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### Informal economic activity and political consumption

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## INFORMAL ECONOMIC ACTIVITY AND POLITICAL CONSUMPTION\*\*

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### ABSTRACT

*Drawing upon findings from an ethnographic study conducted in crisis-ridden Greece, this article explores consumer participation in the informal economy and illustrates the diversity of political discourse embedded within this type of economic activity. The study focused on twenty-four consumers from three distinctive theoretical categories (termed ‘ethical consumers’, ‘active citizens’ and ‘disqualified consumers’) and involved a variety of data collection methods (including observation, kitchen tours, shop-along and interviews). Empirical evidence demonstrates that to fully appreciate consumer activity and consumer agency in the informal economy, it is imperative to recognise informal modes of acquisition and exchange that do not resemble formal market transactions.*

**Keywords:** *political consumerism; informal economy; Greece; ethnography; consumer agency*

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*Μαργαρίτα Κομνηνού\**

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ΑΤΥΠΗ ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΙΚΗ ΔΡΑΣΤΗΡΙΟΤΗΤΑ  
ΚΑΙ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΟΣ ΚΑΤΑΝΑΛΩΤΙΣΜΟΣ\*\*

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

*Αντλώντας ευρήματα από μια εθνογραφική μελέτη που διεξήχθη στην Ελλάδα της κρίσης, το άρθρο διερευνά τη συμμετοχή των καταναλωτών στην άτυπη οικονομία και απεικονίζει την ποικιλομορφία του πολιτικού λόγου που ενσωματώνεται σε αυτό το είδος οικονομικής δραστηριότητας. Η μελέτη επικεντρώθηκε σε είκοσι τέσσερις καταναλωτές από τρεις διακριτές θεωρητικές κατηγορίες («ενεργοί πολίτες», «ηθικοί» και «αποκλεισμένοι» καταναλωτές) και περιλάμβανε ποιοτικές μεθόδους συλλογής δεδομένων. Τα εμπειρικά στοιχεία καταδεικνύουν ότι για να εκτιμηθεί πλήρως η δραστηριότητα των καταναλωτών και η δράση τους στην άτυπη οικονομία είναι επιτακτική ανάγκη να αναγνωριστούν οι άτυποι τρόποι απόκτησης και ανταλλαγής που δεν προσομοιάζουν στις επίσημες συναλλαγές της αγοράς.*

*Λέξεις κλειδιά: πολιτικός καταναλωτισμός· άτυπη οικονομία· Ελλάδα· εθνογραφία· δράση καταναλωτών*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Economic activity outside official (state) regulated markets and its role in poverty and social inequality are well documented in the literature. Depending on perspectives, the informal (a.k.a. ‘shadow’, ‘grey’, ‘hidden’ or ‘underground’) economy has been seen as a ‘structural necessity of late capitalism’, a ‘function of poverty’, a ‘rational choice’, or even the ‘hot-bed of socially revolutionary activity’ (Bonnet and Venkatesh, 2016). In discussions about the informal economy, the spotlight typically falls on the supply side, with a particular focus on unwaged and undeclared labour. The demand side, i.e. the sphere of consumption, although equally important for understanding the mechanisms that create and sustain such a system of economic activity, appears relatively neglected (Horodnic, Ciobanu, et al., 2022).

Informal economies thrive in less developed countries, where the term first originated (Portes and Haller, 2005), and in advanced economies. Supply and demand of goods and services within an informal economy vary in size and characteristics across nations and through time. With respect to demand in Europe, one in ten Europeans admits having purchased undeclared goods or services in 2018 (Eurobarometer, 2020). A recent acknowledgement that consumer motives for participating in the informal sector extend beyond a strictly economic rationale gave rise to few, but noteworthy, studies on the informal economy aiming to highlight the social drivers for this behaviour (e.g. Horodnic, Williams, et al., 2022; Littlewood et al., 2018; C. C. Williams and Horodnic, 2016; C. C. Williams and Martinez-Perez, 2014).

Portrayals of consumers as strictly rational and self-interested economic agents, in the way neoclassical economics suggested, have long been contested within social science literature; the works of (Polanyi, 1947, 1992) and Granovetter (1985) on “embeddedness” suggest that economic behaviour does not take place in a vacuum, but is nested in networks of ongoing social relations. In the past twenty years, a growing body of scientific enquiry in the interdisciplinary research field of consumer behaviour (MacInnis and Folkes, 2010) focuses on noneconomic motivations (e.g. sustainability) behind consumer practices. A theoretical framework currently gaining the attention of scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds (e.g. political science, marketing, sociology, anthropology), is that of “political consumption” (Micheletti et al., 2004), which brings forward the political dimension in consumer practices. To date, however, there is

limited empirical work (see e.g. E. A. Bennett, 2019), that explicitly connects political consumption with the informal (and illegal) economy.

To address this gap, the present article contributes theoretically by highlighting that the informal economy constitutes a significant space of political consumption practices performed outside the official market. The article also contributes empirically by offering a qualitative investigation into motives and logic behind political consumer practices within the informal economy of crisis-ridden Greece.

## 2. INFORMAL CONSUMER ACTIVITY

The concept of “informal economy” can be traced back to Keith Hart, an economic anthropologist, who in the early 1970s used the term “informal” to refer to *economic activities* and particularly to alternative *income earning* opportunities lacking worker protection and/or government regulation in West Africa (Pisani, 2013b; Portes and Haller, 2005). Informal economic activities were seen as ingenious ways to respond to insufficient job creation and to alleviate poverty (de Soto, 1989), and concurrently as conditions that impede economic growth (Tokman, 1982) or reflect exploitative employment. A novel analysis of 102 definitions for the informal economy by Luque (2022) illustrates the diversity of perspectives existing to date, reflecting the complexity of the phenomenon that “cuts across sectors and disciplines”.

Relevant terms and definitions often highlight different aspects of the phenomenon and occasionally seem contradictory. One contradiction concerns the inclusion (or not) of illegal or illicit economic actions. C. C. Williams and Youssef (2014), for example, define the informal economy as “those activities where monetary transactions are not declared to the state for tax, social security or labour law purposes but which are legal in all other respects” (p.42). Venkatesh (2006), however, argues that *a priori* removal of criminal behaviour from conceptualisations is arbitrary and views the informal economy (which he terms ‘underground economy’) as “a widespread set of activities, usually scattered and not well integrated, though which people earn money that is not reported to the government and that, in some cases, may entail criminal behaviour” (p.8).

Another issue of controversy concerns the inclusion (or not) of, usually monetary, transactions. In C. C. Williams and Youssef’s (2014) definition, monetary transaction is a defining characteristic in distinguishing informal economic action from other actions performed informally or underground. Likewise, informal economic activity has been defined as “transactions

where the state neither provides protection nor receives a ‘cut’” (Centeno and Portes, 2010, p. 29) and “an exchange of a good or service between (at least) two parties that occurs via some form of nonstate based regulation” (Bonnet and Venkatesh, 2016).

In contrast, Gershuny (1979) views the informal economy as comprised of three distinct sectors (household, communal and underground economy), which reflect productive processes (e.g. cooking, volunteering, undeclared work etc) and do not necessarily involve monetary transactions. Correspondingly, Folbre (2020) proposes that “informal employment” should be redefined as “informal market economy” since current (and influential) conceptualisations by national and international statistical agencies (such as the System of National Standards) reproduce gendered assumptions on the economy, excluding much of females’ economic contribution.

Conceptualisations of informal economy focus predominantly on the productive and income-generating feature of economic activity, although distribution processes of goods and services are also frequently considered. This may be explained partly by the fact that the informal economy as a concept was born out of economic development literature (Portes, 1983) and is often measured in terms of productivity and employment. In the extant literature, the consumption side of the informal economy is often considered a means to measure production and economic development, while studies focusing on the demand side of the informal economy are limited (Horodnic, Ciobanu, et al., 2022).

A recent systematic literature review identified only 19 published research papers using empirical or theoretical models for consumer behaviour in the informal economy (Horodnic, Ciobanu, et al., 2022). This review does not incorporate certain, but limited in number and citations, studies in business literature (such as K. McCrohan et al., 1991; K. F. McCrohan and Smith, 1987; K. F. McCrohan and Sugrue, 1998; Ours, 1991; Zlolniski, 1994). It also fails to recognise that consumption practices falling under the household, underground, informal and hidden economy have *extensively* been studied within consumer behaviour-related literature; such practices, however, are occasionally positioned as performed within the “informal economy” (exceptions are for e.g. Culiberg and Bajde, 2014; Laitala and Klepp, 2018; Pisani, 2013a, 2013b; C. C. Williams and Paddock, 2003). It appears that the two bodies of literature have not, to date, developed a dialectic and mutually informing relationship.

To address this, Table 1 offers a taxonomy of consumer practices and the corresponding type of economic activity which they represent, based

on the distinction between formal and informal economy.<sup>1</sup> The table does not aim to create an exhaustive list of consumer practices<sup>2</sup> performed within and outside the formal economy, but to indicate ways of positioning diverse consumer transactions, dispositions (“one-sided” acts as termed by Polanyi, 1992, p. 33) and practices of self-provisioning within the conceptual framework of the informal economy.

TABLE 1

*Mapping consumer practices according to the types of economic activity.  
[Inspired by Castells and Portes’ (1989, p. 14) classification]*

	TYPE OF ECONOMIC ACTIVITY			
	Formal	Informal	Illegal	Self-provisioning
Process of acquisition <sup>3</sup>	Formal market channels	Informal market and non-market channels	Informal market and non-market channels	-
Final product (good or service) consumed <sup>4</sup>	legal	legal	illegal	legal /illegal
Consumption practices	Registered acquisition (purchasing) of licit products and services	Unregistered acquisition of licit products and services (e.g. hand me downs, barter exchange, free-exchange bazaars unrecorded trade)	Unregistered acquisition of illegal products (e.g. drugs, piracy, stolen/counterfeit products)	Household-ing and self-provisioning (e.g. cooking, farming etc)

1. The matrix in Table 1 is inspired by Castells & Portes (1989, p. 14) distinction between formal, informal and criminal economic activity (termed here illegal) and elaborates further to include household economic activities as suggested by Gershuny (1979) and Folbre (2020). These activities do not involve transactions between the household and other units but reflect self-sufficiency (e.g. production carried out for domestic use).

2. Consumption is limited to either self-production or acquisition of material goods and services, ignoring other processes such as use and disposal. This narrowing down facilitates elaboration on Castells and Portes’ (1989, p. 14) classification, and is somewhat anticipated since self-production and modes of acquisition indicate the meeting point between production and consumption.

3. Table 1 proposes that informal economic activities encompass unregulated acquisition of products and services through informal market and non-market channels, in contrast with formal economic activities which involve regulated processes of acquisition through formal market.

4. Goods related to consumption practices are in Table 1 categorised according to their legal

All types of consumer economic activity in Table 1 have been studied in the literature, with the so-called alternative or atypical (Amine and Gicquel, 2011; Koskenniemi, 2021) forms of consumption corresponding to informal, illegal and self-provisioning categories. Scholars from various social disciplines explore alternative consumer practices that challenge the economistic model of consumer's decision-making under relevant and often overlapping concepts such as consumer resistance, anti-consumption, alternative, ethical, political and green consumption (for a recent review on the field and main concepts used see Koskenniemi, 2021).

Alternative consumer practices may also be explained under Gibson-Graham's (2008, 2010) concept of "diverse economy", which suggests that what is often accounted as "the economy" represents only one facet of the actual economic activity performed around us (for an overview on the diverse economy and alternative economic spaces see Gritzas and Kavoulakos, 2016). Economic transactions are found within the official and alternative markets, and even outside markets (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 616; 2010, p. 228). Thus, certain alternative consumer practices, such as housework, DIY and gift exchange, may be hidden from official accounts of economic activity.

Considering the above and embracing a substantive perspective on the economy (Polanyi, 1992, p. 33), this article views self-provisioning, non-income generating and illegal activities as relevant to the informal economy and of interest, particularly from a consumption perspective. Therefore, a working definition of informal consumer activity includes all economic activities performed through transactions (two-sided), dispositions ("one-sided") and self-provisioning, that occur through informal market and non-market (private) channels, irrespective of the legality status of the product consumed.

### 3. POLITICAL CONSUMPTION AND INFORMAL ECONOMY

Although consumer activism has a long history extending at least since the sugar boycotts in Britain and France at the end of the eighteenth century (Van Dyk, 2021), the very term "political consumer" first appeared in 1995

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or illegal status, and this is the basis upon which formal and informal economic activity is distinguished from activity found in an "illegal" economy (Feige, 1990). Castells and Portes's (1989) original taxonomy use the characterisations of licit/illicit instead of legal/illegal, but here a stricter approach is used to highlight state's control over economic transactions (Dewey, 2016, p.3).



and was popularised by Danish mass media concerning Shell's plan to dispose of the oil storage buoy "Brent Spar" in the Atlantic, and the French Government's decision to resume the nuclear weapons tests in the Pacific (Jensen, 1998, 2003). This term was used to characterise consumers who included political, social, and ethical considerations in their buying decision process. Since then, the research field of political consumption grew substantially. It is heavily influenced by political science scholars (Koskeniemi, 2021) who view consumer choice and the rising 'politics' of products as an increasingly important form of political participation that exists parallel to conventional party-centred and national-state level politics (Micheletti et al., 2004). Political consumption highlights the connection between consumer and citizen (Føllesdal, 2004), sees the market as an arena for politics, and uses consumption as a metaphor for voting (W. L. Bennett, 2004). Political consumption is defined by Micheletti et al (2004, p. xiv-xv) as:

"the consumer choice of producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices. It is based on attitudes and values regarding issues of justice, fairness, or non-economic issues that concern personal and family well-being and ethical or political assessment of favourable and unfavourable business and governmental practice".

Basic "action forms" of political consumption include "boycotting" (negative purchasing), "buycotting" (positive purchasing), "discursive practices" (communicative actions), and "lifestyle political consumerism", which reflects "profound changes in lifestyle practices" (Boström et al., 2019).

Under such perspective, "Acts of production and consumption are [...] considered as more than purely private matters about business profit-making and individual consumer preference based on a cost-benefit analysis when buying goods" (Boström et al., 2019). Therefore, consumer behaviour within an informal economy may be viewed not as rational economic decision-making, but as a social activity which, amongst other intentions, aims to signify and communicate social concerns. This theoretical framework of political consumption facilitates the need identified by Horodnic, Ciobanu, et al. (2022) to include multiple motivations justifying purchase decisions within the informal economy, including but not limited to economic, social and formal market failures in terms of availability, speed of provision and quality. Additionally, this perspective is in line with previous research observing that, for a considerable proportion of consumers, social and/or redistributive rationales drive participation in informal markets (Horodnic,

Williams, et al., 2022; Littlewood et al., 2018; C. C. Williams et al., 2017; C. C. Williams and Horodnic, 2016; C. C. Williams and Martinez-Perez, 2014).

This article interprets informal economic activities under a political consumption approach and offers specific insights concerning the motivations, logic and agency of individuals engaged with informal consumption practices.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### *4.1. Research setting*

The article draws upon findings from a wider ethnographic study on political consumption conducted at a large city in Greece before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, between November 2017 and June 2018. At that time discourses for the ongoing “economic crisis” were widespread amongst residents, along with public policy efforts to exit the sovereign debt crisis and recover from economic recession.

In 2018, 27% of Greeks admitted having purchased undeclared goods or services, while the mean for the European Union is 10% (Eurobarometer, 2020). Greek informal economy is estimated to be among the highest in the Euro Area (International Monetary Fund, 2019), calculated at around 27,5% of the country’s GDP for the years 1999-2007 (Buehn and Schneider, 2012) and tax evasion a “chronic hide-and-see game” which has taken the form of a “vicious cycle” (Ballas and Tsoukas, 1998) (p. 572). Macroeconomic conditions (such as high unemployment rates and low GDP growth), coupled with institutional factors (such as a low tax morality and the low quality of state institutions) are drivers for the development of the informal economy in Greece (Bitzenis et al., 2016). Tax evasion in Greece has been explained as a sociocultural phenomenon of “mutual distrust” between the state and its citizens which was historically formed during the process of state formation, and therefore not considered “unethical” by a large part of the population (Ballas and Tsoukas, 1998). Low tax morality in Greece is related to low levels of institutional quality and tax burden reciprocity (Kaplanoglou and Rapanos, 2013).

The broader economic context during data collection was characterized by dire employment conditions. In February 2017 the unemployment rate reached 23.2% which is the highest among OECD countries (OECD, 2017), amid extensive austerity policies. Such conditions generate expectations that informal economic activities at that time reflected a strategy of surviv-

al and subsistence, rather than choice. It was also under these conditions of “crisis” that solidarity economy gained momentum in Greece and served as a catalyst for the formation of numerous *primarily informal* Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) initiatives (Kalogeraki et al., 2018).

#### *4.2. Data collection and informants*

Data collection involved a variety of methods including observation, kitchen tours (Meah and Jackson, 2016), fridge stories (Joosse and Marshall, 2020), shop-alongs (Joosse and Marshall, 2020) and interviews. Observation aimed to immerse the researcher in the field and to recruit participants. Sites of observation included a local produce festival, a dissemination day at the City Council’s Food Bank and visits to local organic produce shops.

The study adopted a purposive sampling technique focusing on 24 consumers from three distinctive theoretical categories (A, B and C) termed “ethical consumers”, “active citizens” and “disqualified consumers”. Ethical consumers are defined here as consumers who actively seek to purchase “ethically” labelled products, such as organic, local and fair trade, from the formal market. Adoption of such a narrow definition accommodated recruitment of consumers who, due to their engagement with boycotting, would, by definition, be political ‘consumers’. Recruitment for this category of informants was done via leaflet invitations left in organic specialty shops of the city, a random approach by the researcher at a local produce festival, and snowballing.

Category B, termed here “active citizens”, includes consumers actively engaged in civil society institutions and/or SSE initiatives. Institutions and initiatives approached to recruit participants, addressed environmental and/or economic concerns. Recruitment from this category facilitated the collection of data from consumers who are politically active through forms other than consumption (i.e. participation in civil society and SSE).

Finally, category C of this study’s sample included what Bauman calls “disqualified” or “flawed” consumers (Bauman, 2007, 2012), that is without income and facing extreme economic difficulties. Bauman (2007) argues that in a society of consumers “the poor of today [...] are ‘non-consumers’, not ‘unemployed’ (p. 33). Participant recruitment for this theoretical category was achieved through listings of the Foodbank run by the city council. The inclusion of this category of consumers facilitated the collection of data from individuals with “little or no chance of winning while playing the game by its official rules” (Bauman, 2007, p. 39).

An overview of the demographic profile of informants is provided in Table 2.

TABLE 2  
*Informants' Profile (n=24)*

Code	Age	Gender	Occupation	Education	People in Household
A1	37	Female	Unemployed	Bachelor's Degree	4
A2	62	Female	Pensioner (Civil Servant)	Lyceum	2
A3	38	Female	Self-employed - Academic	PhD	4
A4	62	Female	Housekeeping - Farmer	Lyceum	3
A5	38	Male	Technical Staff in HEI	Master's Degree	2
A6	44	Female	Hotel manager	Bachelor's Degree	3
A7	36	Female	Self-employed -Academic	PhD	1
A8	35	Female	Primary Teacher	Bachelor's Degree	1
B1	24	Female	Student (Part-time job)	Bachelor's Degree	2
B2	63	Male	Pensioner - Civil Servant	Bachelor's Degree	2
B3	68	Male	Pensioner - Army	Military	1
B4	33	Male	Self-employed (SSE)	Lyceum	3
B5	38	Male	Self-employed (SSE)	Gymnasium	2
B6	28	Male	Self-employed (SSE)	Master's Degree	2
B7	34	Male	Self-employed (SSE)	Bachelor's Degree	1
B8	65	Male	Pensioner (Teacher)	Bachelor's Degree	4
C1	46	Female	Unemployed	Primary	6
C2	45	Female	Unemployed	Gymnasium	3
C3	51	Female	Cleaner (part-time)	Primary	3
C4	31	Female	Unemployed	Lyceum	3
C5	35	Male	Unemployed	Bachelor's Degree	4
C6	47	Male	Unemployed	Primary	5
C7	67	Female	Pensioner	Primary	1
C8	58	Female	Unemployed	No education	18

Participation involved three distinct waves of interviewing. The first wave utilised in-depth interviewing to get an initial understanding of participants' consumer behaviour and their views while reflecting upon their consumer choices. The second wave of interviews involved either a kitchen tour or a shop-along. These complementary methods facilitated

the exploration of the “backstage” of consumption (Joosse and Marshall, 2020) and aimed at getting further insight into the actual behaviour of the consumers – what people do instead of what people say they do (Ehn et al., 2015). The third wave aimed to get participants to reflect upon their participation in the study and to clarify any issues raised from the analysis of the previous two waves.

Interviews were audio recorded, generating a total of around 65 hours of audio material (see Table 3). During the second wave photographic material was also collected resulting in just over 200 photographs. This article mostly makes use of collected audio material.

TABLE 3  
*Audio Data*

1st Wave		2nd Wave		3rd Wave	
Sub-Total (in minutes)	2116	Sub-Total (in minutes)	1353	Sub-Total (in minutes)	456
Average (in minutes)	84.6	Average (in minutes)	64.4	Average (in minutes)	26.8
n	25	n	21	n	17
min	44	min	34	min	10
max	161	max	117	max	56
Total in minutes	3925		Total in Hours	65.4	

Prior to participation, individuals were informed about data handling and their rights (following the EU Regulation 2016/679) and provided written participation consent.

#### 4.3. Analysis

Audio data were transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis was then undertaken in six steps (phases) following suggestions by Braun and Clarke (2006). Efforts to establish trustworthiness during each phase of the analysis were made according to recommendations by Nowell et al. (2017). Coding was assisted using RQDA open-source software. A total of 112 codes were identified during that early phase of the analysis; codes were arranged under identified themes (n=7) and subthemes (n=19) relevant to, for example, sites of consumption, consumption practices, motivations,

trade-offs and inconsistencies, feelings, biographical and life-changing stories. This article uses codes related to informal consumer activity.

## 5. DISCUSSION

### *5.1. Understanding consumption motives and the role of informal markets*

The first central question to be addressed is, what drives consumption within the informal economy? It is often suggested that individuals and households (facing economic strains or just for gain) engage in informal markets as consumers to take advantage of the lower prices for material products and services needed to get by. This is a vivid example of economic thinking about human motives based on a “fallacy”, since “no human motive is *per se* economic” (Polanyi, 1947, p. 111).

Throughout data analysis, the need to understand economic activity in various settings (formal and informal, consumption and production), as “submerged” in social relations (Polanyi, 1947) became evident. Participant B4 describes one painful childhood experience

I cried for a year because all kids at that time wore Nike and made fun of you if you were wearing something else. [...] For many years in primary school this was happening. There were the dominant kids who made fun of the others if they didn't wear branded outfits and their parents were poor (Participant B4, self-employed, age 33).

Brand-related buying, a relatively neglected phenomenon within literature (Kucuk and Aledin, 2021), is often developed within school settings and illustrates how children breaking brand-related cultural norms may be exposed to both covert (threatened, as in receiving negative comments) and overt (actual) violence (W. P. Williams and Littlefield, 2018). For low-income families, such as in the case of Participant B4 presented above, the illegal market of counterfeit brand products could offer an escape route from peer pressure and social exclusion. Previous studies suggest that purchasing of counterfeit brand products is primarily driven by social motives (see e.g. Wilcox et al., 2009).

All participants presented economic reasoning when asked to identify motivations driving their engagement with the informal economy. Nonetheless, under the surface of such “economic” logic lies, as argued by Polanyi (1947) a deeper (false) assumption that there exists a separate (from society) economic sphere governed by the logic of the market. While there can be multiple rationales behind consumers' engagement in informal mar-

kets, they entail intrinsically social motives (even if individuals sometimes provide simple economic justifications). The role of informal markets is clear; by providing cheaper or unavailable formal market alternatives, informal markets are better understood as *means* through which individuals, particularly those with limited monetary resources, can interact with their surrounding community and fulfil social aspirations.

### *5.2. Non-market consumption*

All interviewees mentioned alternative modes of acquiring goods and services for their household including gift exchange, barter exchange and self-provision. During the Greek financial crisis, characterised as “the deepest and longest ever recorded in an OECD country in the postwar period” (Andriopoulou et al., 2019, p. 2), disposable income declined by a staggering 42% (Andriopoulou et al., 2019). This hostile economic climate required consumers to seek coping strategies to compensate for this income loss. Self-provisioning was, for those with available space, one such alternative.



*Picture 1: Urban illegal chicken coop on a terrace*

*[Source: picture taken by the researcher during fieldwork]*



Self-production mostly involved legal practices such as growing vegetables and herbs at courtyards and balconies, but illegal practices were also observed, such as the terrace chicken coop seen in Picture 1. Participants from sample category C particularly stressed these alternative ways of food provisioning as important for their household resources. The emergence of municipal allotment gardens during the period of the financial crisis has been documented by (Anthopoulou et al., 2017) as a more collective and institutionalised way of food provisioning. Participants did not mention the use of such structures, although one such structure was launched in 2014 in the city where this study was conducted.

Self-produced food is not only used for final consumption; excess quantities enable households to engage in the non-commercial circulation of products through bartering and gift exchange practices.

“When other people also realized that we can barter, it seemed like a better practice than to say 5 kilos of apples for 5 euros, they understood and agreed having a barter exchange with us, that is they [would give us] apples and we [would offer] tomatoes, they [would offer] greens, we [would offer] something else that we may have at some other point in time, or else it could be something else, for example, recently a friend borrowed tools from us and gave us products that he produces and our tools helped him”. (Participant A4, housewife, age 62)

Transactions relying on barter were also observed for services, as another participant explains

“If I want to repair my car but I have no money, my friend that owns a garage will say ‘bring it and [in return] come and paint my room’. That’s how it goes when you have no money to pay”. (Participant C6, unemployed, age 47)

Existing empirical research on consumption within an informal economy, such as identified by Horodnic, Ciobanu, et al., (2022), often treats economy and market as synonymous, missing a significant amount of economic activity performed outside markets and/or involving non-monetary transactions. For example, a recent study on clothing reuse in Norway indicated that the amount of private clothing exchange exceeds that of the formal market (Laitala and Klepp, 2018).

Interviews revealed the wealth of alternative forms of appropriating material goods and services for a household through informal networks.



These included gifts and exchanges through interpersonal networks (i.e. extended family, relatives, friends, co-workers, and neighbours) and wider consumption networks involving structures where strangers could engage in giving and receiving products and services (such as walls of kindness and time banks). Previously established institutions and provision networks (such as churches' food and clothing banks) as well as alternative practices (e.g. dumpster-diving) were complemented by newly established ones (e.g. state-run food and clothing banks and initiatives that could fall under Social and Solidarity Economy) and were mentioned as means of facilitating reciprocity and redistribution.

Practices previously performed individually were also becoming collectivised. For example, a common practice cited amongst households with children includes the so-called "hand-me-down", which involves the passing over of clothes to younger children of the family, or relatives and friends. This is usually a practice achieved through interpersonal networks, although similar initiatives appear to have been organised within schools; participant C4 stated that her children's school has set a system in place where at the end of the school year clothes are collected from each classroom and distributed to lower grades. Comparable initiatives such as "free-exchange bazaars" (Sotiropoulou, 2011) were held by formal and informal institutions, including schools, across the country.

Food and other subsistence products were also distributed through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives. A successful campaign through which Participant C1 had access to food, was the "Oloi mazi mporoume" (united we can) launched by SKAI TV, a pro-establishment broadcaster, in collaboration with various businesses and religious institutions (Chatzidakis, 2014). The campaign mainly involved the collection of donated products at the checkout in supermarkets, and their distribution by the supermarkets themselves or by cooperating churches.

A variation of the "wall of kindness" (Khan et al., 2018), a practice which at the time had spread to several cities across Greece, was employed at this research site by a social enterprise operating in the hospitality industry

"it was fashionable at the time, 2 years ago, when there were these solidarity hangers for everything, and food and so on. So, we also put a hanger outside, and we hung the food" (Participant B7, SSE member, age 34).

Interviews revealed a wealth of everyday consumer practices which escape the dominant transaction form of the market (i.e. purchasing) and through which individuals manage to sustain themselves and their households, particularly in times of economic hardship. Individuals relying on the informal economy as producers and consumers, develop networks and become familiar with “hidden” transactions, even to the extent of *normalising* respective consumer behaviours. Studies measuring only “purchases” from informal markets overlook this. While people with higher levels of disposable income might be more prone to engage in informal purchasing (e.g. Littlewood et al., 2018), barter and gift economy appears a crucial mode of acquiring necessities, particularly for those without available disposable income.

### 5.3. *Legitimacy and legality in informal consumer activity*

During interviews, the issue of ‘legality’ prevailed only for certain consumer practices. These varied from somewhat legitimate or low-risk illegal practices such as asking-for-no-receipt and software piracy to less legitimate and high-risk practices such as reconnecting electricity.

“I had my electricity cut 4 times, and 4 times I reconnected it. [...] For me it’s not illegal because the meter records what happens”. (Participant C6, unemployed, age 47)

“I won’t ask for a receipt. I do not care. I don’t think that the Greek state is currently offering anything in return, so I will steal from it in any way I can”. (Participant A3, self-employed, age 38)

“I only install [cracked] software at some pc’s here at the department [...] It is a personal choice and in collaboration with the department”. (Participant A5, technical staff in HEI, age 38)

Consumer behaviour is regulated (and held accountable) by the state typically when the product or service acquired is framed as “illegal”, or there is a breach in formal transaction rules. Products and market transactions “shift in and out of illegality” (Beckert and Dewey, 2017) (p.6), hence “it is through state-devised acts that the distinction between legal and illegal is established” (p. 7). Legitimacy and illegality are close but separate concepts; legality best reflects the state’s intervention in econom-

ic activities, nonetheless, “the distinction between both dimensions, legal/illegal and legitimate/illegitimate, allows the capture of both the externalities that emerge from illegal markets and their role as subjects of political interest” (Dewey, 2016, p. 7).

An illustrative case of “legitimate illegality” (Beckert and Dewey, 2017) commonly brought up during interviews involved digital piracy in the entertainment industry (see Table 4).

TABLE 4  
*Consumer views on digital piracy in the entertainment industry*

<p><b>Piracy in the entertainment industry</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>for me, these creations should be freely circulated (A7)</i></li> <li>• <i>I felt that this is not even consumption (B1)</i></li> <li>• <i>piracy is normal, I don't even think about that (B6)</i></li> <li>• <i>if you have internet, you have a free movie (B7)</i></li> <li>• <i>you see that it's the whole system [like this], so you go into such a process (C2)</i></li> <li>• <i>since they promote them, you have a right (C6)</i></li> </ul>
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Difficulty from the side of consumers to conceive digital piracy as “un-ethical” has already been documented (Bhal and Leekha, 2008). The scarce empirical evidence on digital piracy in Greece suggests that this practice is rather common across the country (Papadimitriou, 2018).

Against the backdrop of economic recession, along with more individualised illegal actions such as digital piracy, new consumer movements were formed and voiced efforts to legitimise illegal practices previously uncontested. Two particularly successful movements were that of “Den Plirono” (Refuse to Pay), which started as a call for civil disobedience against rising tolls on national roads (Rovisco et al., 2017) and extended to various acts of consumer resistance such as reconnecting electricity (Smith-Nonini, 2020; Staley, 2013), and the “Horis Mesazontes” (Without Middlemen) movement (Nikolaidou, 2020; Rakopoulos, 2017) involved the organising of informal open street markets where producers were directly selling to consumers.

#### *5.4 Politicising informal consumption in times of austerity*

The previous sections provided an overview of the diverse everyday informal consumer activities’ informants reported engaging with, as well as

instances of how such individual action was “collectivised” (Holzer, 2006) through formal and (mainly) informal networks and institutions. Holzer (2006) highlights the vital role of Social Movement Organisations (SMOs) in collectivising and signalling grievances to targeted actors, enabling individual voices to transcend from the personal to the public sphere. Under this line of thought, we can trace several spaces of contention revealing the political dimension of consumption practices in times of austerity by examining claims signalled by SMOs at that time.

Food security and access were perhaps one of the most widespread claims, giving rise to numerous food network initiatives undertaken both by formal and informal institutions. Formal institution initiatives mostly involved a “charitable” approach of donating food to vulnerable social groups and included corporate social responsibility campaigns (such as the “Oloi mazi mporoume” analysed earlier), and state and church food banks. In contrast, grassroots initiatives suggesting “alternative” food networks, such as community-supported agriculture and markets without middlemen, approached these issues through solidarity and reciprocity (Nikolaidou, 2020).

Equally, formal and informal institutions and networks, either already established or newly formed, addressed claims around access to clothing (e.g. through clothing banks, exchange bazaars, walls of kindness), health (e.g. social pharmacies and clinics), education (e.g. social “shadow education”, (Zambeta, 2014), housing (e.g. social housing, squatting), services (e.g. time banks), roads and electricity (e.g. “Den Plirono”), information and entertainment (e.g. free press and free cultural events). Grassroots initiatives regularly approached these claims by developing alternative economic spaces, challenging dominant norms of the market and often (particularly in the early years of the economic crisis) involving informal consumption practices.

The rise of solidarity as a widespread “counter-austerity bottom-up narrative” (Arampatzi, 2016, p. 5) and the corresponding SSE initiatives that emerged at the time (Kavoulakos and Gritzas, 2016), reinforced reflexivity from the side of consumers on the “politics behind products”, i.e. “an understanding of material products as embedded in a complex social and normative context” (Micheletti et al, 2004, p. xiv-xv).

I support SSE groups. It’s not easy because sometimes the products are more expensive, but surely of better quality. [...] the most important is how they are produced, that is if they are produced within a process of cooperation and solidarity, of horizontal structure, without bosses, where

everyone is equal. That is the most important for me in order to support groups without middlemen (Participant A8, primary teacher, age 35).

In 2015 Rakopoulos highlighted informality as a main feature of Greece's crisis-driven arguing that: "Crises, I propose, should be seen in terms of the tensions that they raise and bring to the fore. In Greece, such a tension is the one between (what counts as) the formal and the informal economy" (2015, p.88). Indeed, public policy reforms were later introduced, such as legislation on a new type of open street market called "Consumers' markets",<sup>5</sup> as a result of the "legitimization processes of informal practices"(Nikolaidou, 2020), paving the way for several SSE initiatives, offering political consumers alternative (in terms of production and distribution) goods and services, to enter the formal economy markets.

Nonetheless, several consumer practices remain hidden from the formal economy, either because of unawareness and choice (as in the case of informal purchasing) or because they are non-commodified (as in the case of "Den plirono"). Informal purchasing existed before the crisis, but during times of austerity, not asking for a receipt reinforced the meanings of disobedience and solidarity.

I would consciously not ask for a receipt. When we go to the *laiki* [open market – literally "popular" market], no one [of the producers] issues a receipt, no one from the small shops or small-sized producers. It's reasonable for me and correct in a way, but we can't support it openly. (Participant B7, SSE member, age 34)

I know it's illegal but if someone is struggling, and issuing a receipt will be a burden, I will say "leave it, I do not want a receipt", even if I do pay the same amount (Participant A8, primary teacher, age 35)

Likewise, in Rakopoulos' (2015) study, groups of anti-middlemen attributed their resistance to officialization, not to alleged embeddedness "in a culturally produced informal economy", but due to suspicions that "the state will incorporate and suffocate them", illustrating how informality "can be thought of as an act both of resistance to incorporation and of disobedience" (p. 98).

Finally, anti-consumerism sentiments were also apparent at the time, although as the case of Skoros (an anti-consumerist collective running a

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5. "Consumers' markets" were introduced under Article 37 Law 4497/2017 providing the legal framework under which civic-consumer organisations (associations and cooperatives) were allowed to organise open street markets on conditions that they: a. are non-profit, b. promote consumer awareness and protect consumer rights and interests, and c. promote solidarity.

free-exchange shop in Athens) illustrates, when the crisis deepened, conventional critiques of consumers and consumerism became somewhat “redundant” (Chatzidakis, 2014, p.35; Chatzidakis and Maclaran, 2018, p. 510). Although critiques on over-consumption were to a certain (but limited) extent brought up during interviews, discussions with participants from sample category C were largely preoccupied with difficulties related to under-consumption and ways to make ends meet.

For disqualified consumers facing extreme economic strains, the informal economy is concurrently a space of no agency, as passive recipients of “charity”, and of emancipation, by actively engaging in self-provisioning and transactions that either do not require a monetary exchange or, when they do, are cheaper than alternatives found in formal markets. In contrast to situations described above (where consumers can support more pricey SSE initiatives and withdraw from getting a receipt without attaining a price deduction), disqualified consumers often perform their solidarity by supporting “equals” (i.e. individuals submerged in informality both as producers and consumers).

Interviews with disqualified consumers also revealed an urge of catching up with consumption, a strive for social integration and a rather *hidden* political claim for, what Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco (2022) call, “the right to shine” (i.e. a “desire for fashionable things and pleasant experiences, but [...] also an existential claim for visibility, recognition and citizenship”, p.2).

I know someone that makes delicious marmalade, awesome beeswax paste, I have a friend that does awesome nail job, everything black [undeclared] I mean, I have a beautician that does great make-up, em, what else, let me think, a person I know is a massage therapist that does a great massage, whom I will prefer of course or I will choose people who I know and who are in more need rather than going somewhere else [...] 70% from what I spend goes to people without a receipt and 30% with receipt. (Participant C4, unemployed, age 31)

Here, a “latent” (in terms of non-collectivised) form of political consumption is observed, portrayed as a strictly self-interested, and economically motivated consumer act, not so much guided by post-materialistic narratives, but by the claim to fit in society by taking part in the dominant consumer culture. Fullerton and Punj (1998) successfully assert that “misbehaviour” by consumers (including participation in informal and illegal markets) “is a fundamental— and intrinsic— element of the modern consumer culture, because it is unintentionally but powerfully fostered by the

very marketing values and practices which shape and encourage legitimate consumption experiences”. It is under such a perspective that the political aspect of the “right to shine” can be understood and agency for the “dis-qualified” consumer realised.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Through an examination of informal consumption in crisis-driven Greece, this article demonstrated why informal (and illegal) consumer activity constitutes a significant, yet understudied, dimension of political consumption. In the case of Greece, economic turmoil and harsh fiscal policies experienced at that time reinforced consumer reflexivity, popularised alternative modes of provision and turned the informal (market and non-market) economy into a platform for expressing market and civil disobedience and solidarity. Nonetheless, the informal economy thrives in more affluent countries, and it is certainly worth investigating further how political consumption and informal consumer activity intersect in more stable economic and political settings.

This study also provided empirical evidence supporting the social embeddedness of the economy thesis, i.e. consumer activity is intrinsically socially driven. Interviews with consumers reinforced Gibson-Graham’s perspective on a diverse economy by highlighting the need to consider non-market modes of acquisition and exchange as common consumer strategies within an informal economy. Informal markets may represent alternative economic spaces through which individuals acquire lower-priced or unavailable (in the formal market) goods, but evidence from this study suggests that confining consumer activity only to “markets” (formal and informal) distorts consumer agency (particularly for the underprivileged) and thus eschews attempts to fully appreciate the dynamics of consumption within the informal economy.

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