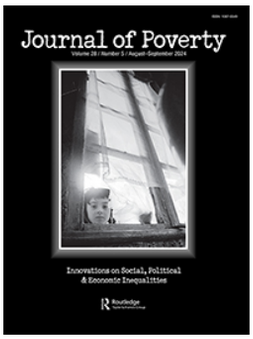

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Bargains, Handouts, and Hand-Me-Downs: Poor Households' Use of (Re)distribution Systems

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ABSTRACT

Consumption practices represent a central mode of social integration. Yet, due to the lack of material resources poor households cannot meet the expectations of dominant consumer culture, thus facing limited choices and feelings of shame. Based on a qualitative long-term study of the welfare production of 40 poor Swiss households, this article sheds light on consumption patterns and experiences in different distribution systems, namely the primary market, the charity system, and redistribution systems for used goods. It shows that feelings of shame and processes of exclusion differ between distribution systems according to institutional features conducive to the (in) visibility of poverty.

KEYWORDS

Charity; consumption; exclusion; shame

Introduction

In a general way, poverty can be conceptualized in terms of lack: as lack of material means to meet socially defined minimum needs, lack of social participation, and lack of social recognition. It is relative and relational in that having less than what a given society regards as an acceptable standard of living is coupled with being less in the eyes of others. In affluent societies where "life-projects are built around consumer choice" (Bauman, 2005, p. 1), participation is inextricably intertwined with *consumption* – especially with conspicuous consumption beyond mere basic necessities as the basis for social identity, status, and self-respect. Identity and belonging are expressed through everyday consumer choices; hence, having such options is per se a central mode of social integration (Lorenz, 2022). The poor are confronted with the dilemma of being constantly exposed to the temptations and pressures of consumer culture while being excluded from full participation (Hohnen, 2006, 2017). Thus, on top of the struggle of getting by, they experience the shame of not being able to fulfill the social expectations of consumerism. Moreover, the conditions

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under which goods are acquired also matter: whether one buys new things in the market with one's own money, gets them as handouts from a charity, or picks them up on a sharing platform on the Internet. The market, the charity system, and the sharing economy distribute goods and treat actors according to different logics. In the market, goods are sold for profit to solvent customers; the charity system distributes them for free to needy clients; in the sharing economy goods circulate between equals who can simultaneously act as sellers, buyers, donors, and receivers. This paper investigates the potential of different distribution systems for providing the poor with what they need and want without being stigmatized for their poverty.

Amartya Sen famously declared the *ability to appear in public without shame* as a central social capability going hand in hand with the capability to participate in the life of the community. Referring to Sen, Walker (2014, 2019) posits shame as the defining feature of poverty. This painful feeling of inadequacy is both "internally felt and externally imposed" (Walker, 2019, p. 104). Feelings of shame and being subject to interpersonal and institutional practices of shaming are (nearly) universal experiences of the poor (Gubrium et al., 2014; Lister, 2015; Walker, 2019). Among other conditions, Sen links the shame of poverty to the lack of material possessions. "Avoiding shame from failure to meet social conventions, participating in social activities, and retaining self-respect" (Sen, 1983, p. 168) requires a conventional set of commodities. Which commodities are regarded as essential to meet social expectations varies historically, as well as between and within communities (Peacock, 2017).

Historically, the problem of material lack has been addressed with material handouts in addition to, or instead of financial support. Recently, this form of poverty relief has become a rapidly expanding *secondary distribution system* based on surplus commodities from the primary for-profit market to provide the poor with necessities (Kessl & Schoneville, 2024; Kessl et al., 2021). Goods that have lost their market value, such as food close to the expiry date or clothes from overproduction, are collected from businesses and handed out for free or for a symbolic price. The most prominent type are food banks which have seen a dramatic increase around the globe since the 1990s. The vast international research on food banks criticizes this system as a political regression from statutory rights to the charitable distribution of alms, which cannot guarantee a sufficient and steady supply (Garthwaite, 2016; Lambie-Mumford & Silvasti, 2020; May et al., 2020; Riches & Silvasti, 2014).

Akin to the purely charitable system of in-kind donations, yet not restricted to poor consumers, are the *redistribution systems for used goods* (clothes, furniture, household items, etc.) encompassing charity shops, flea markets, garage sales, and thrift stores (Gregson & Crewe, 2003; Horne & Maddrell, 2002). Since the 1990s online peer-to-peer (P2P) platforms have become an important new distribution channel for used goods. On P2P platforms, goods

can be sold, exchanged, given away for free, or shared between private actors who are not personally known to each other. Thus, these platforms might offer the poor new avenues of access to cheap goods.

The sociology of consumption has largely neglected low-income consumers (Ekström & Hjort, 2009; Hohnen, 2017), whereas poverty studies focus on how the poor manage scarce resources and juggle debts (Daly, 2017; Daly & Kelly, 2015; Halpern-Meekin et al., 2015; Tach & Greene, 2014). The emphasis is on what they *cannot* buy and on strategies for making ends meet rather than on actual consumption. Research on the secondary distribution system is limited to food bank use and does not address other forms of consumption. Studies of offline markets and exchange platforms for used goods mostly lack data on the socioeconomic situation of buyers and sellers.

This paper examines poor households' use of different distribution systems from the perspective of meeting needs and wants, and avoiding the shame of poverty. In which systems do they (not) get what they need and want? What are the material and psychological costs in terms of money, effort, and shame of buying in markets for new and used goods compared to getting things for free from the charity system and social networks? Empirically, it is based on an ongoing qualitative study of the practices of welfare production of 40 poor households in Switzerland. Welfare production encompasses the household's input of time and effort to convert market commodities and (public) services into actual welfare (Zapf, 1984). It includes a wide range of everyday activities to access and appropriate resources and services from the market, the welfare state, the family, and the community. The scope of this paper is limited to the dimension of consumption.

Distribution systems and the consumption of poor households

To the extent that research in the field of consumption gravitates to the symbolic and cultural dimensions of consumption practices, consumption is hypostasized as an "arena of choice and individual freedom" (Lodziak, 2002, as cited in Hohnen, 2006, p. 261). Consequently, the ideal-typical consumer is implicitly middle class, whereas those without money tend to be ignored (Hohnen, 2006). Moreover, the focus is mainly on the *consumption of new goods in the primary market*. Empirical research shows that in contrast to the discourse of consumption as a means of seeking pleasure and expressing identity, for low-income people, consumption is mostly associated with unease and stress (Hohnen, 2017). On the one hand, they face structural market barriers such as the lack of low-price shops in the neighborhood, or financial exclusion through lack of access to credits, loans, and digital payment technologies (Biosca et al., 2020; Hohnen, 2006, 2017). On the other hand, making ends meet on a meager budget requires time-consuming efforts like careful planning, calculating, bargain hunting, earmarking money for special

purposes, and weighing trade-offs between buying certain goods and forgoing others (Daly, 2017; Hohnen, 2006; Morduch & Schneider, 2017; Oestreicher et al., 2017). With respect to avoiding shame, the increasing cultural importance of expensive brands that are out of reach for poor consumers adds to feelings of exclusion (Hamilton, 2009). Thus, in the primary market, poor consumers are constantly confronted with their financial limits.

Lack and shame are the dominant topics in research on the *use of the secondary distribution system* of charity, which mainly analyzes food banks. In public discourse, food banks are framed as a means to combat hunger and food waste alike. Academic research also analyzes food bank use in the context of hunger and the right to food (Lambie-Mumford & Silvasti, 2020; Riches, 2018; Riches & Silvasti, 2014). However, hunger is not the only reason why people resort to food banks – saving money for other purposes or social contacts are important motivations, too (Garthwaite et al., 2015; Lorenz, 2022). Nevertheless, empirical research finds that food banks are seen as a last resort that people only use when they feel they have no other options (Middleton et al., 2018). Mixed feelings are reported in many studies. While receiving free food is experienced as a relief and people are grateful for it, it also hurts their pride that they are unable to provide for their families. Especially long-term reliance on food aid provokes feelings of shame, embarrassment, and powerlessness (Lambie-Mumford, 2017; McNaughton et al., 2021; Purdam et al., 2016). Regarding the distributed food, clients criticize the insufficient quantity, the poor quality, and above all the lack of choice (Garthwaite et al., 2015; Kessl et al., 2020; Middleton et al., 2018; van der Horst et al., 2014). Finally, the conditions and practices of food aid are experienced as inherently shaming: clients are subject to eligibility tests involving the disclosure of their financial situation; they may be allotted a fixed time slot to pick up their ration; they may have to queue in public thus being exposed as poor.

More recently, there has been a trend to organize food charity according to the model of supermarkets where consumers have a choice (Andriessen et al., 2022; McNaughton et al., 2021). In Switzerland, the aid organization Caritas operates 23 social groceries (called Caritas Markt) in different parts of the country that sell food and hygiene products at fixed prices well below those of supermarkets. In contrast to voucher-based models with a maximum monthly budget (Andriessen et al., 2022; McNaughton et al., 2021), clients of the Caritas market pay for the food with their own money, and it is up to them how much they want to buy and to spend. Yet, they also need a user card issued by various welfare agencies.

Redistribution systems for used goods are situated at the intersection of market, charity, and (in the case of P2P platforms) sharing. Wearing clothes with visible signs of use constitutes the paradigmatic case of the inability to appear in public without shame. Historically, clothing and other items

discarded by the middle and upper classes were distributed to the poor through charity shops or as in-kind donations (Horne & Maddrell, 2002; Krüger, 2024). Recently, secondhand consumption has spread beyond low-income consumers (Gilal et al., 2024), and in the context of sustainability discourses, it has lost its association with poverty (Horne & Maddrell, 2002). However, concerning quality and distribution channels, there is a wide range from run-of-the-mill worn-out goods sold at garage sales, flea markets, and charity shops (Gregson & Crewe, 2003; Horne & Maddrell, 2002) to offline and online shops for expensive "retro" and "vintage" fashion (Turunen et al., 2018). An important focus of respective research is on the motivations of secondhand shoppers, e.g. on the significance of a sustainable lifestyle. Typologies of motivations for secondhand consumption consistently find that economic reasons are important alongside hedonic or political aspects (Guiot & Roux, 2010; Hur, 2020). These typologies are not systematically linked to the socioeconomic profile of shoppers. Yet, there is some evidence for a significant correlation between acquiring used goods and social class: economically deprived populations buy secondhand more regularly and extensively as more affluent consumers (Horne & Maddrell, 2002; Norum & Norton, 2017; Williams, 2003).

Methods and data

This paper is based on data from an ongoing long-term study on the welfare mix and welfare production of people living below the social assistance poverty line.[1] Employing a qualitative mixed methods design, the research comprises three waves of semi-structured interviews with 40 poor households as well as financial diaries over a period of one month. Following the iterative-cyclical process of grounded theory methodology, data collection and data analysis are interwoven throughout various phases of fieldwork (Strübing, 2021). The interviews are analyzed with the techniques of open, axial, and selective coding developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998).

The sampling strategy aimed at capturing different standpoints regarding potential access to income from the labor market and/or welfare benefits (social assistance, social insurance). 16 working poor households do not receive any welfare benefits beyond subsidies for health insurance, and 13 households live on old age or disability pensions. For 11 working-age households, social assistance benefits are the main income. Study participants were contacted through various charities and civil society organizations addressing different poor and non-poor groups. In addition, participants were recruited through information leaflets placed on the premises of these organizations and calls in online newsletters relevant to the target groups.

The interviews of the first wave focused on different areas of welfare production within the household: access to resources (employment,

benefits, financial support from charities or personal social networks), consumption patterns, and decision-making under the conditions of scarce resources. Since poverty and coping strategies are dynamic phenomena (Millar, 2007), the longitudinal design serves to capture changes across different spheres of life: shifts in household composition and welfare mix, changing strategies of welfare production, and the (in)stability of the financial situations.

In addition to the interviews, financial diaries were utilized (Biosca et al., 2020; Morduch & Schneider, 2017). To gain a comprehensive and detailed understanding of income sources, expenditures, and the consumption behavior of the study participants, they were asked to record daily over a period of one month the monetary and non-monetary resources and services their household received and provided for others. Irregular income and expenditures (e.g. fluctuating wages, taxes, insurance, other large non-recurring expenses) and contradictory information were subsequently addressed in the follow-up interview. Despite the challenges faced by participants in recording financial details in the diary, 32 completed budgets were returned. For another five households, the financial data could partly be reconstructed in the second interview. The second wave of interviews thus comprised 37 interviews. The third and last interview wave is planned for 2025.

Findings

The following presentation analyses the use of different distribution systems separately. Empirically, all households use two or more systems simultaneously and their patterns of consumption may change over time. Moreover, these systems overlap. Second-hand goods, for instance, circulate in for-profit or charity shops and on P2P networks. Offline charity shops may be open for all consumers while at the same time granting discounts to poor people based on means-tested user cards.

Bargain hunting in the market

The clash between the promises of consumer culture and the limited purchasing power of poor households is most pronounced in the market for new goods. To avoid this painful experience, Franziska Christen, a single mother on welfare, stays away from shops: "I used to like shopping in the city. I don't feel like it anymore. I don't have the money and I don't feel like going to the shops without having money."[2] Nevertheless, she and all the households in our sample still shop in the for-profit market – some more deliberately than others. Consider, for example, the case of Gregor Fischer: since his wife lost her job and her unemployment benefits expired, the three-person household lives on only one income from Gregor's full-time job which leaves them below

the social assistance poverty line. Yet, Gregor refuses to apply for welfare benefits, and the family struggles hard to avoid being identified as poor. Consequently, they steer clear of institutions of the charity system and shop almost exclusively in the primary market.

Participating in the market requires special knowledge of *where, when*, and *how* to shop. "You go to the discounter, the normal supermarket is off-limits, I don't go to Migros, I can't afford that," Gregor explains.[3] He and the majority of the sample are well aware of "their 'range' of shops" (Hohnen, 2006, p. 84), even though our interviewees disagree on which of the most popular supermarkets and discounters are affordable or too expensive. Choosing the cheapest shop for different products and finding the cheapest products within those shops is *time-consuming*. Most households have an eye on special offers or on food nearing the expiry date which is sold at a reduced price before shop closing time in the evening or early in the morning. The Fischer family takes bargain hunting to yet another level. On the rare occasions they use their car, they put it to good use by driving across the border for a shopping spree in Germany – a journey of about 100 km. During the diary month, 36% of expenses for everyday consumption were spent on a single shopping trip to Germany. Gregor claims that he is less motivated by lower prices but by the wider selection of German hypermarkets. Since it is implausible that he could not find just about any consumer good in the big Swiss city he lives in, his statement rather means that the selection is wider in his price range. The generally lower price level in Germany and the prevalence of low-end hypermarkets near the border catering to Swiss shoppers allow poor households to participate in the consumer world to a greater extent than at home. The Fischers are not alone in *profiting from international price level differences*: a third of the sample occasionally shops in the neighboring Eurozone or has friends and relatives who shop for them abroad. They also search the Internet for cheap goods like Gregor who again emphasizes the wider selection and the "much nicer and cheaper" children's clothing in Asian online shops.

The Fischers have found yet another way of getting the most out of the market: every time they pass the branch of a low-end fashion chain in their neighborhood, they spin a virtual wheel of fortune in the shop's app to win *discount points* or small sums of cash. By pooling their gains, they manage to win CHF 200–300 per year which covers much of the clothing costs of Gregor's wife and little extras for their seven-year-old daughter. While *consumer loyalty programs* are designed to tempt consumers to spend more money, the Fischers exploit the system to get clothes for (almost) free. Helene Jansen, a working poor single mother, also discovered the trick, but feels guilty about taking advantage of the extremely cheap clothes sold by this fast fashion chain: "I know it's bad because of labor [conditions] and child labor and so on, but I can't consider everything." She is clearly aware of the moral significance of consumption practices and feels compelled to justify that

she cannot live up to middle-class norms of ethical consumption (Carfagna et al., 2014; Hohnen, 2017; Salonen, 2023). Helene and most of the sample also collect bonus points from large retailers. The points are sometimes used like a *quasi-currency*: they serve as a nest egg when the money runs out toward the end of the month and some of our interviewees receive the points as gifts from relatives or friends.

Seven of the 40 households deliberately shop mostly in the primary market of new goods. This preference cannot be explained by their income level: with one exception, these households do not have higher disposable incomes than the other households of our sample. Rather, they have in common that they try to *hold on to the status of an ordinary non-poor consumer*. Some of them take pride in their ability to get by on a low budget. Helene, for instance, claims to have a "brutal talent" for money. In her case, this brutal talent turns against herself, as she concedes: "I hardly spend any money on myself." Moreover, she does the unavoidable shopping with "my head (. . .) down because the cheap stuff is at the bottom." Consumption strategies like keeping one's head down or looking for special offers reach their limits with expensive goods like furniture, home electronics, bicycles, and the like. For such items, even this group must turn to the market for used goods.

Handouts for the poor: consumption in the charity system

Passing as an ordinary consumer is costly in terms of money and material sacrifices but helps to preserve one's sense of self-worth and avoid the stigma of poverty. In contrast, the charitable secondary distribution system marks its clients unmistakably as poor while providing them with free goods thus relieving their tight budgets. At some point in time, most of the sample households opt for the handouts despite the stigmatization attached to the use of the respective charitable institutions.[4] While many of them use food banks only for a short period or sporadically, seven households rely heavily on food banks, the Caritas market, soup kitchens, and clothing donations.

Julia and Remo Hunziker are intensive users of the charitable distribution system. Both are skilled workers, but due to the care needs of their three-year-old disabled son, Julia had to give up her job and the household must manage mainly on Remo's income. In addition, the household receives disability insurance benefits for the special needs of the child as well as financial support from several civil society organizations. After their savings accounts are "down to zero," the weekly trip to the food bank and the bimonthly bulk shopping at the Caritas market become a dire necessity. Their financial diary shows that they spend more than twice as much on food in the Caritas market than in the primary market.

Six households, Hunzikers included, experience such severe financial squeezes that they *see no other choice than turning to food charity* or going

hungry. The other users describe food charity mainly as a welcome *opportunity to save money* for other purposes. The financial diaries show indeed that food bank-using households spend less money on groceries than non-users. The interviewees characterize these arrangements in terms like "a great relief," "helpful" or "helps a little." Renate Saner, a disability insurance pensioner and shrewd client of the secondary distribution system, is an exception. She reserves a fixed amount for lunch per week in her mental budget. Each time she spends less by eating in soup kitchens or going to food banks, which happens several times per week, she puts the remaining money in an envelope and saves it for taking courses. For Renate, savings through food charity thus enable *social and cultural participation*. Often, however, the financial effect of using food charity is like robbing Peter to pay Paul. What people save through food banks cannot be spent on "extras" for participation but merely pays for other necessities like rising costs for electricity and rent.

Appropriating free goods from the charity system requires *information, proof of need, time, and know-how*. Remo and Julia learn about the food bank from a parent counseling service that also provides them with the necessary user card. They chance upon the Caritas market while searching the Internet for possible support institutions. Other interviewees are less lucky: they lack the information, or they are denied user cards because the capacity of the respective food bank is limited. Yet, Julia notes how food bank use encroaches on her time:

> You have to be flexible; you can hardly do something else like working. You have to be there, for us, it's at 10.15, plus you have the journey, the whole morning's gone. [. . .] If I could just go to a supermarket, I'd be done with the weekly shopping in an hour.

Flexibility is also needed to process the received food. "You need to know how to cook without a recipe book," Julia explains, "because you don't get everything." *Lack of choice* is a recurring theme in our interviews. Food banks usually distribute pre-packed parcels according to household size; some allow their clients to pick or refuse certain items. Clients can thus neither choose *what* they get nor *how much*. The Caritas markets simulate ordinary grocery stores inasmuch customers select the goods from the shelves as they wish, pay more than a symbolic lump sum, and there is no rationing system. Still, our interviewees are critical of the selection at the Caritas markets too. Moreover, many complain that it is not cheaper than "normal" discounters. Somewhat surprisingly, Remo criticizes that they get high-quality products like organic food or brands. He also complains that they cannot use much of the exotic food on offer "because we don't know it and don't know what to do with it." Criticism of culturally inappropriate food and complaints about unhealthy or outright spoiled food does not only describe the objective quality of the food but also expresses the unease about the lack of choice. Faced with rations they find too small, sometimes too large, e.g. when the same durable product is

distributed in short intervals or not to their taste, the interviewees *barter* with other clients or occasionally give items away to non-poor neighbors or friends.

Like other clients, Julia and Remo are ambivalent about food charity: "It's supportive but it's a burden too." The burden relates to the *psychological costs* like shame, stigmatization, humiliation, feelings of powerlessness, and the like. While the Hunzikers remain clients despite their uneasiness, a third of the interviewed households explicitly opt against food banks either based on previous experiences, or because for them *using food charity represents a red line of shame* implicated in severe poverty, which they refuse to cross. "There's a limit, you know, I don't queue for hours for two bananas," says a disability pensioner. The limit here is defined by the stark imbalance of effort and reward, but she also distances herself from the "asylum seekers" she perceives to be the target group of food banks. Other typical remarks are "I'm not a drug addict" or "I don't belong there; I want to get out of this." Thus, on top of indicating absolute poverty, dependence on food charity is associated with social degradation (Bonvin et al., 2020; Middleton et al., 2018), which the non-clients want to avoid. In the face of such negative stereotyping, some food bank clients take pains to describe themselves as not poor. Julia, for instance, speaks of a temporary "financial emergency" whereas she associates "real" poverty with "not having a roof over your head." A second strategy to live with the stigma attached to food bank use is to acknowledge it while emphasizing the benefits, like this old age pensioner who says, "it's like begging," but adds that without accepting charity "you simply have much less." Finally, a third group reinterprets food charity as an entitlement just like statutory welfare benefits, and reacts with indignation if they are not granted a user card by social services.

Hand-me-downs: online and offline consumption of used goods

In markets for new goods, the poor are relegated to the segment of cheap shops and bargains. In the charitable distribution system, they may obtain a narrow set of basic necessities for free, but the price for these handouts is segregation from the non-poor consumers and shame. There is a third alternative in between, namely the offline and online redistribution systems for used goods.

Nicole Ruef, a single mother of four teenage and adult children rarely buys new goods. Her sources include specialized online shops for recycled mobile phones and computers, P2P platforms for sports equipment and a PlayStation for the younger son, and a local WhatsApp chat group for clothing, household items, and sometimes food. Offline, she uses charity shops, swap meets for clothing, and thrift stores for furniture. Nicole can count on the support of the boyfriend of her eldest daughter to do the online bargain hunting for her because, as she admits, "I'm not good at that (. . .) and I hate that digital stuff." Nevertheless, she checks the local chat group every day for items the family might need. As mentioned above, almost every household in our sample must

turn to used goods at least for costly items like furniture, home appliances, or cars. For 28 of the 40 sample households, *second-hand goods* constitute a *significant part of their overall consumption* even though not many make such extensive use of a broad variety of secondhand distribution channels as Nicole. Traditional offline sites like charity shops, flea markets, and the more recent online platforms differ concerning *selection, preconditions for use*, and the *shame associated with hand-me-downs.*

Transport costs pose a major problem for many interviewees and were often cited as an obstacle to using shops and services located beyond the local area. Online shops and P2P platforms *extend the reach* of the poor and *open a vast non-local space for second-hand consumption*. The sample households use global and Swiss platforms to find anything from clothing to kitchen utensils, home appliances, furniture, electronic devices, etc. While smaller items can be delivered at lower costs than traveling to the seller oneself, heavy and bulky items require means of transportation, and thus imply additional costs. Gregor Fischer, for example, hires a delivery van for a day to pick up several pieces of furniture and a mattress he has purchased on a P2P platform from different sellers in another city. He argues that the total costs including the car hire are still far below the price level of new furniture. Besides low-cost items, P2P platforms offer the chance to find free goods. Moreover, two pensioners use house- and pet-sitting platforms as access to free lodging for holidays.

In contrast to the secondary distribution system, P2P marketplaces *do not separate the poor from the non-poor*: they are open to everyone who knows how to navigate the Internet and who has access to the necessary technical infrastructure. Research shows that digital literacy and access to digital technology correlate with income leading to digital exclusion of the poor (Holmes & Burgess, 2022). In our sample, roughly a fifth of the interviewees do not use online marketplaces at all because they lack digital skills, and among them, only two elderly men do not own the necessary devices for Internet access. Others may not feel too comfortable but, like Nicole, get Internet access by proxy. Moreover, P2P marketplaces do not require proof of need to obtain cheap or free goods. Users do not have to disclose their financial situation and thus are *not discredited as poor through the institutional design of the distribution system.*

P2P platforms allow for *role reversals* and may become an *income source*: half of those buying on platforms also act as sellers. Mostly, selling is motivated by a mixture of wanting to dispose of things one does not need anymore, and making money. Sporadically selling things – sometimes items received as gifts – provides "a bit of money until the end of the month." Zekiye Lusha, a working poor single mother, is the only one who trades regularly for profit. She buys or obtains goods for free on one platform and sells them for a higher price on another, thus generating about six percent of her earned income. In contrast to professional traders, she does not aim for maximum profit but for low risk and rapid turnover because she cannot afford losses and has very

limited storage space: "I buy cheaply and I sell cheaply, so the stuff is gone quickly."

Online and *offline second-hand consumption* often go hand in hand. For the non-users of digital distribution systems, charity shops, flea markets, thrift shops, and swap meets are the main sources of getting used goods. Like P2P platforms, these secondhand spaces are open to all consumers, thus using them is not stigmatizing. However, some charity shops offer discounts for low-income customers, thereby reintroducing a potentially stigmatizing difference between ordinary and poor consumers. In addition, it seems that the *negative associations of second-hand consumption with poverty* are more about the *spaces* where used goods are obtained than the fact that they are used per se. As Gregson and Crewe (2003) observe appropriating secondhand goods, especially clothing and items from charity shops, requires practices of divestment, cleansing and personalization to symbolically erase the (bodily) traces of former owners and the association with financial neediness. Our study corroborates their finding that underwear, shoes, and bedding are items people would not buy secondhand. However, feelings of revulsion or strong rejection of used goods were expressed with examples of charity shops but not regarding P2P platforms. A young single mother, for example, says about a charity shop: "I'm a bit fussy (. . .) Just that it's lying there disgusts me."

Both, online and offline secondhand consumption is currently undergoing a *discursive shift* from economic necessity to *ecological justification*. P2P marketplaces and secondhand shops increasingly frame the consumption of used goods in terms of fostering *sustainability*. It is no surprise that thrift is the chief motivation of the poor households of our sample. Yet, for a small group of four households *personal values of ecological sustainability or frugality* are important reasons for secondhand consumption. Nicole's family is among them. She even justifies food bank use with the ecological argument of avoiding food waste. The fact that Nicole first resorted to the food bank when her rent and energy costs rose points to the issue of adapted preferences (Robeyns, 2017). It would be a mistake, however, to simply dismiss her consumption preferences as an adaptation to economic restraints. Nicole emphasizes how much time and effort her ecological lifestyle requires: finding, storing, sorting, and disposing of used goods; procuring organic food at affordable prices; etc. But she declares, "it's part of my sustainable lifestyle that things are reused." For three other households, secondhand consumption is also embedded in a set of ecological values like sufficiency, eating organic food, and saving energy. Thus, far from being experienced as a shameful marker of poverty, secondhand consumption is positively affirmed as an element of an ethical lifestyle. The cultural reframing of secondhand consumption can also be helpful for those who do not endorse ecological values themselves, as the example of Karim Nassar, a young working poor man, shows. He regularly buys and sells clothing on P2P platforms, at flea markets and among his

friends to keep his "clothes carousel running" despite his low income. He observes that buying only new goods is frowned upon by young people as harmful to the environment. "Honestly, for my situation, it's really perfect," he comments on the sustainability discourse.

Beyond organized distribution systems for consumer goods, *used goods circulate as gifts in personal social networks* of family, friends, neighbors, or workmates. Half of the sample households receive clothing, children's toys, furniture, musical instruments, and other goods as gifts from people they know. However, on the one hand, accepting used goods may be shameful because it exposes the poverty of the receiver and their dependence on hand-me-downs from others. On the other hand, norms of reciprocity constitute a burden for poor people who do not have the means to return gifts which may lead to social exclusion or withdrawal from personal networks (Offer, 2012). Nevertheless, a few interviewees defy the potential shame of receiving hand-me-downs from their personal networks. Rather, they actively solicit gifts by openly communicating their needs. Anni Forster, a pensioner who had to live on a low income virtually all her life, has a circle of female friends who help each other out whenever one of them needs something. In this way, Anni learned to overcome inhibitions and ask for things:

> I make a remark and say, oh, the zip of my winter jacket is broken (. . .), and then it's two or three weeks and someone comes with a winter jacket. (. . .) People give you so many things if you ask, so much stuff is thrown away in Switzerland. But you have to tell people clearly, I could use this. (. . .) It doesn't bother me to ask, I have no problem with that because I also give when I know that someone needs it.

Like Anni, those who let their material needs be known in their personal networks emphasize that they fulfill the reciprocity norms by also giving. Furthermore, Anni and others legitimize their direct requests by linking them to the ecological discourse of avoiding waste and practicing reuse.

Discussion and conclusions

Consumption is an important medium for social integration. Possessing the appropriate collection of commodities is necessary for "avoiding shame of the inability to meet the demands of conventions" (Sen, 1983, p. 161). How much and what it takes to participate in the community without shame depends on the social context. In Switzerland, one of the most affluent countries in the world, the level of socially expected consumption is high. In this paper, we have argued that it is not only the inability to keep up with the level of consumption that causes shame but there are also institutional features conducive to shame in the way commodities are distributed and acquired. The *visibility of poverty* and the perceived *lack of agency* are crucial here. Four factors are relevant in this respect: first, whether consumers are forced to

disclose their financial situation to the gatekeepers of goods; second, the separation of distribution channels for poor and non-poor consumers; third, the degree of consumer choice, and, four, the degree of visible differences in the quality of goods accessible to the poor as compared to non-poor consumers.

The *charitable secondary distribution system* for in-kind donations such as food or clothing scores negatively in all these dimensions. Access to food banks or similar charitable distribution channels for free goods invariably requires proof of need. Hence, potential clients must disclose their personal and financial situation in detail to a welfare agency that issues respective user cards (Kessl & Schoneville, 2024; McNaughton et al., 2021). Through this procedure and through special localities where goods are dispensed (community or church centers etc.), clients are institutionally marked as poor and separated from non-poor consumers. Our study confirms the main findings of the international research on food banks: having to turn to the secondary distribution system for basic necessities is experienced by clients as a last resort and the *epitome of neediness and loss of control over one's life*. The savings thanks to in-kind charity are small and must be used for other necessities such as rent and energy costs. Except in isolated cases, participation in cultural and social activities is not enabled by savings through food bank use but through sporadic financial support from civil society organizations. Insofar as poor households feel they have no other choice, the secondary distribution system *exacerbates the experience of exclusion* from the consumer society. Some households selectively shop at the Caritas market now and then, but do not use food banks. In these cases, turning to the secondary distribution system is more voluntary and offers an additional option to procure necessities. Yet, despite simulating the ordinary shopping experience, market-style social groceries like the Caritas market still represent "food charity, not food shopping" (McNaughton et al., 2021, p. 104).

In contrast, consumption in the *primary market for new goods* allows the poor to *pass as ordinary consumers*, thus preserving their dignity. Clearly, the market is segmented according to the purchasing power of customers, hence according to class. Yet, the separation is not absolute; rather, there is a gradual differentiation from low-end to luxury shops, and there is a range of price levels within shops. In addition to limits regarding the range of shops and products, poor consumers must also pay attention to the *timing of purchases* to make the most of their limited financial means such as taking advantage of (seasonal) special offers and price reductions on fresh products before shop closing time. The quality of the kind of cheap fast fashion and other low-cost consumer goods mentioned by the interviewees is probably questionable. Yet, none of our interviewees felt exposed as poor through wearing or using such items. In sum, the market for first-cycle goods protects the poor from institutionalized stigmatization. Their poverty may remain invisible to others, but it

is still painfully obvious to themselves. Instead of outright exclusion imposed by others, low-income consumers must restrain themselves within the abundance of the consumer world (Hohnen, 2017). They may avoid the shame of having to wear visibly worn clothes from a charity shop, but they are restricted to the segment of low-end stores, cheap and reduced-price items, and their consumption patterns are dictated by involuntary frugality.

To what extent do *redistribution systems for used goods* provide an alternative to charity or markets for new goods? Similar to the market for new goods, the distribution of secondhand goods is not homogenous. At one end of the spectrum, it borders on the charity system, for instance when charity shops grant discounts based on proof of need. Generally, however, offline and online marketplaces for used goods do not discriminate between poor and non-poor consumers through institutional features like physical separation or needs-based access. Concerning choice, especially online P2P platforms offer a broad range of for sale or for free goods (including brand products and nearly new items without visible signs of use). In the respective literature, online platforms are understood as hybrid forms between market exchange, gift exchange, and sharing (Belk, 2014). Importantly, receiving free goods on digital platforms does not entail the "personal obligations and forms of indebtedness" of gift exchange (Widlok, 2019, p. 29). Rather, exchange on platforms creates opportunity structures for "cultivating acceptable forms of demand" between personally unacquainted people (ibid., p. 30). Moreover, in contrast to free goods obtained in the charity system, the recipients of free goods on P2P platforms have a choice as to which gifts they want to solicit by placing a legitimate demand. As we have shown, many of those using P2P platforms do so in changing roles: as buyers and sellers, gift recipients, and occasionally as donors. Thus, they are not confined to the role of gift recipients but participate as equals. To conclude, anonymous open P2P platforms offer the poor a new channel to participate in the consumer society without subjecting them to shaming by institutional design.

Nevertheless, the consumption of used goods carries the historical legacy of shameful hand-me-downs for the poor. Not being able to replace worn-out clothing or furniture with new ones still serves as an indicator of social and material deprivation in poverty statistics like, for example, the European Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC). In the wake of ecological discourses, there has been a *cultural reassessment of second-hand consumption*, however. Using secondhand goods is no longer tantamount to poverty. Rather, it is reframed as a form of socially desirable ethical consumption in public discourse and advertising for secondhand marketplaces. Yet, while secondhand consumption has become culturally normalized, the crucial difference between affluent and low-income consumers again is choice. As Williams and Windebank (2002) note, low-income consumers regard

"the inability to buy new goods [...] as a mark of their exclusion from mainstream consumption practices" (p. 502). Other studies show that many non-poor consumers reject used goods on principle as inferior (Norum & Norton, 2017) or because they fear social degradation (Hur, 2020). A preference for new goods was also discernible among our study participants.

In his provocative enumeration of the *positive societal functions of poverty*, Herbert Gans (1972) noted 50 years ago that "the poor buy goods which others do not want and thus prolong their economic usefulness" (p. 279). Gans (1972, 2012) had in mind the economic profit of sellers of used goods and food on the brink of spoilage. Today the latter is given away for free, but the positive function of the poor has become even more significant. By eating discarded food and using secondhand items, they embody the ecological fight against food waste and the promotion of sustainability. In our sample, only a small number of four households justify secondhand consumption with their own personal ecological values. For them, buying used goods is a choice within a whole lifestyle that also rewards them with social recognition. Others like Karim Nassar, cited above, can surf on the wave of ecological discourses to cover their lack of financial means for purchasing new goods. For the majority of our sample, who experience secondhand consumption as simply unavoidable for financial reasons, it is still shameful. Moreover, the discourse of ethical consumption is double-edged for poor people: they may gain ground in the "ideological and moral battlefield" of consumption (Hohnen, 2017, p. 261) by consuming secondhand items. At the same time, they risk social devaluation for *un*ethical consumption in the primary market. Their strategies for making the most of a tight budget to keep up appearances (Walker, 2014), like bargain hunting and buying the cheapest goods in low-end offline and online shops, may be looked down upon as morally wrong from the point of view of social justice and ecological sustainability. Cultivating ethical consumption has become a new distinction strategy by "high capital consumers" (Carfagna et al., 2014) which is out of reach for those with less cultural and much less economic capital.

Notes

1. As of 2024, the social assistance poverty line is CHF 2284 per month for a single-person household and CHF 4010 for a four-person family (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2024).
2. All names of study participants are pseudonyms.
3. Migros is the largest retailer in Switzerland operating supermarkets in all parts of the country.
4. This is partly a sampling effect. A third of the sample was recruited through a food bank or the Caritas market. Nevertheless, two-thirds of the food bank users were contacted through other channels.

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