by "get[ting] rid of currency" (Acacia) or making money "expendable" (Magnolia). One excerpt is provided below to demonstrate this stream of opinion.

> *I think we should think globally and move in all societies to a basic income, you know, the statutory basic income that everyone just gets. I think it would be the best money we ever spend. Even if we have to print the money stuff to do it, you know, [laugh] we print money to do all sorts of things. So, you know, that is just go there, and then actually, we should be saying, "No, you cannot manufacture that. The world doesn't need it. No one needs it", "You can't actually manufacture that", you know, "You can't actually sell that". We get down to what we do need. And if we put people out of jobs, well, it doesn't matter, we've met their basic income, we've met their basic needs. OK, it's not good. They would like to have a job, but they can look for another job, you know, and there will be other jobs, but we're not making them destitute. We're saying, "We've already met your needs, ok?" Yeah, we're taking away a job, that's not a good thing, but you were making sort of plastic widgets that we don't need. [phhh] And you know, I think it's the national basic individual income is the fundamental because then you can say, "We're not actually going to open that coal mine. We're not going to do this. We're not going to do that. We're not going to have that factory doing that".* (Magnolia)

This account by Magnolia focuses on a radical reformation of the monetary system and its subsequent effect on eradicating jobs that are socially unsustainable. They propose a monetary system of *statutory basic income* which ensures everybody's basic needs are met (i.e., *we've met their basic needs*), and therefore, productions that are deemed 'unnecessary' (e.g., *plastic widgets*; *coal mine*) can be discontinued as all the workers are financially secured. Albeit radical, what Magnolia supports does not entirely align with the ideologies of anarchism. Their use of the pronoun *we* throughout the excerpt indicates the existence of an authority in their imaginary society who decides what kind of production is allowed and what is forbidden. The party of *we* also has the power to take away jobs, but in Magnolia's opinion, this can be justified as it is for the greater good of societies and the environment (e.g., *The world doesn't need it*; *you were making sort of plastic widgets that we don't need*). Reflecting on the goal of

'restructuring', this excerpt shows how the community members envision post-consumerist monetary and productive structures. Although presently the community itself has not yet established a restructured monetary system at a group level, discussions in 6.3.5.2. suggest that individual residents have experimented with alternative forms of living without money within the community.

Considering how the community residents restructure social relations, some believe returning to a pre-modern lifestyle where people live together in communities is the answer. This perception is captured from the residents' discursive accounts describing their interpretations of post-consumerism. For example, some view post-consumerism as "a kind of reaction against modernity" (Willow) in which people "come back to community" (Cedar) and live in "self-sustaining communities of different styles" (Maple). Communal living seems to be an essential part of these people's envisioning of post-consumerism, and Rowan's account below gives more explanation to this construct.

> *I like living with other people, but that shouldn't be a luxury because I think man is naturally social, so that's why I don't think it's very... I don't think [The Community] or any intentional community is necessarily very radical or very taboo or very strange because that is how it should have been and always was until fairly recently, where you need to, you know, live in your own house and go to work in your own car and cook in your own oven and rather than sharing all these things. And again, I think that links to consumerism and individualism.* (Rowan)

At the beginning of the excerpt, Rowan expresses that they enjoy living with people and refer to the discourse of human nature (i.e., *man is naturally social*) to explain such enjoyment. This contributes to their following argument that community living should not be regarded as *radical, taboo,* or *strange*, as this is supposed to be the 'natural' way that humans live (i.e., *that is how it should have been and always was*). By employing the phrase "until fairly recently", Rowan then turns to the issue of modernisation, arguing that this progress is a 'mutation' of human history which diverts people to an unnatural, consumerist, and individualistic way of living (i.e., *live in your own house and go to work in your own car and cook in your own oven*). The use of "rather than" at the end of the penultimate sentence indicates Rowan's preference between the modern, individualistic and the natural, communal ways of living. In short, this excerpt represents how people in the community view social relations in post-consumerism. They believe that communities should replace individual households as the basic unit of social relations, and people should return to communal living like their ancestors.

7.3.4. Redistribute

The goal to 'redistribute', suggested by Chatzidakis and colleagues (2014), aims to rearrange the distribution of access to resources at both local and global scales in order to eradicate conspicuous consumption and unequal resource distribution among classes, generations, and individuals. People in the community adopt sharing as the practice to materialise this goal. Sharing is interpreted by some scholars as "nonreciprocal pro-social behaviour" (Benkler, 2004: 275), and it is often a communal act that contributes to the creation of bonding, solidarity, and companionship (Belk, 2010). The culture of sharing in the community could be observed in many facets, from material, tangible items such as clothes and spaces to intangibles like skills, knowledge, and incomes. In the interviews, the participants deny the "false idea" (Birch) that more possessions enable more enjoyment and fulfilment. Instead, they believe that borrowing and sharing are "far better" (Birch) than owning because sharing to them is a "less consumerist" and easier way for a group of people to become materially "enough" (Holly). Besides, the community is also reckoned "post-capitalist" (Alder), for the residents share not only material entities but also incomes (Alder) and skills and talents (Cherry). In one of the interviews, a resident tells me about the ideal community they wish to be in one day.

> *I would like time to share with other people, you know, I would like to open a school, a community school with everybody is learning from everybody. If you have a skill, you could just come and share it, and somebody will bring another skill and they come and share it [...] OK, how we can make our own soaps, how we can make our own shampoo, how can we make our own toothpaste... this kind of things. Sewing, probably, and healing, like medicine, herbal medicine, so that would be like my four pillars probably, in the community that I want.* (Cherry)

From this excerpt, I observe that the content of sharing in the community has moved beyond the material boundary and entered an intellectual level where skills, experiences, and talents become sharable. Cherry's utterances propose a form of community which operates on the basis of sharing culture and ethos of being educational and reciprocal (e.g., *a community school with everybody is learning from everybody*). In there, skills become subject to share with other community members, and such sharing from one to the others distinguishes from gift giving and commodity exchange because it does not expect reciprocity or exchange (Belk, 2010) but aims to assemble a variety of skills (e.g., soap and shampoo making, sewing, and healing) to enable the community to achieve self-sufficiency collectively (suggested by the repeated use of the pronoun *we*).

7.3.5. Re-Localise

> *I think, yeah, post-consumerist culture looks very local.* (Rowan)

The fifth goal towards degrowth and post-consumerist citizenship is to 're-localise', which means returning to a local basis of production, circulation of resources, and economies, as well as retracing the roots of local politics and culture (Chatzidakis et al., 2014). Many participants in the interviews also share this vision. Like Rowan's account at the beginning of this section, many others also believe that a post-consumerist society will be characterised by local exchange among neighbours (e.g., "to exchange with [a neighbouring] Farm, you know, exchange with them", Alder) and limited production and consumption within local areas (e.g., "trying to limit the way you consume things from", Ginkgo). At present, the community is working towards self-sufficiency, which could be considered a means to concretise the goal of re-localisation. As introduced in the Methodology chapter (see 4.5.2.), the community maintains a certain extent of self-sufficiency through growing vegetables in the community garden.

Nonetheless, some residents also argue that the extent to which self-sufficiency and localisation that a community can achieve is constrained by the current climate of the globalised economy. One of the participants draws on their experience of visiting another intentional community to demonstrate this.

> *Um... I suppose a totally post-consumerist society would have to be a lot more self-sufficient and would have to be a lot more local. [...] I mean, maybe [the name of the visited community], where I visited a couple of years ago will be an example of somewhere that was quite radically post-consumerist because they grow all of their own food, generate pretty much all of their own power. Even them aren't completely independent of the rest of the world because they do... like they buy in tea, for instance, which is obviously imported from somewhere far away.* (Holly)

The first sentence of this excerpt expresses Holly's belief that post-consumerism should encompass self-sufficiency and re-localisation. These elements remind them of a community they once visited, which they reckon a better analogy of post-consumerism than the community we were in. The reason Holly gives in the following sentence argues that the other community is more radical (*radically*) and supports this point with two examples (i.e., *they grow all of their own food, generate pretty much all of their own power*). Their use of "all of [...]" in phrases "all of their own food" and "all of their own power" delivers a strong sense of confidence, and even admiration, of this other community's post-consumerist practices,

building up to the following twist at the beginning of the next sentence (i.e., *Even*). In the rest of the excerpt, Holly discloses that even a radical community like the one they went to cannot *completely* escape the influence of globalisation and global economies (e.g., *they buy in tea, for instance, which is obviously imported from somewhere far away*). This example also presents good evidence for the aforementioned characteristic that post-consumerism is considered elusive by the community members.

7.3.6. Reduce

A post-consumerist society is expected to entail reductions in both production and consumption through practices including shortening the working week and encouraging people to pursue non-consumerist enjoyment (Chatzidakis et al., 2014). Likewise, accounts related to this subject mostly speak from the perspective of reducing consumption. The community residents endeavour to "use less" (Holly) and discover alternative ways of "doing something without having to create something" (Rowan), as well as learn to "make things than to buy things" (Elm). Besides looking for ways to reduce consumption of new things, a few other residents present a relatively more tolerant attitude towards consumption. They acknowledge the pleasure of buying and extend that the "emotional return" will be greater if people make their buying decisions more consciously and "carefully" (Alder).

> *You can get the return, the emotional return that you want from carefully choosing things and buying things from a smaller range, more simplified, and enjoy the simplicity of your life more.* (Alder)

What Alder utters at the end of this excerpt (i.e., *more simplified, and enjoy the simplicity of your life more*) links to another significant attitude shared by many community members – the inclination towards simplicity. More than once in the interviews, words including 'simple', 'simplified', and 'simplicity' and idioms such as 'less is more' have been uttered by different respondents. As shown in the three excerpts below, the community residents' aspiration for simplicity in life manifests through various facets, including how these people manage possessions, finance, and everyday life.

> *I had huge piles of things I had bought that I need to get rid of. [...] just feeling cluttered, like I had too many things around me. I probably wanted a bit more simplicity.* (Holly)

> *Like my bank balance, you can see all my transactions in a whole month, you can just see on one page. It's not much, and I like that. I like the simplicity of it. I like knowing what goes in, what goes out.* (Rowan)

> *[My life outside of work is] Really beautiful, it's really simple. I just do yoga and walk and walk more and sit and stare at nature. I read a lot, so it's mainly reading and... Yeah, that's about... really simple. I don't drink, I don't party, I just, you know what I mean, I just, yeah, look at nature and read books and listen to music.* (Juniper)

Taken together, these accounts from the community residents echo the concept of 'voluntary simplicity' discussed in Chapter 3 (see 3.3.1.). Albeit the multiplicity of its meanings (Rebouças and Soares, 2021), voluntary simplicity, understood by Elgin and Mitchell (1977), is a lifestyle aiming to live in a way that is 'outwardly simple and inwardly rich' (1977: 13). Juniper's utterances above offer an exact sample of such a lifestyle. Their life outside of work, as Juniper delineates, is *simple* – in terms of the variety of activities they undertake (e.g., *I don't drink, I don't party*) – but *beautiful* – in terms of the degree of meaningfulness that each activity encompasses (e.g., *look at nature and read books and listen to music*).

7.3.7. Reuse/Recycle

The last goal – 'reuse/recycle' – is suggested as a pragmatic approach to achieving the previous goal of reducing (Chatzidakis et al., 2014). Practices of reusing and recycling can be observed in several facets of the community life. The utterances below by a participant exquisitely exhibit the three major ways of how the community members practise reusing and recycling in their everyday lives.

> *[Post-consumerism] would be a concentration on either producing quality products that designed to last a long time or to repair things that have already been made and to recycle things, [...]* (Rowan)

The first way suggested is *producing quality products that designed to last a long time*. One participant of the interviews once envisioned a 'luxurious' circumstance in which the community would offer every worker "a Barbour coat" and "a pair of Dr Marten" when they join because the brands that make these products – in their perception – provide high-quality aftercare services which enable long endurance of the products (e.g., "we could then send it back, get it rewaxed and have that coat for like thirty, forty years", Juniper).

The second practice of reusing and recycling in the community is to *repair things that have already been made*. A substantial number of accounts from the participants revolve around this topic. Some of them tell me that they always try to "amend" (Hazel), "fix" (Rowan), and "repair" (Ginkgo) things they already own instead of simply disposing of them, while some others reserve a more critical attitude highlighting that the community has not invested enough efforts

in terms of fixing things. A participant comments in the interview, “We have no one who’s actually there to fix things, the toasters, the blender... there’re so many things already there, and we just buy new [ones]” (Cherry).

Moving forward to the third practice – *to recycle things*, I discovered that recycling in the community often appears to occur internally among individual community residents and overlaps with acts of sharing. Except shopping from second-hand sources (e.g., “I am totally into charity shops”, Alder), many community residents also undertake recycling activities within the ecosystem of the community. As mentioned at the beginning of 6.4.1., the community residents share various kinds of basic living necessities such as clothes, food, and shelter. Besides these, the community also has a cupboard called ‘the clutter park’ to which residents can donate unwanted items so that whoever wants the items can pick them up. Therefore, the recycling practice in the community often appears to be the shift of ownership of items from one person to another. As a participant utters,

> *By the skip, I’ve been looking for a little shelf to put all my cooking oils and herbs just next to my… While I thought, “Where am I going to get this?”, then suddenly, there’s this beautiful red [...] A little trolley with shelves on it. And I put it… You just wait, and it comes to you!* (Alder)

The excerpt above illustrates a scenario in which Alder wants something specific and then coincidently discovers a perfect match from a pile of discarded items. There seems to be a trace of hedonism in Alder’s recycling experience. They tell this story in the pattern of setting up suspense in the beginning (i.e., *While I thought, “Where am I going to get this?”*) and then unfolding the result (i.e., *then suddenly, there’s this beautiful [...]*). By doing so, they deliver a sense of excitement to the listener and naturally transfer to the concluding sentence, “You just wait, and it comes to you!”, overturning the active-passive relationship between the person who does the recycling and the item that is being recycled, as if the process of recycling is the approach actively taken by the discarded item to find a new user. The same excitement has also been expressed by another community resident who describes recycling as “cool*”* and “fun*”* and even resembles it with the experience of shopping (e.g., “a bit like going shopping”) because it is exciting “when you find something on there that you want” (Ginkgo).

7.4. Discussion: Post-Consumerism as a Sensitivity

The analysis above presents constructions of post-consumerism differing from its current conceptualisation established by the literature. First, the analysis underscores the equivocality of post-consumerism (see 7.2.1.). Existing literature tends to perceive post-consumerism in a homogeneous, optimistic manner, associating it with anti-consumerist social movements and innovation with the goal of subverting consumer society and the capitalist system (e.g., Cohen, 2013). However, when the community members are asked about how they understand post-consumerism – an obscure concept to many of them, their answers showed a divergence. Some people's interpretations adhere to the optimistic conceptualisation that post-consumerism entails a series of positive changes and reformations. This group of participants incorporate a wide range of alternative discourses that countervail the logic of capitalist consumerism to support their post-consumerist practices. For example, participants in 7.3.6. call on the discourse of (voluntary) simplicity to justify their goal to 'reduce' consumption and material waste in everyday practices. Others, on the contrary, turn to pessimistic envisioning and refer to post-consumerism as the apocalypse of human societies (see 7.2.3.). Such pessimism triggers a critical rethink of the current homogeneous conceptualisation of post-consumerism and a subsequent quest for alternative perspectives to understand the term.

Returning to the research question this chapter set out to address, which is to understand how community members construct post-consumerism, I wish to argue that post-consumerism is presented by these people as a sensibility. This point of view is motivated by and borrowed from feminist studies in terms of how a group of feminist researchers approach the concept of postfeminism (e.g., Gill, 2007; Gill et al., 2017). In their accounts, postfeminism consists of entanglement of contradictory discourses of feminism and anti-feminism (Gill, 2007). They illustrate such contradictions as,

> *[...] notions of autonomy, choice and self-improvement sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline and the vilification of those who make the 'wrong' 'choices' (becoming too fat, too thin or have the audacity or bad judgement to grow older).*

Reflecting these on the notion of post-consumerism, similar contradictions have been observed in places throughout the analysis. In 6.4.2., temptations from consumer society intertwine with morals of frugality and sustainability, resulting in the community residents feeling guilty when indulging in consumerist pleasures or purchasing things carelessly. In this example, two

contradictory discourses – consumerist hedonism and anti-consumerist ethics – coexist and influence how individual consumers in the community perceive and practise their consumption activities. Their ambivalent, liminal attitude towards consumption is the outcome of the constant battling of these two contradictory forces. Gill (2007) turns to the media to illustrate the sensibility of postfeminism. She argues that instead of adopting a feminist perspective unproblematically, the media presents contradictory but patterned constructions, and such patterned nature of contradictions makes up the essence of the sensibility. In the context of this research, contradictions between the residents' anti-consumerist intentions and the constraining consumerist reality also seem to fall into three patterns. As discussed in 6.4., the community residents' everyday consumption and anti-consumerist practices follow three contradictory patterns: 'involuntary frugality', 'temptation, guilt and morality' and 'inevitable entanglement'. People in the community therefore constantly undergo the searching for an equilibrium to ease these contradictory scenarios. These patterned contradictions constitute the sensibility of post-consumerism.

Furthermore, post-consumerism appears to be a response to anti-consumerism and a consequence of its interplay and intertwinement with consumerist discourses. Aligning with a post-consumerist sensibility, consumers adopt anti-consumerist logic and discourses to tackle problems caused by consumerism, but meanwhile, they are still constrained and tempted by the system of, and the hedonism offered by, consumerism. For example, community residents in 7.3. draw on various countervailing consumption paradigms and anti-consumerist discourses (e.g., ethical consumption, voluntary simplicity) to make sense of their ethical consumption practices, but it is the same group of people who also believe that capitalist consumerism is pervasive and will never come to an end (see 6.2.2. and 7.2.2.).

Another issue raised by Gill (2007, also in Gill et al., 2017) debates whether academics should understand postfeminism as a theoretical stance or an analytical object that is subject to critical scrutiny. The same question could be raised in this pursuit of conceptualising post-consumerism. To date, existing literature leans towards viewing post-consumerism as a paradigm which upholds that consumption should be downgraded to the periphery of societies and individuals should transcend their conventional social identity as consumers. For example, the idea of alternative hedonism by Soper (2000) promotes a less-acquisitive lifestyle which rejects consumption as a meaningful and central act of people's everyday life (Soper et al., 2009). These pieces of literature view post-consumerism as a set of theoretical and practical

principles and attempt to answer the question of 'what a post-consumerist society should be like'. In this chapter, the analysis indicates that the meaning of post-consumerism is equivocal and sometimes contradictory. The community residents' interpretations of post-consumerism in 7.2.3. and 7.3. point to two opposite connotations, discursively constructing post-consumerism as an apocalyptic future and a salve for the deterioration of consumer society at the same time. The analysis in Chapter 6 delineates a liminal state of consumers in which their consumption experience fits in neither the anti-consumerist nor consumerist paradigms. Taken together, one may suggest that post-consumerism represents a third paradigm, which encapsulates these contradictions and liminality. Post-consumerist consumer experience, therefore, refers to situations where anti-consumerist ethos gets entangled with consumerist reality, and post-consumerist research should then focus on understanding how consumers in such situations respond to the contradictions and mitigate the sense of liminality. As such, post-consumerism should be recognised as an analytical object to study rather than a theoretical, cultural, or political stance that a researcher may take.

7.5. Chapter Summary

This chapter adds to the current conceptual construction of post-consumerism. It unfolds three characteristics of post-consumerism, constructed by the community residents, and then investigates the praxis of post-consumerism within the community. Based on the analysis made in this chapter and the previous Chapter 6, the last section of this chapter explores alternative interpretations of post-consumerism, arguing that the term should be understood as a sensibility. The next chapter will move to the other focus of this thesis – understanding alternative meanings of luxury within a post-consumerist context.

CHAPTER 8:

EXPLORING POST-CONSUMERIST LUXURY: CONSTRUCTING ALTERNATIVE VALUES

8.1. Introduction

The focus of this chapter returns to luxury. The chapter particularly examines how the community members understand, construct, and experience luxury in everyday practices. The first two sections of the chapter (i.e., 8.2. and 8.3.) adhere to the pursuit of many luxury studies (e.g., Dubois et al., 2001; Armitage and Roberts, 2016a; Thomsen et al., 2020), continuing exploring the ambiguous meaning of, and consumers' ambivalent attitudes towards, luxury. The second half of the chapter turns to identifying themes of luxury that emerge from the context of the community, which could be regarded as an analogy of post-consumerism. The themes include 'accessible luxury', 'the freedom of doing', 'human efforts, creativity, and companionship', 'returning to basics', and 'comfort, harmony, and beauty'. The end of this chapter connects these themes with findings from previous chapters to further conceptualise the notion of 'post-consumerist luxury'.

8.2. The Ambiguous Meaning of Luxury

When talking about luxury, the community residents recurringly structure their questions in the format of, 'Is [something] a luxury?' (e.g., "Is freedom a luxury?", Laurel). There seems to be an unclear boundary with regard to what luxury means to these people. On some occasions, participants are confused about to which points things should be considered luxury. For example,

> *I mean, luxury is things which are unnecessary, of course. But on the other hand, I have a nice soft bed, [and] I have a hot water bottle there. [laugh]* (Willow)

The beginning of this excerpt presents how Willow defines luxury initially. With an affirmative tone (*of course*), Willow claims that luxury refers to unnecessary things, echoing the traditional view that luxury represents extravagance, non-essentials, and excessive pleasure (Brun and Castelli, 2013; Kovesi, 2015). However, in the following sentence, Willow immediately denies their own words (*But*) and has second thoughts (*on the other hand*) on the possessions they own that they consider non-essential (i.e., *a nice sofa bed*; *a hot water bottle*). The laugh at the end of the excerpt implies Willow's awareness of the contradiction in their account, leading to the question of whether the concept of 'unnecessary' is interchangeable with luxury. If not, where should the line be drawn to differentiate unnecessary from luxury? The account from

Willow sheds light on the prevalent confusion among the community residents regarding the concept of luxury, which results in them discursively constructing luxury as a relative and socially constructed notion.

8.2.1. Luxury is Relative

The community residents' construction of luxury being relative is built upon the consensus that luxury encompasses more than one connotation (e.g., "I guess there can be different kinds of luxury", Holly). Across relevant accounts, the notion of luxury has been variously described as "a really nice hotel" (Apple), "having a shelter" (Lindens), having "food cooked" (Pine), "central heating" (Willow) and "water" (Cherry). The participants sometimes also juxtapose different notions of luxury in the same utterances, such as

> *[...] seeing my family every day would be a luxury, or having lots of time off would be luxury for me, whereas for the people would be just travelling in the private jet set or having a meal every day out, that's luxury as well, for me. Or buying expensive clothes, buying expensive cars.* (Hazel)

> *I would say that relationships are luxury but different to ones that are, you know, if I've got money and I do, then I can buy experiences and that's a luxury.* (Cypress)

In both excerpts above, the speakers refer to luxury with multiple connotations. For Hazel, luxury means both having time off and travelling in private jets. Likewise, for Cypress, Luxury not only refers to having a good (romantic) relationship but also means being able to afford exceptional consumerist experiences. On the one hand, the community members' perception of what is luxury is guided by non-consumerist desires, such as *seeing [their] family every day*, *having lots of time off*, and enjoying good *relationships*, whereas, on the other hand, their understandings of luxury are still notably shaped by consumerist discourses, considering the idea of buying expensive clothes, cars and experiences is also accepted by them as luxury.

To some extent, the construct of the relativeness of luxury could be seen as resulting from the community residents' reflexivity; this is to say, most of the participants start by discussing what luxury means to themselves and then move to reflect on their situations in comparison with others, who are in different financial, cultural, and geographical circumstances, in order to make sense of their understandings of luxury. The excerpt below provides an example of this.

> *So, since I started travelling, um... luxury, for me, is what most people don't have. Hmm... I'm wondering if someone who is rich and has always lived in*

> *wealth, someone who has always lived in a castle, does he see his castle as a luxury or as a standard? So, it's not necessarily on... It's about consciousness, luxury. [...] If I'm a wealthy person, and I know only wealthy people that all live in castles, castle is not a luxury. So, it is not about what most people have, it is about what most people have between the people you know and you are aware of. So, if you are aware of the world, having a house is a luxury, having a shelter, even living in a tiny house, I think that could be a luxury.* (Lindens)

The repeated use of first-person pronouns in this excerpt (e.g., *I started*; *for me*; *I think*) signifies that Lindens attempts to conceptualise and articulate their interpretation of luxury by drawing on their personal experiences. In the middle of the excerpt, Lindens proposes an imagined scenario in which they were *a wealthy person* who *know[s] only wealthy people that all live in castles*. The notion of 'castle', which symbolises luxury in this context, loses its luxuriousness because it becomes a *standard* when everybody lives in castles. Through this example, Lindens discloses their argument that the meaning of luxury is relative and subject to one's social surroundings (i.e., *it is not about what most people have, it is about what most people have between the people you know and you are aware of*). This example also hints that an object's luxuriousness dissolves as its ubiquity grows (i.e., castles would not be luxury if everyone lived in castles); accordingly, it is plausible to assume that Lindens reckons that luxury is associated with scarcity. In addition, the beginning of the excerpt (i.e., *since I started travelling*) implies that Lindens's understanding of luxury presented here is not a viewpoint they always possess but emerges from their recent experience of travelling. This perspective links to the next section, which suggests that the community members see luxury as a socially constructed notion.

8.2.2. Luxury is Socially Constructed

One of the questions I repeatedly asked in the interviews was, 'Do you think your understanding of luxury has changed over time?' and the answers I received from the community members were always 'Yes'. Most of these people would then retrace back to when they were younger (e.g., "I remember when I was about 30, I thought by the time I'm 50 or so, will I have a BMW sports car?", Olive) or before they joined the community (e.g., "Coming here definitely changed mine", Oak) to compare how their perceptions of luxury have changed over time. These participants tend to attribute their impressions of luxury to three factors: time, personal experience, and social surroundings, such as their upbringings and the community. Ash's utterances in the excerpt below exemplify how social surroundings change their views on luxury.

> *Luxury. Well, before [The Community], I would say luxury is a posh car and house, and a garden, and enough money to buy all the little things you want, but now I think luxury is having my own bathroom, my own toilet.* (Ash)

Ash regards coming to the community as why their understanding of luxury changes. *Before*, their impression of luxury aligns with the mainstream consumerist construct, which centres on wealth and material abundance (e.g., *a posh car*; *enough money to buy*). After moving into the community, the conjunction '*but*' in the last line of the excerpt signals a significant change in Ash's perception, as now the notion of luxury to them means *having my own bathroom, my own toilet*. It appears that changes in social environments – in this context, it refers to Ash moving from the mainstream society to the community – reconstruct the meaning of luxury for them. Therefore, the significance of social constructions in shaping one's perception of luxury manifests. Similarly, other participants have also acknowledged the influence of external social surroundings – such as family – on shaping their understandings of luxury, e.g., "Maybe what I saw as luxuries may have reflected more of what, you know, what the society I saw around me and what my parents saw as luxuries" (Cypress). This resonates with what has been discussed in Chapter 2 (i.e., 2.2.) that a meaning of luxury is often produced under, and only meaningful to, certain social structures and cultural contexts (Roper et al., 2013; Thomsen et al., 2020).

Except for implying that the notion of luxury is relative and changeable depending on social and cultural contexts, some participants also think that the word 'luxury' "just doesn't resonate" (Ginkgo) for them because the mainstream consumerist connotation of luxury does not represent things that the community members "think about or strive for in any meaningful way" (Holly) and often "relate[s] to a lot of bad things" (Rowan). Subsequently, a few of them see the necessity "to redefine luxury" (Magnolia) and to "change the direction of the railroad by reframing what luxury is" (Aspen). One of the participants contends that such reframing of luxury should underscore a transformation from market-defined to consumer-defined luxury, fitting into the research interest of unconventional luxury studies (see Thomsen et al., 2020). They utter,

> *I guess what I meant by saying I'd rather luxury didn't exist was the way the word's use is like, "This is a luxury thing, not because you want it, because I'm saying that it is luxury", whereas the change that needs to happen is, I mean, all these things that people may have said about alternative luxuries are like, you know, time and tap water and things. It's about how the consumer feels about them, not about how they're being shown or sold to the consumer by somebody else.* (Rowan)

To this point, luxury appears to be an ambiguous notion to the community residents, as many of them believe that the meaning of luxury is subject to a person's relative situation and social surroundings, resonating with the premise established in Chapter 2 (see 2.2.) that luxury should be viewed as a variable, equivocal, and socially constructed notion.

8.3. A Contradictory Attitude towards Luxury

At the end of Chapter 7, I argued that post-consumerism should be understood as a sensibility in which contradictory but patterned discourses of consumerism and anti-consumerism coexist. A similar contradiction has been captured here. The community members show contempt and insensitivity towards luxury but, meanwhile, admit that luxury remains, to a degree, desirable. This contradiction has been discussed in previous studies. Researchers have noticed the inconsistency between consumers' self-reported attitudes and their actual behaviours (Otnes et al., 1997), and Dubois and colleagues (2001: 3) suggest that 'complexity and ambivalence lie at the heart of consumer attitudes towards luxury'. The following three sections exhibit this contradictory and ambivalent attitude in detail.

8.3.1. Problematising and (Re)Moralising Luxury

Many community members uphold a conventional view and associate luxury with notions of money and wealth (e.g., "There's that kind of luxury that I associate with... wealth", Holly), exclusivity (e.g., "I suppose luxury has things about being unattainable or not being for everybody or... yeah, exclusive is another word that defines", Ginkgo), excess (e.g., "It's like, uh, too much stuff or too good a quality something", Rowan), status (e.g., "It's much of a status aspect", Hazel), and exploitation (e.g., "It hasn't always been present, but it's been present for a hell of a long time through slavery and before that as well", Elm). These views underpin their discursive construction that the notion of luxury is contradictory, morally inferior, and essentially a tactic for selling illusions.

Accounts that highlight the contradiction of luxury revolve around the consumption aspect of luxury. Some participants turn to 'masstige' luxury, which refers to the mass consumption of luxury goods (Wang et al., 2022), and argue that the idea of masstige is contradictory to the exclusivity of luxury, e.g., "you want to sound exclusive and yet you want as many people as possible to buy your goods" (Willow). This point of view resonates with the argument raised

by Kauppinen-Räisänen and colleagues (2019) in 2.3.3. that luxury may lose its exclusivity as more luxury goods become accessible to the masses. Another viewpoint regarding the contradictory nature of luxury consumption underscores the inconsistent values that luxury salespersons and luxury products subscribe to. As one of the community residents utters, "Someone who's involved in that kind of marketing department of this, selling this can have their own values and still have a job that means they have to sell this that they don't necessarily agree with, or they wouldn't necessarily buy themselves" (Rowan).

Secondly, many community residents question the moral correctness of luxury. In Chapter 2, I reviewed Berry's (2016) observation of the 're-moralisation' of luxury, which contends that luxury under the capitalist consumerist context is undergoing a moral examination regarding its ethical, social and environmental impacts. The accounts of the community residents all seem to address one of these three aspects. Concerning the ethical aspect, some of them confess regretting their wasteful spending in the past (e.g., "I could buy a £200 purse [...] Like, I feel so stupid", Cherry) and believe that the kind of careless spending is "excessive" and "unnecessary" (Maple). Accounts revolving around the social aspect focus on restoring values, such as redefining the means to true happiness. For example, one of the participants in the interview talked about their views on consumerist luxury as follows:

> *Have you seen Schindler's List? When he was leaving, he realised, "This car, this car could save 10 people. This ring, I will get another people... and Hitler's house...", but he was... because he was able to do more. I just feel that way, that I'm able to do much more and just because I don't want to quit some of my privilege. I have quit too many, and I'm really happy about that.*
> (Cherry)

Cherry draws on the film Schindler's List to elucidate their value priority that material wealth (i.e., *this car*; *this ring*; *Hitler's house*) and *privilege* are reckoned less important and less valuable than saving and helping other people. Cherry believes that withdrawing their entitlement to privilege is an analogy to Schindler's actions of saving lives in the film (*I just feel that way*). Also, at the end of the excerpt, they remark on their own experience of giving up privilege (*I have quit too many*) and are content with that (*really happy*). Cherry's utterances overturn the conventional belief that consumerist consumption activities and material abundance are the only ways to contentment – a heavily criticised discourse because fulfilment beyond basic needs does not necessarily generate lasting satisfaction and happiness (e.g., Alvesson, 1994; Ellis et al., 2011) – and suggest an alternative approach to obtaining happiness through helping others. This alternative approach to happiness is echoed in other community

members' accounts, as one of them utters, "Your best chance of happiness is working for other people's happiness" (Willow). Apart from abandoning privilege, Cherry also told in another part of their interview that they have also given up other forms of luxury in life to protect the environment – addressing the environmental aspect of the remoralisation of luxury. For example, they told me that they have decided to refuse to take baths because "We don't have water" and thus having baths is "just a luxury that we all should quit", even though they "love" having baths and think that it is "great" (Cherry).

The last group of opinions from the community members states that the concept of luxury consumption is essentially a "groundless" (Laurel) and "empty" (Ginkgo) illusion. In the interviews, many community residents brought up the 'performative' attribute of luxury consumption, describing luxury as "a logo", "a show", "a joke" (Willow), "a lie" (Cedar), and "a mirage" (Ginkgo) and sharing observations of how the word 'luxury' is being used in everyday marketing and advertising practices to support these opinions. For example,

> *I mean, if you don't mind me saying this, I think it's very rude. I mean, in London telephone boxes, they always have been used for advertisements for prostitutes, and the prostitute advert says, 'in luxury flat'. It's just a word! It's a kind of like a dream word.* (Willow)

The first sentence of the excerpt implies that the advertisements about prostitutes on London telephone boxes are regarded by Willow indecent (*I think it's very rude*). Therefore, when they see the word 'luxury' appearing in those advertisements (i.e., *'in luxury flats'*), they feel unnatural and subsequently realise that the term in this context is equipped to delineate a *dream* for the audience of these advertisements and is rather performative, as there is no real guarantee of luxury in the reality behind what they advertise for. Besides, some other community residents suggest that consumers' participation in luxury consumption also seems performative. In the excerpt below, for instance, Ginkgo implies that knowing the expensiveness of luxury motivates consumers to approach and behave around luxurious experiences in *a certain way* that is infused with hedonistic and entertaining spirits (indicated by their use of the word *enjoy*).

> *I think there's this sort of thing where people have these experience where something is very expensive, and they know it's expensive, and so they have this expectation that they need to enjoy it in a certain way.* (Ginkgo)

However, by drawing on their past experiences with luxury, Ginkgo also has discovered that "to a certain extent that [luxury experience] is never as good as it seems". Likewise, another community resident expresses that many high-expense activities and consumption experiences

are “dressed up to that luxury, but [they’re] not” (Acacia). In reasoning why all these luxury consumption experiences appear to be performative and never as good as they claim, the participants, once again, attribute it to capitalism. They assert that mainstream luxury is a tactic for selling, “a way of presenting something” (Ginkgo), or, from a feminist perspective, “a way to get women to give you their money” (Juniper), which differs from “the real luxury” that costs “endless hours”, manpower and “amazing materials” to accomplish (Ginkgo).

8.3.2. (Therefore) “Luxury is not for us”

Except for the inclination to problematise and (re)moralise luxury, the community residents also express an insensitivity to consumerist luxury, uttering that “luxuries are for other people” (Apple) but not for us, i.e., people in the community. Such an attitude was captured in the interviews when these people were asked about their opinions on the kind of luxury displayed in spaces such as shopping malls and department stores. With only a few participants telling me about their awareness of the existence of those luxuries (e.g., “I know them all. I know Gucci and Versace”, Willow) and a limited extent of appreciation (e.g., “I enjoy it as much as anyone looking at nice things”, Poplar), the majority of these people responded with a mixture of avoidance, alienation, and disconnection. Statements such as “I don’t NEED any of those things” (Apple) and “I saw luxury like very, very far away from me and my family” (Hazel) represent the predominant theme in terms of how the community residents see their relationships with luxury. Many of them present themselves as active actors who intentionally choose to distance themselves from consumerist luxury, such as Beech,

> *For me it’s not interesting, for me... So, I don’t buy those kinds of brands not only because I can’t afford them, it is because it’s not interesting for… because it’s not my lifestyle. I mean, because as I said, for me, to buy a £500 T-shirt is going to make me feel REALLY uncomfortable when I wear it because I’m thinking that I had to work – I don’t know – how many hours to earn £500. I don’t know, two weeks? Or three or one week just to wear a T-shirt that I can get dirty with some ketchup or… That’s ridiculous.* (Beech)

Beech’s utterances begin with claiming their lack of interest in luxury (*it’s not interesting*). The repeated use of the first-person pronouns (e.g., *For me*; *I don’t*; *I can’t*; *my lifestyle*) throughout the text indicates their intention to construct the message that their insensitivity to consumerist luxury is a consciously chosen lifestyle. The second sentence of this excerpt seems to reinforce this intention. However, the way this sentence is structured (i.e., “not only because..., it is because...”) implies that Beech’s lack of interest might not be the sole reason contributing to their insensitivity to consumerist luxury, as they also bring up the factor of unaffordability (*not*

only because I can't afford them) in their utterances, as well as expressing the *uncomfortable* feeling when using and consuming luxury products. Similar expressions have been observed in other participants interviews in which the unaffordability of luxury is also taken into account when the participants attempt to make sense of their alienation from luxury (e.g., "Luxury, yeah, something I can't afford, and I don't give a shit because I don't see the point of having... buying like a £500 sneakers", Hazel). Moreover, it also seems like these people's insensitivity to luxury contributes to their collective construction of the community. In several places, different participants have mentioned that the idea of luxury is incoherent with the image of the community. "If you want luxury, then you don't come here" (Willow). They also contend that the community should be a place which "refuses the idea of what luxury is" (Ginkgo), thus it does not seem to "make sense to talk of luxury in a post-consumerist society or situation" (Rowan). Nevertheless, the accounts and discussions presented thus far predominantly interpret luxury as a sector of the consumer market, whereas in the following section, signs for alternative meanings of luxury start to emerge in the community residents' accounts.

8.3.3. (However) Luxury is Still Somewhat Desirable

Albeit the contempt and insensitivity, the same group of people also hold a conflicting view that luxury is, to some extent, desirable. These people utter that they are "drawn at times into those types of luxury" (Cypress) and think that luxury is "quite desirable [...] in some ways" (Ginkgo), describing their interest in luxury as "a matter of curiosity" (Willow) or, on some occasions, a guilty pleasure (e.g., "I sometimes look at Vans online. That's like my guilty thing to look at", Apple). More importantly, the concept of luxury has also been constructed by the community residents as things that are desired by themselves or others. For example,

> *Getting the [news]papers is a luxury. I do it every two years because it's one of my favourite jobs but everyone else wants to do it.* (Alder)

Fetching the newspapers every day, described by Alder, is one of their favourite jobs in the community and a *luxury* to them. It appears that two factors are in play contributing to the luxuriousness of this activity. First, fetching newspapers is desirable because, except Alder (*it's one of my favourite jobs*), many other people in the community (*everyone else wants to do it*) are willing to take on the job. Such high desirability leads to scarce opportunities for Alder to undertake the task and subsequently reinforces their impression that this job is a luxury. This example signals desirability and scarcity as two components of luxury for Alder. This point of view is echoed in another participant's account, "[...] the things that for individual groups of

people, what is scarce and what they desire, and that will be the future luxury, probably" (Cypress). In the meantime, I notice that although many of the community residents have constructed luxury as something desirable in their interviews, the objects they refer to as luxury are distinctively different from the kinds of luxury discussed in the previous sections of 8.3.1. and 8.3.2. Here, luxury refers to non-consumerist notions such as water (Cherry), healthy food (Willow; Poplar), and spare time (Aspen), and the participants' attitude towards these kinds of luxury differs from their attitudes towards the kind of luxury that operates in consumerism. Instead of solely seeing luxury as an apparatus of consumerism, the community members offer alternative constructions through which luxury represents things that people aspire to but cannot be obtained through purchasing. These will be presented in detail in the following sections.

8.4. Emerging Themes of Post-Consumerist Luxury

8.4.1. Accessible Luxury

Historically, access to luxury has always been restricted by various measurements, such as sumptuary laws and high prices, because these allow the rich and aristocrats to preserve their social distinction (Featherstone, 2014). Therefore, possessing luxury has long been considered an exclusive privilege of people of certain social and economic status. Differing from this conventional construct, I notice that many residents in the community describe luxury as "something that's attainable" (Elm) and tend to conceptualise that luxury exists in their everyday practices (e.g., "There's luxury in just taking in the everyday things, not just here, but wherever you are", Laurel). Some community residents also believe that the limited and exclusive access to luxury is artificially created and maintained.

> *And I think actually every single human being should be entitled to that level of luxury. What I am opposed to is the fact that poverty means that people aren't. They don't have it accessible to them, and people don't have the right to have it. And what's made it worse is that people believe that they don't have the right to have it. [...] we can actually get rid of all our crappy, low, horrible items and only have luxury items. There's no reason why we can't just have luxury items. There's no reason whatsoever.* (Acacia)

In the excerpt above, Acacia challenges the binary division of poverty and luxury, arguing that the construction of the exclusivity of luxury is not only a trickle-down process but also attributed to the poverty mindset shared among normal people, who believe that "they don't

have the right to have [luxury]". On the contrary, Acacia aligns with the conventional perspective viewing luxury as a synonym for high-quality material products, which is the opposite to *crappy, low, horrible items*. With an assertive tone (*I think*; *should be*; *we can*), they contend that luxury, especially material luxury (indicated by *luxury items*), should be provided to *every single human*. Acacia's opinion on the accessibility of luxury reflects their underlying belief that the productive capacity of contemporary modern societies can suffice the provision of high-quality luxury to every person, and the rarity of luxury is artificially created based on the information and messages disseminated by luxury brands (Catry, 2003). Therefore, "There's no reason" for luxury to be exclusive.

Similarly, when referring luxury to the abundance of natural resources and social dynamics in the community, some participants find it "very difficult" to perceive their easy access to nature and being able to live with other people as luxury, as these "shouldn't be thought of as a luxury" (Ginkgo); instead, everyone should be naturally entitled to them (e.g., "*I like living with other people, but that shouldn't be a luxury because I think man is naturally social*", Rowan).

Another approach for the community residents to marry luxury with the notion of being accessible encompasses a shift of mindset. Namely, in these people's view, luxury does not have to be expensive and exclusive. The accessibility of luxury depends on how a person perceives whether something is luxury or not. For instance,

> *Um, I mean, but genuinely, luxury, I would say you can um… I can eat as good a food as almost anybody in the world if I, you know, if I cook carefully and I'm interested in food, you know. I can make a simple meal and I just eat them up. Probably there's not many places that… you know, this is properly satisfying. This is, you know, this is a luxury. You know, this is nice.* (Alder)

> *And maybe relationships are slightly different because it's something that… I guess everybody can work at it. You know, it's not a luxury in the sense of "if I've got affluence, I can buy things and I'm buying experiences". Whereas relationships are things I guess everybody can work on.* (Cypress)

In Alder and Cypress's accounts, their constructions of luxury revolve around what is important to them personally. For Alder, because of their passion for food (*I'm interested in food*), eating a simple meal that is carefully cooked is *satisfying* and *a luxury*. Similar to Cypress, they perceive good relationships as a luxury, which is coherent with what they indicate in other parts of the interview that they were in a fulfilling romantic relationship. These two versions of luxury from Alder and Cypress contribute to the notion of accessible luxury, as they insist that

these luxuries are available for *everybody* or *almost anybody in the world*. However, in both accounts, there is also an emphasis on the importance of human agency in facilitating the fulfilment of luxury. For example, the food needs to be cooked *carefully* for Alder to accept it as a luxury, and for Cypress, people need to consciously *work on* relationships for them to turn into good outcomes. As such, luxury is not unconditionally accessible but requires endeavours in certain aspects. The second sentence of Cypress's account offers further information, i.e., *it's not a luxury in the sense of "if I've got affluence, I can buy things and I'm buying experiences"*. It implies that the concept of accessible luxury discussed in this context does not correspond to consumerist luxury, whose inaccessibility is created by the capitalist market and maintained by high market prices. The community members' construction of accessible luxury may have dissolved luxury's inaccessibility in the marketplace, but in the meantime, it also produces an alternative set of criteria, and luxury is only accessible when those criteria are met; this is to say, within the context of the community, luxury may no longer require monetary input but instead expects alternative forms of investments such as labour, time, and emotions.

8.4.2. The Freedom of Doing

Accounts that are related to this construct tend to depict luxury as an ultimate state of freedom in which people have abundant time and choices to do whatever they want freely without any responsibility and commitment. In particular, residents in the community regard choices, time, and private ownership as the components that comprise such freedom. Some community residents suggest that being able to make choices in terms of where to spend their money freely is "an absolute luxury" (e.g., "I've got this little pot of money, and I'm allowed to spend it, and I don't have to spend it on anything else, and that to me, is an absolute luxury", Magnolia) though the luxuriousness these people perceive does not come from the act of consumption nor the items they purchase, but from their entitlement to the absolute freedom of choosing how and where the money is spent. In comparison, some other residents in the community think that having the choice to live in the community or having somewhere to reside *per se* is a luxury. One of the participants draws on their experience of being expelled from the tent when they were camping in the wild at night to support this argument,

> *Having a house, that is a luxury, I mean, living under a roof. And I slept in a tent outside, like once while I was doing my long walks, I walked on a beach in Bournemouth, and I got woken up at 3:00 in the morning, [someone else was] saying, "Get out because you're not allowed to sleep here", that was myself for one night, and I felt so vulnerable. People live like that, and*

> *actually, I chose to sleep in a tent, and then I will go to the next community in a few weeks. These choices are luxury.* (Lindens)

Lindens's utterances underscore the luxuriousness of choices by exhibiting a scenario when they did not have enough choices. Lindens recalls feeling *vulnerable* when they got woken up and had nowhere to go to spend the rest of the night. This experience allows them to grow empathy for those who have no choice but to live without shelter and meanwhile makes them realise their privilege of having the choice to sleep in a tent for only one night.

Another subject that is considered along with choices as luxury is time. The luxuriousness of time, based on the community members' construct, especially refers to the time for people to be involved in non-productive activities, such as "time to be with other people" (Apple), "having lots of time off" (Hazel), "time of free of distraction to focus on what's interesting to me" (Birch), or even just time "to sit down and talk to people for an hour or two" (Rowan). When reasoning why time is luxurious for the community members, some attribute it to the matter of scarcity (e.g., "time is something that can be scarce or more scarce", Cypress) and suggest that the value of time is equal to everybody regardless of their wealth (e.g., "They're millionaires, but, he doesn't have time to even have that bike ride with his children. What's the point?", Beech).

Following these, the last component constituting the luxuriousness of freedom is the lack of private ownership within the community. Section 6.5.3.1. in Chapter 6 provided an analysis of this phenomenon and concluded it was a consequence of the interplay between individualism and collectivism. Unlike choices and time, the luxury of private ownership is produced under the sharing culture of the community. After sharing spaces and necessities with others for a while, some community residents start to desire things of their own (e.g., "My own toilet and shower", Pine; "having my own bathroom, my own toilet", Ash).

> *I had about three different flatmates. People came and went up there. And it's a lovely space, but I like my own space. I'm in a bit of a quandary because I love community, but I love my own space, and because I'm working on shifts and hours. I prefer to be on my own, you know, because I cook meals at really odd times, and it's hard when you're sharing kitchen and bathroom.* (Poplar)

Like many others in the community, Poplar finds sharing living spaces with other people *hard*. Due to the nature of Poplar's work, their life routines are different from the flatmates (*I cook meals at really odd times*). Therefore, living with other people cannot provide the same extent of autonomy as living in a space of their own.

Taken together, it appears that choices, time, and private ownership are perceived luxuries by the community residents due to their deficiencies in these luxuries. For instance, Lindens did not have choices regarding where to go when they were prohibited from camping, and Poplar did not have enough private space for them to live with a different routine. These people live with limited degrees of freedom and, therefore, wish to gain more control and autonomy in their lives. My conversation with another participant discussed this further,

> ***Birch:*** *I feel I'm a rich person, but not yet a luxurious person.*
>
> ***Researcher:*** *Rich, in what way?*
>
> ***Birch:*** *I have friends, I always go to bed to sleep in, I always got food to eat in mealtimes, I have access to health care if I need health care. So, in terms of what I need in my life, most of my material needs are met and always had been met. I've never worried very much that I'm going to be homeless or hungry. Um... [pause] So, in that way, I feel rich. Yeah, I've ALWAYS had enough money to do what I feel I need to do next. I've also limited my thought of what I might do with the money I think I have. So, something that I might have done, I've never even thought of doing because I knew I couldn't afford them.*
>
> ***Researcher:*** *Why do you think you're not a luxury person?*
>
> ***Birch:*** *Because I still feel pressure. I don't feel free just to walk away from all commitments and do the things I want to do. So, I feel I'm carrying the weight of a lot of commitments, which may or may not be of service, but they stopped me... I think they stopped me just enjoying the moment.*
>
> ***Researcher:*** *So, the difference between rich and luxury is...?*
>
> ***Birch:*** *Being rich means always having enough. And luxury is having so much that I'm not needing to attend to anyone else's needs. I can just do whatever I like whenever I like. Whereas at the moment, I have added all sorts of informal contracts with people in places and things. I'll do this for them, I'll do that for them, and in return I get what I need. If I was living a life of luxury, I won't need to do any of that.*

Birch, in the conversation above, draws a distinction between a *rich* person and a *luxurious* person. They describe themselves as a rich person, as *most of [their] material needs are met and always had been met*, but they are not yet a luxurious person because they *still feel pressure* from *carrying the weight of a lot of commitments*. Therefore, their freedom to do *whatever [they] like whenever [they] like* is constrained by all the *commitments* and *informal contracts* they established with people. They perceive such commitments as burdens (*I still feel pressure*) and look forward to achieving a state of freedom with which they can do things freely without feeling any pressure or urge to "run anywhere and do something else" (Oak). Such a state of

freedom has also been interpreted as the capacity to pursue education solely for interests and passion rather than for increasing employability. For example, "For me, being able to do a master's degree in [a subject] was probably a luxury because I had some savings, I had some time, and it was nothing to do about jobs and what I want to do afterwards" (Rowan). In short, the community residents suggest that luxury should entail the freedom of doing; that is, individuals are free to make choices and take time to do things they like without any pressure.

8.4.3. Human Efforts, Creativity, and Companionship

The third theme constructed by the participants centres on these people's experiences of luxury gained from their appreciation of human efforts, creativity, and companionship. A similar point has been raised previously in 7.3.1., which uncovers that the community residents prefer craftsmanship and interpersonal engagement over industrially manufactured and mass-produced objects. As one of the participants suggests,

> *Luxury will come from the creativity and mistakes of humans. So, we won't be looking at something that's perfect, we will be looking at something that's... We enjoy the mistakes; we enjoy the human aspects.* (Elm)

Aligning with Elm's words, many community residents express that they see human efforts and creativity as essential parts constituting luxury, specifically referring to spending "emotional capital" to nurture a good relationship (Cypress), or artisans such as "watchmaker" (Aspen) and "tailor" (Birch; Alder) creating beautiful and enduring objects, or even the effort that a merchant invests in designing and delivering amusing consumption experiences (e.g., "a luxurious meal will be somewhere where it's a higher quality of food. The atmosphere has been put on to a degree that someone has really made an effort to create it", Acacia). It appears that the human efforts invested in producing an object or an experience are crucial for the community members to recognise something as a luxury, as one of the participants utters,

> *I think I make a distinction between comfort and luxury. They are very closely related, I mean, you know, and I don't like being uncomfortable, but I don't want luxury, yeah. You know, I just want comfort, you know. And I think comfort is what requires least. I mean, the difference between comfort and luxury is that luxury takes an effort to obtain, whereas comfort is, you know, is you have to work maybe to get comfortable, but only without causing yourself too much discomfort.* (Willow)

Similar to my conversation with Birch presented in the previous section 8.4.2. in which Birch differentiates the concept of rich from luxury, Willow also makes a distinction between comfort and luxury. Based on their utterances, a spectrum can be drawn on which *uncomfortable* and

luxury are positioned at the two ends of the spectrum, and *comfort* occupies the middle ground. To Willow, *the difference between comfort and luxury is that luxury takes an effort to obtain*. Namely, the state of luxury cannot be achieved without a certain degree of effort being made. On a few occasions, human efforts and creativity have been considered by the community residents within a capitalist consumerist framework in terms of their monetary values. As a participant suggests, the price of an object is an indicator of the amount of "time and people and energy and creativity to find the thing to create something that is most in harmony with nature, with me" (Aspen). This viewpoint reflects that, to Aspen, the luxuriousness of an object is not defined by its price but by the amount of effort and creativity involved in finding and producing the object. Meanwhile, it appears that such appreciative attitudes among the community members towards human efforts and creativity also help them to make sense of their consumption decisions, as Aspen also utters, "There are many luxury items that have a high price because I don't have the time or the capability, or I'm not in the right space at the right time to get that, to make that item".

Apart from appreciating efforts made by and creativity of humans, most of the community members also express their fondness for companionship with people. This viewpoint is largely drawn from the community residents' personal experiences of living in the community. These people suggest that being in the community with "people from all over the world" (Poplar) provides them with a lot of "intellectual stimulation" (Ginkgo) and moments when they can feel "true heart relatedness" (Cedar) with "like-minded people" (Maple).

> *[...] it's kind of a luxury in some way to have... lots of friends around and like have the um, all of this stuff going on, so as I was talking about before, all of the kind of opportunities to get involved in things socially here that it is luxury in a way.* (Holly)

Holly's excerpt above suggests that opportunities to be around friends and involved in social activities are *luxury in a way* because – reflecting on the discussion around Holly's other utterance in 7.3.1. – consumer society has nurtured consumers to privatise their satisfaction with consumption (Bauman, 1998), thus the activity of sharing leisure with other people become rarer in the present day. As Birch suggests, "there's not often an option to sit in a couple of chairs, talk to someone and think creatively about new ideas". As such, being able to live in a community and to be constantly involved in social interactions with others means luxury to the people in the community because it enables them to build an "emotional connection" and a sense of shared goals (Ginkgo) with each other.

8.4.4. Returning to Basics

The theme of basics becoming luxury majorly stems from conversations with the community residents about how they envision the future of luxury. Many of them hold a pessimistic perspective and depict an "apocalyptic" (Lindens; Alder) and "dystopian" (Birch) future in interviews. These viewpoints align with the pessimistic flavour discovered in Chapter 5 and Chapter 7, which suggest that the normality of people's everyday lives is destabilised, and many community members uphold an apocalyptic vision for post-consumerism. When speaking about the future of luxury, basic natural resources, including food, water, and clean air, and basic material needs like secure shelter and clothing have been referred to by different participants as luxury. One of the participants offered an unconventional perspective to explain why essentials and basics have overtaken conventional luxury products and become the new luxury.

> *So, for example, in the past 10 years, luxuries have become cheaper than essentials. So essential as your electricity and gas, your energy and food. Luxuries, for example [they fetched something] so this is a luxury item. This is a Microsoft Elite controller. [...] And these things sell, for a controller, they're quite expensive. These were about £155 [...] Now, this is a luxury item, no one needs this, right? Unless you are a professional player, and you get an advantage from it, no one needs it. And yet that would probably cost less than a month's electricity for a family. It certainly cost less than for a family of four's weekly shop in Lidl or maybe not Lidl, but Asda. So, this is what I mean, essentials cost more than luxuries, [...]* (Acacia)

By comparing the market values of a gaming controller and bills for essentials like gas, electricity, and food, Acacia exhibits the reality that the cost for essentials is even higher than that of a luxury product to deliver the argument that *essentials cost more than luxuries*. In their utterances, Acacia adopts a capitalist perspective and measures the values of essentials by their market prices. It appears that Acacia recognises whether something is a luxury based on two criteria: expensiveness (*These were about £155*) and excessiveness (*this is a luxury item, no one needs this*). As such, they reckon a gaming controller luxurious because it satisfies both the criteria, but when they discover that *energy and food* – things that are conventionally deemed essential and cheap – cost more than a luxury item, they are induced to the conclusion that the value of essentials have exceeded that of luxury and thus essentials have become the real luxury.

Except for regarding basic material entities as luxury, notions including health (e.g., "good health, I think it's like an incredible luxury", Apple), privilege (e.g., "Just for the fact that I'm

European, white, and man, I have luxuries", Lindens), security (e.g., "global security is so fragile, and that's a luxury", Maple), and other intangible taken-for-granted assets have also been brought up and considered luxurious by many participants in the interviews. Several participants describe the privilege of having access to running water as a luxury. They say,

> *Water, the fact that we don't have to carry water is a real luxury, maybe not for the UK, maybe not for Europe, but for half of the world, it is, you know. I'm pretty sure in Asia, in Africa and South America, people carry water in many – probably not in the big cities – but in many, many places, they do.* (Cherry)

> *It feels to me like running water in the sink is a luxury, now. That is just the most amazing luxury, and clean water that you can drink without having to boil or filter it.* (Cedar)

Both excerpts underscore the privilege of living in developed regions where *running water* is provided. Being aware that water needs to be carried, boiled, and filtered before it is ready to use in many places of the world, both speakers appreciate such privilege and describe it as a *real* and *amazing* luxury. Cherry's account constructs the luxuriousness of water by comparing water provisions between developed regions like Europe and developing areas in Asia, Africa, and South America. They continue arguing that, however, such a luxury is not acknowledged and appreciated by people who live in the UK and Europe (*maybe not for the UK, maybe not for Europe*) due to their privileged access to running water.

Additionally, although Cedar's utterances above implicate an appreciation towards the modern infrastructure of running water, an intention to return to premodern lifestyles has been strongly expressed in other parts of their interview and supported by many other community residents' accounts. Some of them have adopted practices to reject the comfort and convenience provided by modern societies (e.g., "There's something within frugality, which is a luxury, you know, because I hate... I do actually hate big, supposedly comfortable beds", Magnolia). Cedar also utters in the interview that

> *I was quite deliberately carrying water. We didn't, I didn't plant watering because I wanted people to experience, uh water as, um, the large percentage of humans do – you know, there's not many that have running water even today – and to actually recognise the value of water.* (Cedar)

Cedar's act of rejecting modern infrastructure (i.e., *watering*) could be understood as a deliberate act (*deliberately*) to reject the privilege (and luxury) granted by modernisation and modern societies. Their account emphasises the importance of water to human beings (*the large*

percentage of humans do) and suggests that living in modern societies makes people take water for granted and overlook *the value of water*. Therefore, through adopting and promoting premodern approaches to living (i.e., carrying water), Cedar attempts to restore people's perception from seeing water as a basic entitlement to seeing it as a luxury. Similar practices of restoring values have also been found in other participants' accounts. Some of them propose to reduce the community's usage of other modern infrastructures, including heaters and the internet (Cherry), and some others express their passion for learning premodern crafts and skills such as "growing vegetables, brewing, making baskets or finding mushrooms" (Apple). There seems to be an overwhelming culture in the community that things which are associated with nature, handmade, and premodern are always preferred and appreciated.

8.4.5. Comfort, Harmony, and Beauty

In this last section, luxury is described by the community members as experiences or moments when they feel bodily and/or emotionally satisfied, and such satisfaction can be further classified into the satisfaction of comfort and treats, the satisfaction of achieving harmony, and the satisfaction of appreciating beauty.

The luxury of comfort and treats frequently comes up in the participants' accounts responding to the interview questions asking them to describe their understandings of luxury. Some participants associate the ideas of 'comfort' and being "comfortable" (Aspen) with the concept of luxury (e.g., "there's a kind of luxury that I just associate with um, comfort, having generally in excess of things that are good", Holly), and some regard treats such as "chocolate bars and some ready meals" (Ash) as a form of luxury. Moreover, their answers are often affected and shaped by the conditions of the community. Many participants have suggested that "treats" (Rowan) such as "chocolate cake" (Pine), "a big feather bed" and "a bath" (Willow), and "hot water" and "warm rooms" (Ash) – which appear to be rather mundane in the mainstream consumer society – mean luxury to them given the frugal living condition of the community. For example, because of the poor housing quality (see also 6.5.3.1.), people in the community endure a shortage of warmth. This consequently motivates them to construct warmth, which enables comfort, as a luxury.

> *Luxury is… and I suppose, a luxury item to me is an electric blanket. Yeah. But um, and if I had an electric blanket here in [the community], I think I would use it.* (Willow)

> *Warmth, I know it's not always warm, but you know we have heating, hot bath. So, I went up two weeks ago and soaked in a hot bath, and I thought, "Oh God, that's luxury".* (Poplar)

This lack of warmth seems plausible to be why Willow wishes for an electric blanket and why Poplar decides to take a bath. Here, warmth is, to some extent, interchangeable with the concept of comfort, as being warm enables Willow and Poplar to achieve comfort and subsequently experience luxury. The word 'luxury' is referred to by Willow as an item they desire because it brings warmth even though it is not a necessity (indicated by the conditional clause '*if I had..., I would...*'). Similarly, Poplar employs the word 'luxury' to describe the hot bath to imply it as an unnecessary, infrequent activity (i.e., *two weeks ago*) that brings warmth and comfort. To sum up, these two speakers tend to interpret luxury as unnecessary things and infrequent activities that create comfort.

In the interviews, I asked how people in the community understand luxury, and one of the answers seemed incomprehensible to me at the time because the participant drew on the abstract concept of harmony to describe luxury. They say,

> *So, when an item or an experience is in harmony. When I say harmony, when two notes come together and create a nice chord, you know, the beautiful sound in harmony, you know. They resonate with each other, they support each other and creating a higher degree of vibrance. That's luxury.* (Aspen)

This incomprehensible feeling lasted until I started to read other participants' accounts, and then I realised that many other community residents also consider harmonious moments and experiences luxuries, only they employ different expressions. For example, for Oak, luxury means "peaceful living"; for Olive, luxury is "if everything worked perfectly"; for Poplar, luxury represents things that "make [them] feel good"; and for Cypress, luxury even refers to purchases that "compliment the situation". All these expressions discursively construct a vision of luxury in which "everything is right" (Aspen), or in other words, everything is in harmony.

Apart from obtaining the sense of luxury from being in comfort and harmony, the community residents also suggest that items – including consumer goods – that are beautifully made are also a kind of luxury. Although these luxuries are material, and many of them are presented in the form of consumer goods, the luxuriousness does not come from the consumerist aspect but from features of the objects such as good quality (e.g., "I really believe that craftsmanship and buying things of quality is quite wise", Juniper), nice materials (e.g., "This sort of beautiful, very close weaved Egyptian cotton [...]", Magnolia), endurance ("[...] made from amazing

materials that last", Ginkgo), good craft ("they do encourage the best out of a lot of different craftspeople", Elm), and heritage ("some of these trees are like a hundred years old. [...] And so, I find that quite a luxury", Rowan). Many of these features overlap with the intrinsic characteristics of luxury identified in Chapter 2 (see 2.3.3.), i.e., high quality, craftsmanship, and heritage. In addition, the community members exhibit a genuine appreciation towards the beauty of well-made things, regardless of whether they are produced by consumer brands such as Audi (Aspen), Chanel and Hermes (Juniper) or by individual tailors (Birch; Alder) and craftspeople (Elm).

8.5. Discussion: Post-Consumerist Luxury in Practice

The research question this chapter attempts to address is to understand how the logic of post-consumerism helps post-consumerist citizens reconceptualise and practise (e.g., access, use) luxury outside of capitalist consumerism. The beginning of the chapter, once again, sheds light on consumers' complex and ambivalent attitudes towards luxury (Dubois et al., 2001). People in the community discursively construct luxury as an ambiguous notion of which the perception of luxury being consumer goods and material abundance exists alongside the construct that luxury represents non-consumerist values such as good interpersonal relationships and being with family. In short, the community residents dichotomise the notion of luxury into 'luxury within the consumerist market' and 'luxury beyond'. Following these, section 8.3. further unpacks the community participants' contradictory attitude towards 'luxury within the consumerist market', and 8.4. turns to 'luxury beyond', exploring how the community residents re-conceptualise luxury in coherence with post-consumerist ethos. Meanwhile, as the last analysis chapter of this thesis, this chapter also encompasses findings that resonate with what was discovered and discussed in previous chapters.

8.5.1. From Theoretical to Praxis of Post-Consumerist Luxury

First of all, the chapter presents a praxis of post-consumerist luxury that echoes the three theoretical implications unpacked in Chapter 5 (see 5.4.). The first implication for post-consumerist luxury is the resumption of moral critiques of luxury. In other words, the moral correctness of luxury, as well as luxury's impacts on society, ethics, and the environment (Berry, 2016), need to be rethought and scrutinised. As suggested in section 8.2., the community residents uphold ambivalent attitudes against luxury. On the one hand, luxury

represents their non-consumerist desires (e.g., being with family or having time off from work); on the other hand, luxury is also associated with the sumptuous and expensive lifestyle of consumer society to which they contempt. The latter attitude is amplified in the following 8.3.1. in which the notion of consumerist luxury is regarded by the participants as a contradictory and groundless illusion. Following these, section 8.3.1. also exhibits the community members' discursive reflection regarding the moral correctness of consumerist luxury. By reflecting on their excessive spending in the past, their experience of true happiness gained from helping others, and their dedication to saving the environment, the community residents' accounts imply how the negative ethical, social, and environmental impacts of consumerist luxury suggested by Berry (2016) could be dissolved in post-consumerism.

The second implication centres on the emerging phenomenon of luxurising normality. This phenomenon first entails the luxurisation of everyday experiences and practices such as taking baths and watching films (see Banister et al., 2020). In the practice of the community, I have also observed that the residents' daily experience of being comfortable and receiving occasional treats such as chocolate cakes and hot water are perceived as luxury (see 8.4.5.). Besides, luxurising normality also refers to the growing preciousness of basic resources and human rights, which has resulted from a series of social disturbances that happened in recent years, such as the global pandemic, war, economic recession, and wealth polarisation. This implication is also reflected in the community residents' accounts. Many of them expressed pessimistic anticipations towards the future and thereafter suggested that basic resources like clean water and air will become luxurious, and the value of essentials will exceed the value of conventional luxury products (e.g., see Acacia's argument in 8.4.5.).

The last implication raises the argument that certain characteristics remain to be associated with luxury even when the concept of luxury is variable and has been highly liquified. The community residents' accounts presented in this chapter, to some extent, reflect the liquid and momentary features of luxury, which have been illustrated by multiple scholars (e.g., Thomsen et al., 2020; Bardhi et al., 2020; Kreuzer et al., 2020). For instance, section 8.4.5. showcases several scenarios where luxury is experienced in transient moments (e.g., Poplar reckons taking a hot bath a luxury) or subject to individuals' desire in particular times and conditions (e.g., Willow views electric blankets as luxury because of the shortage of warmth in the community), signalling that the participants share the same viewpoint that luxury is a liquid and variable concept. In parallel, section 8.4.1. once again turns to the everlasting debate on what features

characterise luxury and attempts to reconceptualise the accessibility of luxury in the context of the community. Traditionally, consumerist luxury is characterised by exclusivity, which means that luxury is rare and only accessible to people of privilege (Nueno and Quelch, 1998). Similarly, in Chapter 5, I concluded that luxury is still an exclusive privilege for people with certain social capital. In comparison, accounts of the community residents attempt to deconstruct the exclusivity of luxury. Some of them hold an anarchist view that material luxury should be made available to everybody (e.g., see Acacia's utterances in 8.4.1.), and some of them adhere to an unconventional luxury perspective (Thomsen et al., 2020), suggesting that luxury can be experienced by anyone as long as people are mindful of it (e.g., see accounts from Alder and Cypress). Further, as mentioned at the end of 8.4.1., the approaches to accessing luxury have been reconstructed by the community members. Monetary affluence does not necessarily lead to lives of luxury. Instead, intentions and endeavours are required to attain the luxury of fulfilling experiences and relationships. As such, I wish to argue that in post-consumerism, luxury is no longer exclusive but remains scarce. Post-consumerist luxury still requires input to attain, though such input can no longer be gained through given privileges, only through people's active endeavours.

8.5.2. Post-Consumerist Luxury and Consumer Society

A number of accounts presented in this chapter also indicate how the community members construct the relationship between post-consumerist luxury and consumer society. Although many of them have expressed their contempt and insensitivity towards consumerist luxury (see 8.3.), the last paragraph of 8.4.5. offers more nuanced insights into this matter. It appears that some participants do not completely reject the appeal of luxuries but appreciate the aesthetic, high quality, craftsmanship, and heritage of conventional consumerist luxury goods. Some of them suggest that the enduring design and quality of luxury products ensure long lifespans of the products, which could turn out to be more economical and ethical in the long run. A participant utters that

> *I understand that something's designed and created, so if you're buying a Hermes bag or, you know, something from Chanel, and it's like you're going to wear that forever. And it's the same thing as like, you know, if you're buying it, and it's going to last, I don't have that much of a problem. But if you were buying like ten Hermes bags, and it was just like, "I've got the latest bag", then that's just like... it doesn't make sense, but I understand buying something of craftsmanship and quality.* (Juniper)

This account represents the general attitudes of the community residents towards consumerist luxury. Juniper, in their account, portrays two types of luxury consumers. One type buys luxury that is *going to last*, and to this type of person, Juniper does not *have that much of a problem*, while the other type buys luxury in a superfluous and conspicuous fashion (e.g., *But if you were buying like ten Hermes bags*; *"I've got the latest bag"*), regarding which Juniper despises (*it doesn't make sense*). Juniper's example indicates that the community members do not deny, and are sometimes even attracted to, the intrinsic values and beauty of luxury, but they are not interested in the symbolic and conspicuous values of luxury products and often criticise the moral and ethical correctness of them.

8.5.3. Alternative Values of Post-Consumerist Luxury

Lastly, this chapter implies what luxury could mean in a post-consumerist context. Recalling Chapter 7, I referred to the framework established by Latouche (2009), which outlines several goals that need to be fulfilled for a society to transform into post-consumerist citizenship. Of those goals, re-evaluation and re-conceptualisation are the first two steps of this transformation. The goal of re-evaluation aims to address the question of 'what values underpin post-consumerist citizenship?', and the relevant discussion made in Chapter 7 (see 7.3.1.) suggests that craftsmanship, interpersonal engagement, nature, altruistic behaviours, and well-being are the answers to this query. Similar values are found in this chapter, and the community residents' inclination towards these values eventually contributes to and legitimate their constructs of post-consumerist luxury. For example, in 8.4.3., the value of humans is highlighted. The participants reckon elements, including human efforts, creativity, and companionship, essential to their experience of luxury. Therefore, luxury in post-consumerism could be understood as objects, experiences, moments, and relationships that embody human endeavours, crafts, or even mistakes. This also justifies many of the community members' appreciation for luxury products that are made by consumerist companies and brands (e.g., "these things of luxury items and so on, they're kind of beautiful, but they do encourage the best out of a lot of different craftspeople", Elm), as the production of those luxuries involves craftsmanship. Likewise, the value of nature is emphasised in 8.4.4., where natural resources and access to them are considered luxury. To truly understand and experience the value of nature and natural resources, some community members even endorse practices of returning to premodern ways of living, e.g., carrying water for everyday chores.

Moving forward, the goal of re-conceptualisation focuses on developing alternative, non-consumerist understandings of wealth, poverty, and scarcity (Latouche, 2009; Chatzidakis et al., 2014). Some of these aspects also have been touched upon in the participants' accounts. Birch's utterances in 8.4.2. offer an alternative angle to interpret the notion of 'rich'. Being rich, understood by them, does not mean achieving monetary affluence but instead, referring to a state of adequacy in terms of their physical and mental needs (i.e., "I have friends, I always go to bed to sleep in, I always got food to eat in mealtimes, I have access to health care if I need health care. So, in terms of what I need in my life, most of my material needs are met and always had been met. I've never worried very much that I'm going to be homeless or hungry", Birch). Secondly, the notion of scarcity has been reconstructed in the context of the community. The scarcity in consumer society is often presented as the scarcity of products due to limitations of resources, production capacity, and technology (Catry, 2003), whilst that in the community appears to be the scarcity of 'right' conditions or moments. Here, the term 'right' refers to the freedom of doing and the states of comfort, harmony, and beauty, which were respectively exhibited in 8.4.2. and 8.4.5. In both these sections, the participants illustrate conditions that are almost unattainable. For instance, Birch cannot easily "feel free just to walk away from all commitments and do the things [they] want to do" (see 8.4.2.), and in 8.4.5., Aspen's constant pursuit of harmony and of "everything [being] right" entails moments

> *[...] when the clothes I wear are clean. There's no chemical that interact weirdly on my skin. It's the right texture. It doesn't cause any friction or damage to my skin. It doesn't leach anything when I wash it and put it into the washer and leach any bad things into the environment. It moves right, moves freely. It didn't cause anyone suffering to make, and it will not hurt the environment when it's destroyed. And it is in harmony with my character, with my mind, my desired persona, like how it appears on me, how it presents me.* (Aspen)

The unattainability of such moments of freedom and harmony contributes to the reconceptualisation of scarcity and subsequently luxury. The notion of luxury in these contexts is constructed on the basis of something being scarce but, in the meantime, desired. The community residents regard freedom of doing, comfort, harmony, and beauty as luxury because these people crave but rarely possess any of these aspects. The shortage of luxury provision persists, and desires for luxury do not recede, even among people who intend to live outside of the logic of consumer capitalism to withdraw from the endless buying and consumption of consumerism. Nevertheless, the nuance lies in whether the things craved are products of

consumer society for fulfilling individualistic desires or are entities that represent and deliver alternative values such as human efforts, nature, freedom, and harmony.

8.6. Chapter Summary

This chapter presents the community members' discursive constructions of the notion of luxury. To them, luxury is ambivalent, relative, and socially constructed. Because of this, their attitudes towards luxury often seemed contradictory and ambiguous. More importantly, the findings of this chapter often overlap with what has been discovered in previous chapters. Therefore, the discussion of this chapter draws on threads from the literature review and preceding analysis chapters of the thesis, attempting to conceptualise the concept of 'post-consumerist luxury'. The next chapter will revisit the highlights of each analysis chapter and conclude the thesis's final understanding of 'post-consumerism' and 'post-consumerist luxury'.

CHAPTER 9:

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

9.1. Introduction

An overall discussion regarding the thesis is presented in this chapter. A review of the previous four analysis chapters is presented in the first section, providing a landscape of the findings and analyses made thus far. The overarching theme of this thesis is then unfolded in the next section, suggesting that post-consumerism and post-consumerist luxury *per se* are characterised by ambivalence, contradiction, and liminality. This chapter also brings together findings from the analysis chapters to offer a final examination of post-consumerist luxury and the nuances of the term in different contexts. The contributions, limitations, and implications for future research of the thesis follow to pull together an end of this chapter.

9.2. Review of Analysis Chapters

Chapter 5 investigated how the notion of luxury is unconventionally understood and constructed by non-mainstream parties, i.e., alternative media. Data drawn from contents produced by five independent alternative media were used to study the media's discursive construction of the notion of luxury. Consequently, two constructs of luxury were unpacked. The term 'luxury' is used by alternative media to refer to either consumerist objects, including material entities and experiential activities, or social capital, such as privilege. Further, the chapter also examined how alternative media construct these two types of luxury. It suggested that the media tend to employ a 'moralising' repertoire to criticise when the term 'luxury' is used alongside consumerist objects and activities and an 'othering' repertoire to highlight the unattainability and exclusivity of luxury when the term is used in accounts regarding the unequal distribution of social capital. Altogether, alternative media moralise luxuries that are produced and maintained under the logic of capitalist consumerism, and meanwhile, other luxury into a privilege for those with adequate social capital. Several new connotations of luxury also emerged from the analysis. Basics and necessities such as living in normality and having freedom of choice were implied as luxuries, especially under the gloomy backdrop of the pandemic. Stemming from these, this chapter, in the end, proposed the concept of 'post-consumerist luxury' to encapsulate such gloomy and pessimistic constructs of luxury. The concept sets out as an alternative perspective to conceptualise luxury in response to the existing perspectives of consumerist luxury and unconventional luxury. Three theoretical implications were developed and discussed to characterise post-consumerist luxury. First, post-consumerist

luxury should resume moral critiques of luxury. Second, post-consumerist luxury marks a movement towards luxurising normality. Third, solidity regarding what luxury is characterised by can be sought even when the notion of luxury is liquefied.

Chapter 6 transferred the research context from alternative media to the intentional community and looked closely at the dynamics among the community, its members, and their relationships with the mainstream consumer society. Data were collected through a range of ethnographic methods, including participant observation, field notes, and interviewing. The analysis was conducted largely based on the interview transcripts and supplemented with insights from the field notes. The chapter first disclosed the anti-capitalist consensus shared among the community residents, which subsequently contributed to the following discussion in regard to what motivated people to join the community. It was discovered that people joined the community for alternatives, to become different, to heal from traumas, to practise alternative principles of living, or to obtain a better life. These motivations also signalled the community members' inclination to sanctify and romanticise the community, for many of them described the community as a sanctuary and a playground for alternative, post-capitalist experiments. However, the glorified image of the community often shattered after these people had developed deeper connections with the place. The analysis unfolded three challenges the community residents had commonly encountered and experienced. First, 'involuntary frugality', that is, some residents found themselves involuntarily impoverished, financially and mentally, after living and working in the community for a while and eventually developed a dependence on the community. Second, 'temptation, guilt, and morality' revealed the community residents' ambivalent attitude towards consumer society. These people are attracted by the appeal of consumer society and simultaneously feel guilty for it because they perceive indulgence in consumerism as immoral. Third, 'inevitable entanglement' turned to the practical aspect of alternative living and suggested that the community members' anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist practices could only be fulfilled to a certain extent, and their engagements with the mainstream are inevitable. Regarding these, the concept of liminality was drawn to provide a theoretical ground for understanding the ambivalence between the community residents and the external consumer society. The community had been deconstructed as a liminal space which depends on, is constrained by, extends, and inherits from mainstream capitalist societies. Therefore, individuals entering such a liminal space was risky because they consequently lost the stability provided by mainstream societies. The chapter also interpreted

the community residents as liminal individuals who cope with the constant battle of individualism and collectivism in everyday practice.

Chapter 7 paid particular attention to the conceptualisation of the term 'post-consumerism'. A specific set of questions in the ethnographic interviews was dedicated to exploring the community members' understandings of post-consumerism. The chapter first characterised post-consumerism as equivocal, elusive, and apocalyptic. Then, it examined how the community members re-evaluate, reconceptualise, restructure, redistribute, re-localise, reduce, reuse and recycle in daily practice to concretise post-consumerism. Of these, alternative values, including craftsmanship, interpersonal engagement, and nature, emerged, and the notion of abundance was reconceptualised from referring to monetary wealth to mental fulfilment attained from reciprocal acts. In terms of restructuring, the current monetary system was suggested to be abolished, and closer social relations, such as communities, were endorsed. Degrowth ideas, including sharing, local economy, self-sufficiency, voluntary simplicity, and the practice of reuse, repair, and recycling, were also drawn upon in the participants' accounts in achieving post-consumerism. Stemming from the apocalyptic construct of post-consumerism, a critical rethink regarding the current homogeneous conceptualisation of post-consumerism was evoked at the end of the chapter. In doing so, the chapter argued that post-consumerism does not simply represent an optimistic vision of future societies but is better understood as a sensibility in which consumerist and anti-consumerist discourses are at play. As such, post-consumerist research should centre on how consumers navigate through the contradictory discourses of consumerism and anti-consumerism and mitigate the sense of liminality derived from the contradiction.

Chapter 8 returned to luxury and studied how luxury is understood, obtained, and experienced in the community. As in the two preceding chapters, data used in this chapter were drawn from the ethnographic interviews. An ambiguous, ambivalent attitude towards luxury had been captured. The community residents described luxury as a relative and socially constructed concept. Although, on most occasions, the community members perceived luxury as immoral and alien, they also employed the term to refer to things they desired, especially non-consumerist notions such as clean water, food, and time. This led to unpacking a series of alternative connotations of luxury. Following a post-consumerist ethos, luxury was depicted as the satisfaction that could only be accessed through non-monetary inputs, as the freedom of doing without constraints and concerns, as efforts, creativity, and companionship of human

beings, as basic natural resources, and as a holistic experience of comfort, harmony, and beauty. These connotations delineated a landscape of post-consumerist luxury in practice. In the meantime, as the last analysis chapter, this chapter also connected threads from other analysis chapters. It studied the praxis of post-consumerist luxury to add to the conceptual development of the term in Chapter 5. Calling on the analysis in Chapter 7, this chapter indicated a sequence of alternative values underpinning the formation of post-consumerist luxury. It suggested that many post-consumerist connotations of luxury were shaped by the community members' appreciation of human endeavours, nature, freedom, and harmony. Besides, several classic characteristics of luxury were reframed and reconstructed in conceptualising post-consumerist luxury. For example, the accessibility of luxury no longer relies on one's social or economic advantages but depends on the person's endeavours. The socially constructed exclusivity of luxury is dissolved and replaced by factual scarcity.

9.3. Ambivalence, Contradiction, and Liminality

Across these analysis chapters, ambivalence, contradiction, and liminality are the overarching themes that recurringly appear throughout. On the individual consumers' level, ambivalence and contradiction were observed in the community members' attitudes towards consumer society, post-consumerism, and luxury. The composition of temptation, guilt, and morality discussed in Chapter 6 (see 6.4.2.) delineated such. Joy appears beside guilt when the community members submit to the temptation of consumerism. Likewise, luxury was presented in Chapter 8 as a notion that the community members contempt and distance from but simultaneously find desirable. Such ambivalent attitudes also contributed to the community members constructing post-consumerism and luxury into equivocal notions. Post-consumerism was given opposite interpretations in Chapter 7, where an optimistic future of sustainable and ethical living sits side-by-side with the vision of an apocalypse. In Chapter 8, luxury was treated by the participants as an ambiguous notion, as many of them were unsure to what extent a thing should be regarded as a luxury (e.g., Willow, at the beginning of 8.2. tried to distinguish luxury from unnecessary). Connecting the individual level with the macro context of capitalist consumerism, this is where liminality comes into play. Liminality is concerned with the back-and-forth wrestle between the community members' ethical intentions and the constraints of the broader consumer capitalism where they are situated. The liminality is inherent in the community's structure, for the community *per se* is a liminal space, which enables post-

capitalist practices to actualise but, in the meantime, maintains and supports the operation of the capitalist system (e.g., the community still subscribes to a food bank, see 6.5.1.2.). Besides, the liminality also resides inside each community member and manifests as them trying to find an equilibrium in the continuing interplay between individualism and collectivism.

Post-consumerism, as a sensibility, reflects such ambivalence, contradiction, and liminality. In 7.4., post-consumerism was suggested to consist of entanglement of contradictory discourses of consumerism and anti-consumerism. Examining the analysis chapters, the community members' accounts presented contradictory constructions regarding their intertwinements with mainstream capitalist consumerism (e.g., 'involuntary frugality', 'temptation, guilt and morality', and 'inevitable entanglement' in 6.4.). The contradictory but patterned feature of these constructions was deemed the essence of post-consumerism. More constructions like these were captured again in the subsequent Chapter 8, where luxury was, to some extent, desirable and pleasurable but considered problematic and immoral.

9.4. A Final Look at Post-Consumerist Luxury

Before drawing a closure to the thesis, I wish to revisit the concept of post-consumerist luxury one more time by bringing findings from the analysis chapters together. It appeared that the concept of post-consumerist luxury was presented with contradictory undertones in Chapters 5 and 8. In Chapter 5, post-consumerist luxury illustrated a pessimistic approach to understanding luxury in response to the gloomy external social environment of intensifying economic recession, social injustice, climate change, and wealth polarisation. In comparison, the study of the intentional community in Chapter 8 seemed to indicate that the culture and environment of the place enabled more of an optimistic imagination of post-consumerist luxury. There, luxury had been interpreted as a carrier of values that the community members desire and appreciate. For example, these people perceived objects created by human crafts and endeavours as luxuries because the human aspect of the objects is considered valuable in the community's culture.

To this point, one may enquire why these two chapters construct post-consumerist luxury into such a distinct contradiction. I wish to argue that the pessimistic and optimistic connotations are respective manifestations of post-consumerist luxury in mainstream and alternative

contexts, and the underpinning values of these seemingly opposite connotations are, in fact, congruent. Section 8.5.1. reflected such congruence. First, constructs of luxury in both contexts of alternative media and the community embodied moral critiques, implying that morality is valued as an essential component of post-consumerist luxury. The section also highlighted the growing preciousness of nature (and its resources such as water and air) constructed in both chapters. Additionally, having freedom of choice was identified as a privilege, thus a luxury, in section 5.3.2., which echoes the construct in 8.4.2., where luxury referred to the freedom of doing. Such resemblance confirms freedom as another mutual value shared by alternative media and the community. However, this set of values received contrary responses from mainstream capitalism and the alternative, anti-capitalist context of the community.

Alternative media – as a countering force to mainstream media (Harcup, 2005) – centre on reporting and empowering marginalised and subordinate groups (Holt, 2018) in mainstream societies. Such a focus in the mainstream revealed to them the disheartening reality that the values of morals, nature, and freedom were not acknowledged and appreciated there. The media's observation of these unfortunate events contributed to their pessimistic vision of human societies and thereafter motivated them to envisage luxury pessimistically. On the contrary, the community was viewed by its residents as, albeit undeveloped, a post-capitalist playground (see 6.3.5.2.), for it provided a space for people to re-evaluate what should be prioritised in post-consumerism and to experiment with practices of alternative living based on the values of morals, nature, and freedom. Being given the opportunities to explore and experience alternatives encouraged the community members to show more optimism in their envisioning of post-consumerist luxury. With these being said, I felt the necessity to revisit Table 5.4.1., which outlines consumerist luxury, unconventional luxury, and post-consumerist luxury as three different discourses to conceptualise luxury. Taking the above discussion into consideration, the table has been revised as follows.

Table 9.4.1. Revised discourses of conceptualising luxury

Discourses	***Underpinning assumptions***	***Relationship with capitalism***	***Constructs of luxury***
Consumerist luxury	Economic growth, consumer culture	Endorse capitalism	Luxury is demoralised. Luxury is priced, branded, and traded as consumer goods and services.

Unconventional luxury	Consumer emancipation, post-modernism, liquid modernity	Reform capitalism	Luxury is ephemeral, inexpensive, consumer-defined, and inconspicuous. Luxury should be accessible to anyone in principle. Luxury is inspiring, caring, celebratory, and playful.
Post-consumerist luxury	Pessimism on growth, social justice, and the environment	Anti-capitalism	Luxury should be moralised. Luxury represents the shrinking availability of natural resources and human rights. Luxury remains exclusive and scarce.
(Revised) Post-consumerist luxury	Humanitarianism, endorsement of humans, nature, morals, and freedom	Post-capitalism (degrowth)	Luxury should be moral. Luxury appreciates humans and nature. Luxury represents the state of harmony and freedom. Luxury remains scarce but no longer exclusive.

The revised post-consumerist luxury, as the table shows, exhibits differences in relation to the original post-consumerist luxury regarding its underpinning assumptions, relationship with capitalism, and its constructs of luxury. Different from the pessimism of post-consumerist luxury, revised post-consumerist luxury adopts humanitarianism and post-consumerist values (i.e., humans, nature, morals, and freedom) as the underpinning assumptions based on which the concept of luxury takes shape. The revised post-consumerist luxury also moves a step further than post-consumerist luxury in terms of its radical attitude towards capitalism. Instead of adopting an anti-capitalist standpoint, which develops critique primarily in opposition to capitalism, the revised post-consumerist luxury embodies post-capitalism (or degrowth), which refers to a shift beyond "capitalocentric" discourse and aims to make visible a diversity of alternative ways of provisioning and (re)productive practices (Schmid, 2019). These fundamental differences lead to division in their constructs of luxury. Alternative media maintained the belief that luxury is exclusively entitled to the privileged, and therefore luxury, which symbolises such social injustice, should be moralised. In contrast, people in the community contended that luxury in post-consumerism should be intrinsically moral, as the

notion of luxury is produced and shaped in line with the appreciation of humans, nature, morals, and freedom. The revised post-consumerist luxury also addressed the exclusivity of luxury differently. Based on the analysis in 8.4.1. and later in 8.5.1., luxury had been suggested by the community members to be no longer exclusive in post-consumerism, but the construct by alternative media insisted that luxury remains exclusive.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the four discourses presented in Table 9.4.1. do not operate independently and separately. Instead, as post-consumerism prescribed, multiple, and on some occasions contradictory, discourses coexist to impact how individual consumers understand and negotiate their relationships with luxury. This further elucidates why the community members problematised and moralised luxury at the start of 8.3. and then from 8.3.3. onwards expressed desires and praises for luxury. Another evidence was in 8.2.1., where some community members juxtaposed consumerist notions of luxury (e.g., expensive cars) with post-consumerist notions of luxury (e.g., seeing family). Like the liminality presented in Chapter 6, individual consumers navigate through and in between these four discourses of luxury on a daily basis. At one point, they may recognise the luxuriousness of a four-wheel vehicle because the discourse of consumerist luxury embedded in their knowledge as consumers was evoked; at another point, they may describe good relationships with others as luxury because they believe in the value of human emotions and connections as a part of the discourse of post-consumerist luxury.

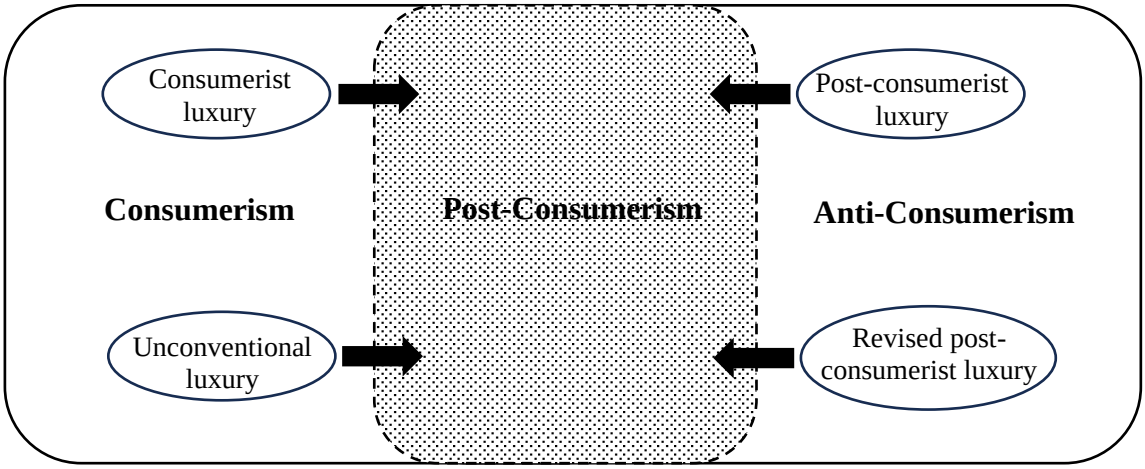
9.5. Post-Consumerism and Post-Consumerist Luxury

The conceptualisations of post-consumerism and post-consumerist luxury were the primary theoretical contributions of this thesis. Therefore, it is worth further elucidating the relationship between these two concepts here. The notions of luxury and post-consumerism were discussed separately in the beginning but started to intertwine as the analysis delved in. The thesis began with two conceptual trajectories. The first trajectory revolves around luxury, of which Chapter 2 presented a review of literature dedicated to this subject, followed by Chapter 5 and the majority of Chapter 8, which investigated how luxury is constructed by alternative media and the community, respectively. In parallel, the second trajectory centred on conceptualising post-consumerism, starting from Chapter 3, which examined capitalist consumerism and existing alternative consumption paradigms through a critical lens. Chapters 6 and 7 also accounted for

parts of this trajectory, especially Chapter 7, which explored how the term 'post-consumerism' is interpreted within the community and thereafter proposed post-consumerism as a sensibility. The discussion of Chapter 8 (i.e. 8.5.) was where all the findings started to interweave with each other; the same for post-consumerism and post-consumerist luxury, whose underpinning values aligned in 8.5.3.

The overarching theme of liminality was the thread that linked the trajectory of post-consumerism with that of post-consumerist luxury. The discussion in Chapter 7 (i.e. 7.4.) suggested that post-consumerism should be understood as a sensibility where consumerist and anti-consumerist discourses exist beside each other, posing constant influence on consumers and subsequently situating them in liminality. Being in such a liminal situation means that individual consumers may draw on various, and sometimes contradictory, discourses to make sense of their everyday lives. Naturally, when concerning the subject of luxury, these individuals also tend to call on multiple luxury discourses to validate their relationships and engagements with luxury. This thesis encapsulated four different discourses of luxury: consumerist luxury, unconventional luxury, post-consumerist luxury, and revised post-consumerist luxury, and offered examples regarding how individuals in the community discursively engaged multiple luxury discourses to construct their perceptions of luxury (e.g. 8.2.1.). Figure 9.5.1. below sums up the relationships of post-consumerism with these four discourses.

Figure 9.5.1. Post-consumerism in relation to various luxury discourses



As the figure illustrates, post-consumerism, if understood as a sensibility, represents the liminal margin between consumerism and anti-consumerism. Of the four luxury discourses,

consumerist luxury and unconventional luxury are depicted as aligned with the logic of consumerism, and post-consumerism and revised post-consumerism are engaged within the territory of anti-consumerism. However, it is important to emphasise that this figure does not intend to reflect the exact position of each luxury discourse in relation to consumerism and anti-consumerism; instead, it offers indications in terms of whether each discourse is more on consumerist or anti-consumerist logic based on the literature review and analysis presented thus far. For example, although unconventional luxury is interested in exploring notions of luxury that are inexpensive and consumer-defined (Thomsen et al., 2020), it does not necessarily seek radical subversion of the current capitalist system but rather pursues reform of the system and ephemeral emancipation of consumers (suggested in Table 9.4.1.). Therefore, unconventional luxury is presented leaning on consumerism in this figure. Moreover, the figure also communicates that individuals within the liminal space of post-consumerism are inclined to simultaneously employ discourses of luxury underpinned by the logic of consumerism and anti-consumerism. By doing so, it allows them to legitimise their ambivalent attitudes and contradictory actions against luxury and capitalist consumer society at large (e.g., the contradictory theme of 'luxury is problematic but also somewhat desirable' unpacked in 8.3.; or as a participant uttered, "[a community resident] lived in the woods, nothing else, and yet at the end of the day, [they were] there buying bitcoin", Acacia). To encapsulate the relationship between post-consumerism and post-consumerist luxury in short, post-consumerist luxury, along with revised post-consumerist luxury, does not simply refer to a single form of luxury in post-consumerism; instead, they represent particular luxury discourses that liminal individuals in post-consumerism may draw on to mediate their ambivalent relationships with luxury and neutralise their feelings of in-betweenness.

9.6. Contributions, Limitations and Future Research

The foremost contribution made in this thesis is exploring alternative notions of luxury beyond capitalist consumerism. This exploration was built upon existing discourses of consumerist luxury and unconventional luxury. Currently, consumerist luxury endorses consumers to immerse themselves in emotional and sensory fulfilment offered by consumer culture, and unconventional luxury research is embedded in an emancipatory, celebratory, and liquid framework. Consumers indulging in luxuries as such symbolises liberation and hedonism; luxury is perceptual and accessible to many (Thomsen et al., 2020). Regarding these, the thesis

called for a rethink of this liberating and playful essence and drew on empirical findings to propose the concept of 'post-consumerist luxury' as an alternative approach to conceptualising luxury. The thesis invoked moral critique to add a moral dimension to the ongoing conceptualisation of post-consumerist luxury, countervailing the celebratory spirit by showing how alternative media and the community moralised luxury, even when it has taken unorthodox forms. Second, the thesis witnessed a shift in value priorities and consequentially offered an alternative set of values, including humans, nature, morals, and freedom, to underpin post-consumerist luxury. Building upon literature on unconventional luxury, the thesis further unpacked alternative manifestations and practices of luxury beyond consumerism. For example, many things that used to be normal in life, e.g., 'everyday luxury' (Banister et al., 2020) and prerequisites of human existence (Cristini and Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2020), are now considered luxurious, and this phenomenon had been encapsulated as 'the luxurisation of normality'. Other mundane objects and experiences, such as human companionship, comfort, and beauty, had also appeared as luxuries in the community members' accounts. The fourth argument addressed the liquefication of luxury, responding to the viewpoint that the meaning of luxury is agentic, liquid, and variable (see Bardhi et al., 2020; Thomsen et al., 2020). Although agreeing with this viewpoint, the thesis noted from the data that scarcity, rather than exclusivity, remains fundamental to luxury, thus providing solidity to the highly liquefied notions of luxury. Besides, the thesis also suggested that the way to access luxury had departed from orthodox means, such as purchasing or entitlement, and married with intentions and endeavours.

A theoretical contribution of this thesis revolves around advancing the conceptualisation of post-consumerism. Current studies of post-consumerism in academia tend to construct the term optimistically, suggesting it as hedonism obtained from alternative egalitarian and ecological means (Soper, 2000, 2017), as the salve of human societies once the current capitalist economies crumble (Cohen, 2013), or as the consumption logic of degrowth in which the focus of societies shifts from consumption to social and community participation (Chatzidakis et al., 2014). This thesis, firstly, offered a possibility of interpreting the term 'post-consumerism' alternatively as a portrayal of apocalypse. Besides, existing discussions approached the term from a theoretical and predictive perspective, thus how post-consumerism manifests in practice in contemporary societies remained ambiguous. In illuminating this ambiguity, the thesis proposed to interpret post-consumerism as a sensibility. Post-consumerism is encapsulated in a dynamic interplay of the contradictory discourses of consumerism and anti-consumerism. This way of interpretation provided a theoretical foundation that allows scholars to view post-

consumerism as an analytical object to study, rather than a theoretical prophecy that is difficult to grasp.

Meanwhile, the thesis turned its focus to alternative groups and parties, which are under-utilised in consumer research. The research contexts of alternative media and the intentional community responded to the call for future research to "explore how different agency is embedded in and triggered by different contexts" by Thomsen and colleagues (2020: 444). Given the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic of this study, the thesis contributes by providing an empirical scope to illustrate how the notion of luxury adapts and transforms in a time of crises and volatility. It contended that luxury could take shape in a dark time to reflect dismal and pessimistic realities, differing from the optimistic and hedonic interpretations of luxury disseminated by existing consumerist and unconventional luxury literature. This argument echoes the theoretical viewpoint of 'terminal marketing' (Ahlberg et al., 2022). According to this, the predominant marketing discourses believe that contemporary consumer culture has the potential to transform towards a better state where consumers' desires are satisfied through means that are harmless to societies and the environment (Ahlberg et al., 2022). Terminal marketing countervails such optimism and alternatively offers a pessimistic lens for critical critiques. The findings of the study of alternative media contributed to this pessimistic current, for they depict a dystopian reality where access to normal lives, alongside basic rights, has become a scarce luxury. Further, studying the intentional community added another piece to existing studies of degrowth activism, answering the call for placing the agenda of transforming to a post-growth society at the centre of marketing thought and praxis (Lloveras et al., 2022). The study of the community, through the lens of luxury studies, explored how the value system and concepts such as abundance, poverty, and scarcity were re-configured in a post-consumerist context, offering practical implications for future movements toward degrowth.

Lastly, this thesis is relevant to a broader enquiry in consumer research, that is, to understand consumers and their relationships with consumption outside the market and within unconventional, extraordinary, or even antimarket environments (e.g., Belk and Costa, 1998; Campbell et al., 2019; Kozinets, 2002). Traditionally, studies of this kind focus on unravelling what it is like once consumers escape, either temporarily (e.g., Kozinets, 2002) or more permanently (e.g., Campbell et al., 2019), the market. However, it seems uncanny, or even scary, to imagine the existence of luxury in those scenarios or any anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist contexts. Existing studies have exhibited resistance to the mainstream consumerist

markets from the people who escape. As Kozinets (2002) observed in the Burning Man Festival, any selling activities initiated by the participants are strictly prohibited, not even to mention engagements with luxury. However, this thesis showcased the existence of luxury in alternative contexts, transcending the boundaries of the capitalist market and consumerism. Although, in many cases, luxury remained unpopular and incompatible with the values these alternative contexts stand for, post-consumerist connotations of luxury emerged, reflecting episodes of social injustice and vulnerable groups' hardship as well as projecting post-consumerist citizens' visions for post-consumerist living in which wellbeing, harmony, and freedom are achieved.

It is worth highlighting that limitations remain in this thesis and wait for future research to address. The notion of luxury and the research contexts discussed in the thesis are still constrained within the Euro-centric framework of knowledge. The alternative media employed in this research majorly circulate among and address social issues of Western countries for English-speaking audiences. Likewise, although it has a composition of cosmopolitan residents, the intentional community engaged in this research is rooted in the English culture in many aspects, which had been observed from the community's diet, its daily routine, and my conversations with people from other cultural backgrounds. As a researcher from East Asia, my response to, and interaction with, the cultural distinction of the Englishness of the place could have been a worthwhile topic in the analysis so as to dissolve the Euro-centric knowledge production of this research to some extent. A further concern relates to the ethnographic study, as it invited the participants to comment on the social environment that they live in and the people they live with. This request entailed the potential risk of damaging the participants' reputations in the community and relationships with others. Ethical issues as such should be foreseen and more carefully handled in the future.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Email to the community

Dear [The Community] residents,

My name is Shuo Feng, and I am a PhD student in critical consumer culture at Durham University. I am writing to ask if it would be possible to invite you to take part in my research. I have explored [The Community's] website and other information I could find, and am very interested in what you want to achieve as a community.

My research shares mutual interests with [The Community]. Firstly, I am keen to understand what alternative lifestyles have emerged in response to advanced consumerism so as to develop a notion which I call 'post-consumerism'. Secondly, I am interested in exploring the notion of unconventional luxury in a community such as yours, to redefine luxury as interests in improving wellbeing and acts of caring rather than expensive consumer goods. To gain these insights, I would like to conduct participant observation and interviews if you agree to take part. I have attached an information sheet to introduce the details of the research and to explain potential ethical issues. The research could supplement the community's philosophy and provide a different perspective for more people to understand and engage with it. My study is supervised by Dr Gretchen Larsen and Prof Nick Ellis who are both experienced academics in this field.

I am fully aware of the potential risks of conducting research under COVID-19 circumstances, thereby in the attached information sheet I introduce what measures will be taken to ensure your safety during the research. I am open to discussion about when the study should start and keen to hear your opinions on it. If you are concerned with the risk of face-to-face contact, I am also happy to adjust my research methods or explore alternative ways of conducting them, e.g., shortening the length of my visit or doing interviews via video.

I sincerely hope you find it of interest. I would be very grateful if I could get an opportunity to learn more about your community, and hopefully my research would contribute to it. Please don't hesitate to get in touch if you have any questions or would like further information. Full contact details for myself and my supervisors are below. I very much look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully,
Shuo

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Appendix B: Gatekeeper Information Sheet

INFORMATION SHEET

Understanding the Transformation of Luxury in Post-Consumerism
Researcher: **Shuo Feng**

You are invited to take part in a study that I am conducting as part of my doctoral research project at Durham University.
This study has received ethical approval from Ethics Advisory Committee of Durham University. The rights and responsibilities of anyone taking part in Durham University research are set out in our 'Participants Charter':
https://www.dur.ac.uk/research.innovation/governance/ethics/considerations/people/charter/
Before you decide whether to agree to take part it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read the following information carefully. Please get in contact if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?
The aim of this study is to explore emerging forms or concepts of luxury within 'frugal' or 'consumer free' communities (or post-consumerist communities). I would like to conduct interviews and participant observation at [The Community]. The participant observation means that the researcher (i.e., myself) being present on the premises, observing activities there, interacting with the participants and taking notes about my experience. The interviews will be conducted between the researcher and individual residents of [The Community]. I would also like to take photographs on the premises, upon your permission. The data collected from this study will contribute to the completion of my doctoral thesis.

Why has [The Community] been invited to take part?
[The Community] promotes alternative ways of living. It encourages people to live in tune with the environment and to reconsider preconceived notions of material needs. After years of development, the community provides an ideal setting to study possible emerging forms of luxury in a post-consumerist context.

Does [The Community] have to take part? Do our members have to take part?
Your organisation's participation is entirely voluntary, and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw at any point up until two weeks after the observations have been conducted, without giving a reason. Your rights in relation to withdrawing any data that is identifiable to you are explained in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

Your residents' participations are also entirely voluntary. I would like to ask the organisation to inform the residents about the project so they can ask questions and decide whether to take part or not. If they do agree to take part, any resident can withdraw at any point up until two weeks after the observations have been conducted, without giving a reason. Their rights in relation to withdrawing any data that is identifiable to them are explained in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

What will happen if our organisation takes part?
If you agree to take part in the study, you will be asked to inform your residents about the research. Residents who express willingness to take part will be offered time to ask questions. The full study will include participant observation and interviews, and it is estimated to be finished in 3 to 4 months.

The location of the participant observation will be [The Community]. I would like to live with the community residents, join their daily activities (cooking, working, etc.) and take notes of what I see, hear, and feel. Some photographs will be taken as a part of the research, which, in most cases, will not feature people; and in the cases when photographs might contain people, I will ask for participants' consent. They can either agree to photos being taken, taken and faces blurred, or not being taken at all. In the later phase of this study, I would like to interview some of the participants. The interviews will also be entirely voluntary. Individuals who express interest in participation will be provided information about the project and sought for consent. They will also be informed that they can omit any questions they do not wish to answer during the interviews.

The participants will also be provided an optional debriefing session before publishing outputs that containing information about your organisation and members. I will send relevant sections of my work to the organisation or to individual participants themselves and give them time to discuss their concerns. This will enable us to detect more potentially sensitive contents and to make the information more anonymous by changing or removing details.

Are there any potential risks involved?
Even though we will take every possible practice to protect anonymity of individuals and the organisation, we can't fully guarantee anonymity, especially of the organisation. This is because even though the name of the organisation will be anonymised, the audience of this research's outputs (e.g., thesis, academic journal articles, conference presentations) may still potentially identify the organisation through information, quotes, interview transcripts and photographs provided in the outputs.

What measures will be taken to ensure our safety during COVID-19?
You and your residents' health and safety are prioritised in this research. I will take every possible precaution to ensure your safety, which may include providing a negative COVID test result before my visit, self-isolating for 14 days upon my arrival, or shortening the length of my visit if preferred. If you are still concerned with the risk of face-to-face contacts, I am also happy to adjust my research methods or explore alternative ways of conducting them at your convenience, e.g., doing interviews via video. I am open to discussion if you have any questions and suggestions.

Will my data be kept confidential?
All information obtained during the study will be kept confidential. If the data is published it will be entirely anonymous and will not be identifiable as yours. *(Full details are included in the accompanying Privacy Notice.)*

What will happen to the results of the project?
The results of the project will mainly be distributed to the completion of my doctoral thesis and may be included in other projects outputs, e.g., academic journal articles and conference presentations. No personal data will be shared, however anonymised (i.e., not identifiable) data may be used in publications, reports, presentations, web pages and other research outputs. At the end of the project, anonymised data may be archived and shared with others for legitimate research purposes.

Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns about this study?
My name is Shuo Feng and I am studying towards PhD at Durham University. My research is about exploring the transformation of luxury within post-consumerist environment. My study is supervised by Dr Gretchen Larsen and Prof Nick Ellis who both are experienced academics in the management and marketing discipline.
If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please speak to the researcher or their supervisors. Their contact details are provided below. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please submit a complaint via the University's Complaints Process.

Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study.

Contact details:
Shuo Feng
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Appendix C: Privacy Notice

Privacy Notice

Durham University

PART 1 – GENERIC PRIVACY NOTICE

Durham University has a responsibility under data protection legislation to provide individuals with information about how we process their personal data. We do this in a number of ways, one of which is the publication of privacy notices. Organisations variously call them a privacy statement, a fair processing notice or a privacy policy.

To ensure that we process your personal data fairly and lawfully we are required to inform you:

- Why we collect your data
- How it will be used
- Who it will be shared with

We will also explain what rights you have to control how we use your information and how to inform us about your wishes. Durham University will make the Privacy Notice available via the website and at the point we request personal data.

Our privacy notices comprise two parts – a generic part (ie common to all of our privacy notices) and a part tailored to the specific processing activity being undertaken.

Data Controller

The Data Controller is Durham University. If you would like more information about how the University uses your personal data, please see the University's Information Governance webpages or contact Information Governance Unit:

Telephone: (0191 33) 46246 or 46103
E-mail: information.governance@durham.ac.uk

Information Governance Unit also coordinate response to individuals asserting their rights under the legislation. Please contact the Unit in the first instance.

Data Protection Officer

The Data Protection Officer is responsible for advising the University on compliance with Data Protection legislation and monitoring its performance against it. If you have any concerns regarding the way in which the University is processing your personal data, please contact the Data Protection Officer:

Jennifer Sewel
University Secretary

Telephone: (0191 33) 46144
E-mail: university.secretary@durham.ac.uk

Your rights in relation to your personal data Privacy notices and/or consent

You have the right to be provided with information about how and why we process your personal data. Where you have the choice to determine how your personal data will be used, we will ask you for consent. Where you do not have a choice (for example, where we have a legal obligation to process the personal data), we will provide you with a privacy notice. A privacy notice is a verbal or written statement that explains how we use personal data.

Whenever you give your consent for the processing of your personal data, you receive the right to withdraw that consent at any time. Where withdrawal of consent will have an impact on the services we are able to provide, this will be explained to you, so that you can determine whether it is the right decision for you.

Accessing your personal data

You have the right to be told whether we are processing your personal data and, if so, to be given a copy of it. This is known as the right of subject access. You can find out more about this right on the University's Subject Access Requests webpage.

Right to rectification

If you believe that personal data we hold about you is inaccurate, please contact us and we will investigate. You can also request that we complete any incomplete data.

Once we have determined what we are going to do, we will contact you to let you know.

Right to erasure

You can ask us to erase your personal data in any of the following circumstances:

- We no longer need the personal data for the purpose it was originally collected
- You withdraw your consent and there is no other legal basis for the processing
- You object to the processing and there are no overriding legitimate grounds for the processing
- The personal data have been unlawfully processed
- The personal data have to be erased for compliance with a legal obligation
- The personal data have been collected in relation to the offer of information society services (information society services are online services such as banking or social media sites).

Once we have determined whether we will erase the personal data, we will contact you to let you know.

Right to restriction of processing

You can ask us to restrict the processing of your personal data in the following circumstances:

- You believe that the data is inaccurate and you want us to restrict processing until we

  determine whether it is indeed inaccurate

- The processing is unlawful and you want us to restrict processing rather than erase it
- We no longer need the data for the purpose we originally collected it but you need it in

  order to establish, exercise or defend a legal claim and

- You have objected to the processing and you want us to restrict processing until we

  determine whether our legitimate interests in processing the data override your

  objection.
  Once we have determined how we propose to restrict processing of the data, we will contact you to discuss and, where possible, agree this with you.

  Retention

  The University keeps personal data for as long as it is needed for the purpose for which it was originally collected. Most of these time periods are set out in the University Records Retention Schedule.

Making a complaint

If you are unsatisfied with the way in which we process your personal data, we ask that you let us know so that we can try and put things right. If we are not able to resolve issues to your satisfaction, you can refer the matter to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). The ICO can be contacted at:

Information Commissioner's Office Wycliffe House Water Lane Wilmslow Cheshire SK9 5AF
Telephone: 0303 123 1113

Website: Information Commissioner's Office

PART 2 – TAILORED PRIVACY NOTICE

This section of the Privacy Notice provides you with the privacy information that you need to know before you provide data to the University for the particular purpose(s) stated below.

Project Title: Understanding the Transformation of Luxury in Post-Consumerism

Type(s) of personal data collected and held by the researcher and method of collection:

Data will be collected through participant observation and interview. These will include standard data of the organisation (e.g. name, address) and individual participants (e.g. name, age, gender, occupation), transcripts and audio recordings of interviews with individual participants, and photographs that are taken on premises, upon your permission.

Lawful Basis

Under data protection legislation, we need to tell you the lawful basis we are relying on to process your data. The lawful basis we are relying on is public task: the processing is necessary for an activity being carried out as part of the University's public task, which is defined as teaching, learning and research.

For further information see:

https://durham.ac.uk/research.innovation/governance/ethics/governance/dp/legalbasis/

How personal data is stored?

All personal data will be held securely and strictly confidential to the research team. You will be allocated an anonymous alias or pseudonym for data collection which will not be connected to your name or identity. Signed consent forms will be stored separately to project data. All personal data in electronic form will be stored on the university computer in password protected folders and files, and any hardcopies will be kept in locked storage. Data will not be available to anyone outside the research team. The conversation will be recorded and stored on an encrypted device until it has been transcribed by the researcher. No-one else will have access to the recording, and it will be erased once the transcript has been completed.

How personal data is processed?

Data collected through participant observation and interviews will be used to understand how the organisation and its members view luxury based on their life experience and the community culture.

Information will be entered into a database for analysis. The anonymisation will start two weeks after the data collection conducted. After six months the data will be completely anonymised and the original records, including any information which can identify you personally, will be destroyed. The recorded conversation will be transcribed by the researcher,

and personal information will be coded and anonymised. The original recording will then be erased.

Withdrawal of data

You can request withdrawal of your information at any point up until two weeks after the study (i.e. participant observation or interview) has been conducted, without giving a reason. I will start anonymising your data after the two-week window. Once the anonymisation has started it will not be possible to withdraw your data nor identify you from any of the data we hold.

Who the researcher shares personal data with?

The results of the project will mainly be distributed to the completion of my doctoral thesis and may be included in other projects outputs, e.g. academic journal articles and conference presentations. No personal data will be shared, however anonymised (i.e. not identifiable) data may be used in publications, reports, presentations, web pages and other research outputs. At the end of the project, anonymised data may be archived and shared with others for legitimate research purposes.

Please be aware that if you disclose information which indicates the potential for serious and immediate harm to yourself or others, the research team may be obliged to breach confidentiality and report this to relevant authorities. This includes disclosure of child protection offences such as the physical or sexual abuse of minors, the physical abuse of vulnerable adults, money laundering, or other crimes covered by prevention of terrorism legislation. Where you disclose behaviour (by yourself or others) that is potentially illegal but does not present serious and immediate danger to others, the researcher will, where appropriate, signpost you to relevant services, but the information you provide will be kept confidential (unless you explicitly request otherwise).

How long personal data is held by the researcher?

Your identifiable data will be held for six months, after which it will be fully anonymised.

Contact details

If you have any concerns regarding the processing of your personal data, or you wish to withdraw your data from the project, contact the researcher or their supervisors. Their contact details are provided below.

Shuo Feng

Postgraduate Research Student, Management & Marketing Department, Durham Business School, Durham University
shuo.feng@durham.ac.uk

Gretchen Larsen (supervisor)

Associate Professor in Marketing, Management & Marketing Department, Durham Business School, Durham University
gretchen.larsen@durham.ac.uk

Nick Ellis (supervisor)

Professor of Marketing, Management & Marketing Department, Durham Business School, Durham University
n.t.ellis@durham.ac.uk

Appendix D: Gatekeeper Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Understanding the Transformation of Luxury in Post-Consumerism

Researcher: **Shuo Feng**

This form is to confirm that you understand the purposes of the project, what is involved and that you are happy to take part. Please tick each box to indicate your agreement:

- ☐ I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet and the privacy notice for the above project and have been given the opportunity to ask questions.

- ☐ I understand who will have access to data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.

- ☐ I understand that the participation of our organisation and members in this research is entirely voluntary and that the organisation or members are free to withdraw at any point up until two weeks after the observations have been conducted, without giving a reason.

- ☐ I understand that members of the organisation are free to refuse answer to any question asked by the researcher.

- ☐ I understand that the study may involve photographs of the premises being taken and understand how photos will be used in research outputs. If the photographs include persons, the consent of those persons will be sought, and they can also refuse to be photographed.

- ☐ I agree for our organisation and members to take part in the above project.

Name of the organisation: ……

Gatekeeper's Name (IN BLOCK LETTERS): ……

Gatekeeper's Signature: ……

Date: ……

Appendix E: Interview Invitation Email

Dear _____,

I hope this finds you well.

I would like to invite you to join in an interview with me for my research about [The Community]. My time at [The Community] has been great and life-changing to me, therefore, I wish I could have a short piece of your time to hear your experience with [The Community].

The interview will not take longer than 90 minutes and is completely voluntary. All our conversations will be kept confidential and only my supervisors and I will have access to them. I have attached the Information Sheet and Privacy Notice, which introduce my research in more detail.

Please let me know if you would like to participate. If so, please feel free to suggest a date and time which suit you best. Considering the distance between us, may I suggest we use a video call (e.g., Zoom, Skype etc.) to conduct the interview. But of course, if you happen to plan to visit [The Community] at any point in November and early December this year, I am more than happy to arrange the interview in person.

At last, thank you for being so supportive of my research the whole time. Please don't hesitate to get in touch if you have any questions about the interview or about any other aspects of my research.

Best wishes,

Shuo

Appendix F: Interview Information Sheet

INFORMATION SHEET

Understanding the Transformation of Luxury in Post-Consumerism
Researcher: **Shuo Feng**

You are invited to take part in a study that I am conducting as part of my doctoral research project at Durham University.

This study has received ethical approval from Ethics Advisory Committee of Durham University. The rights and responsibilities of anyone taking part in Durham University research are set out in our 'Participants Charter': https://www.dur.ac.uk/research.innovation/governance/ethics/considerations/people/charter/

Before you decide whether to agree to take part it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read the following information carefully. Please get in contact if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?
The aim of this study is to explore emerging forms or concepts of luxury within 'frugal' or 'consumer free' communities (or post-consumerist communities). I would like to interview residents of [The Community], talking about the life, culture, beliefs and personal experience there. The data collected from this study will contribute to the completion of my doctoral thesis.

Why have I been invited to take part?
You were chosen because you are a current resident of [The Community]. [The Community] promotes alternative ways of living. It encourages people to live in tune with the environment and to reconsider preconceived notions of material needs. After years of development, the community provides an ideal setting to study possible emerging forms of luxury in a post-consumerist context. Therefore, interviews with its residents will help me to discover new perception of luxury, from individual consumers' perspective.

Do I have to take part?
Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw at any point up until two weeks after the observations have been conducted, without giving a reason. You can omit any question you do not wish to answer during the interview. Your rights in relation to withdrawing any data that is identifiable to you are explained in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

What will happen if I take part?
If you agree to take part in the study, you will be asked to attend an interview session which will not take longer than 90 minutes and is entirely voluntary. Information about the project will be provided and consent will be sought before the interview.

You will also be provided an optional debriefing session before publishing outputs that containing information about you. I will send relevant sections of my work and give you time to express concerns. This will enable us to detect more potentially sensitive contents and to make the information more anonymous by changing or removing details.

Are there any potential risks involved?
Even though we will take every possible practice to protect anonymity of individuals and the organisation, we can't fully guarantee anonymity, especially of the organisation. This is because even though the name of the organisation will be anonymised, the audience of this research's outputs (e.g. thesis, academic journal articles, conference presentations) may still potentially identify the organisation through information, quotes, interview transcripts and photographs provided in the outputs.

Will my data be kept confidential?
All information obtained during the study will be kept confidential. If the data is published it will be entirely anonymous and will not be identifiable as yours. *(Full details are included in the accompanying Privacy Notice.)*

What will happen to the results of the project?
The results of the project will mainly be distributed to the completion of my doctoral thesis and may be included in other projects outputs, e.g. academic journal articles, conference presentations. No personal data will be shared, however anonymised (i.e. not identifiable) data may be used in publications, reports, presentations, web pages and other research outputs. At the end of the project, anonymised data may be archived and shared with others for legitimate research purposes.

Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns about this study?
My name is Shuo Feng and I am studying towards PhD at Durham University. My research is about exploring the transformation of luxury within post-consumerist environment. My study is supervised by Gretchen Larsen and Nick Ellis who both are experienced academics in the management and marketing discipline.

If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please speak to the researcher or their supervisors. Their contact details are provided below. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please submit a complaint via the University's Complaints Process.

Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study.

Contact details:
Shuo Feng
Postgraduate Research Student, Management & Marketing Department, Durham Business School, Durham University
shuo.feng@durham.ac.uk
Gretchen Larsen (supervisor)
Associate Professor in Marketing, Management & Marketing Department, Durham Business School, Durham University
gretchen.larsen@durham.ac.uk

Nick Ellis (supervisor)
Professor of Marketing, Management & Marketing Department, Durham Business School, Durham University
n.t.ellis@durham.ac.uk

Appendix G: Interview Consent Form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Understanding the Transformation of Luxury in Post-Consumerism

Researcher: Shuo Feng

This form is to confirm that you understand the purposes of the interview, what is involved and that you are happy to take part. Please tick each box to indicate your agreement:

- ☐ I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet and the privacy notice for the above project and have been given the opportunity to ask questions.

- ☐ I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.

- ☐ I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point up until two weeks after the interview has been conducted, without giving a reason.

- ☐ I understand that I am free to refuse to answer any question asked during the interview.

- ☐ I consent to the interview being audio recorded and later transcribed.

- ☐ I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, and other research outputs. *(Please choose one of the following two options)*
    - o I agree to my real name being used in the above
    - o I do **NOT** agree to my real name being used in the above

- ☐ I prefer to use …… pronouns to refer to me in this research.

- ☐ I agree to take part in the above study.

Participant's Name (IN BLOCK LETTERS): ……

Participant's Signature: ……

Date: ……

Appendix H: Interview Question Guide

Interview Question Guide

OPENING / RELATIONS WITH [THE COMMUNITY]

1. **Could you tell me how you came to be involved with [The Community]?**
    - How long have you known [The Community]?
    - How did you know about [The Community]?
    - What were the reasons for joining?
    - What were your impressions of [The Community] when you first came here?
    - What were the reasons for you returning to [The Community]?

2.1. Can you tell me what your life is like in [The Community]? *[For live-in residents]*

- Can you tell me about what you do here at [The Community]?
- How do you feel about your life here?
- How different is your life here compared to your life in other places?
- How close is your life in [The Community] to your ideal lifestyle?
- Is there anything you don't like about your life here?

2.2. What does [The Community] mean to you? *[For live-out members]*

- How important is [The Community] to your life?
- What role does it play in your life?

3. **Would you ever consider leaving [The Community]?**
    - When do you think that might happen?
    - When did that happen?
    - What might make you consider coming back?

COMMUNITY LIFE

4. **What do you think about the current state of [The Community] as an intentional community?**
    - What is good about it?
    - What are the problems?

5. **Two different views have been expressed to me while I've been here, I am interested in your views on these points:**
    - "*From an outsider's eye, [The Community] is a place which provides beautiful and holistic communal living experience, while some insiders might say it is an escape for people who don't fit in the outside world.*"

- *"[The Community] identifies itself as an education school, but it is operating as a guest house. Besides, mundane and domestic work at [The Community] takes up people's time and energy for participating in creative and experimental activities."*

CAPITALISM / LIFE AS CONSUMER / POST-CONSUMERISM

6. **In your opinion, what is [The Community's] relation to the capitalist society?**
    - What do you think about capitalism?
    - How much of your life is involved in the capitalist system?

7. **People who live in a consumerist society often tend to show an obsessive interest in consumer goods. As such, how much of your life is involved in the consumerist society?**
    - What's your ethos of consumption?

8. **Based on our conversation on the consumerist society, what comes to your mind when you think of 'post-consumerism'?**
    - In your imagination, what does a post-consumerist society look like?
    - Do you think [The Community] is post-consumerist? Why?

LUXURY IN INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

9. **What comes to your mind when you think of 'luxury'?**
    - Where do you think this impression comes from?

10. **Has your understanding of luxury changed over time? If so, how, and why?**
    - What does luxury mean to you?
    - How important the luxury you describe is in your life?

11. **In consumerist societies, luxury is commonly recognised as expensive goods and services supplied by well-known brands. What do you think about this kind of luxury?**
    - In your opinion, what would be the luxury in our future societies?

12. **What might be the luxury for us – those who live at [The Community]?**

CLOSING / BIOGRAPHICAL

13. **Is there anything you would like to tell me? Is there anything I didn't ask, but you think is Important?**

14. **Is there anything you would like to ask me?**

15. **May I ask what is your age?** *[If applicable]*

16. **May I ask what is your occupation?** *[If applicable]*

Appendix I: Sample Field Notes

13 August 2021
Friday

I still had fever in the morning, so I fell asleep and was 20 mins late for the lunch. I feel headache and was very conscious when I went down for lunch. Things were blurry in my eyes and all sensations get so blunt.

I had a chat with [a community resident] about [their] job and healing after lunch. [They] studied in biological physics and now works in natural medicine, but [they] are also interested in things like sound healing which to me sounds very 'spiritual'. I then suggest maybe [they] can try some of [their] healing techniques on me, since I was suffering from the headache and pain due to the jab. [They] stood up and walked behind me. I was sitting in a chair and [they were] standing. [They] told me to keep regular deep breathing, inhale with nose and exhale with mouth. I was trying to figure out what [were they] doing behind me, meanwhile paying a lot of attention on my breathing. It feels strangely calming for me when knowing someone is doing something such as massage or makeup to me, and I had the same feeling when [they were] giving me the 'treatment'. [They] finished and asked how I feel. Honestly, I didn't feel a significant improvement of my wellbeing, but wasn't sure it was my imagination or what, I couldn't feel that much pain on my head and neck for a while.

I feel better after that so decide to go to the festival. I didn't involve in [a previous festival] thus I want to be more participative this time, for the sake of my research. I looked at the festival agenda and decided to attend a workshop in the barn. This is because earlier on I saw people were dancing in circle in the barn and which looked fun. The workshop I went to is called Reclaiming Our Birth Rites. People took off their shoes when entered the barn. The speaker was a lady who dresses up like a fairy tale or an elf from The Lord Of The Rings. She is wearing light lime dress which looks like the ones from ancient China and a hair crown. She is sharing how did she prepare for her birth giving by communicating to her baby every day, in a specific comforting space and so on. She encourages people to reconnect the idea of birth giving with positive energy instead of fear etc. She tells us to connect with our cervix and womb through those daily practices and communications. There were also a couple of pregnant women walked into the workshop, and which just makes me realise that I have probably come to the wrong place. This workshop is not for me. Surprisingly, the speaker has a master's degree about what she is speaking about. She has even done many interviews with pregnant women, to which I found very impressive. Meanwhile, **I have noticed how shamanic people are employing scientific knowledge to construct their discourses**. In the end, people in the workshop all stood up and started dancing. We were dancing in a circle (just like what I saw earlier), and all of us were women. They were closing their eyes and all seem to be immersed in their own inner world, waving their body or dancing whatever they like. The speaker is playing some music to go with the dance, and one of the lyric is so distinctive that I remember is something like 'holding the seed from our womb'.

[Another community resident] was going to the festival, same as [a few others]. I had a shot of rum, and we headed to the festival again. We met [two other residents] at the festival as well. [One of them] suggests we play a game called Blank White Paper, in which each player has 5 pieces of black paper and can write whatever they like on it. It was fun to the play the

game because people are willing to take challenges that written on the paper. For example, [one resident] climbed on the 'throne' and shouted "I RULE!", and [two other residents] skipped around the fire pit which made a very funny scene.

Appendix J: Sample Analysis

1. Analysis of Alternative Media

Type of luxury	Variants	Discursive construction	Exemplar accounts	Frequency of use
Luxury entails social privilege	Normality	Luxury is only available to those who stay in mainstream and normality.	The presumption of normality (let alone decency) is a luxury of privilege.	10
			And the people who are most at risk are low-income workers who are required to reopen the economy, who have to rely on public transport, who have to go to work, who have to serve people who want to have the luxuries of a normal society.	
			People are taking personal responsibility, if they have — sometimes people talk about the luxury of being able to stay home (...)	
			Today, many of us are currently holed up in our homes attempting to weather the storm through unending Zoom calls, stress baking, and at-home exercise videos, checking the news every hour with dread as we fear for our loved ones most susceptible to the disease. But this is a luxury.	
			Of course, it's a luxury to be able to be home, work from home, and also order groceries online.	
			They admit having enjoyed a rare opportunity to reunite with the family or to (re)decorate their houses, and have shown how staying at home can be a 'luxury'.	
			While some have the luxury of sheltering at home, others must choose between unemployment without an adequate safety net and working at jobs that expose them to the coronavirus.	
			(...) the economy has been brought to a standstill because of the absolute catastrophe of this pandemic, that people have to isolate — although isolation is a luxury.	
			Even with the luxury that comes with having white skin, there are other things about my appearance that give me away (...)	
			Only those cosseted by the luxury of idleness could call it easy work.	
	Freedom of choice	Luxury – freedom of choice – is only offered to those who are indulged.	But we must remember that the choice to believe in an inevitable collapse is itself a luxury, a form of escapism only available to those with the time and resources to plan for its consequences.	3
			(...) the possibility of democratic protest—the engine of social and economic equality throughout history—is treated like some luxury extreme sport, where you need to consider carefully whether or not to participate	
			If richer people decide to eat too much unhealthy food and drink a lot of alcohol, it is often and in no small part through choice. Under corporate capitalism, poor people are not afforded that same luxury	

2. Analysis of Interviews (*Considering interview transcripts may contain information that could reveal the true identities of the community and specific participants, samples for this part of the analysis are not shown here to protect the participants' identities.)

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