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Stories of resilience – rebuilding consumer identity after poverty

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ABSTRACT

Despite the significance of resilience in consumer poverty research, current understanding is skewed towards contexts of downward mobility and research has neglected to explore what happens after consumers move out of a period of financial and identity strain. Employing a novel qualitative two-stage narrative approach, our study analyses autobiographies and interviews to reveal two distinct post-poverty resilience narrative pathways. First, redemptive resilience narratives positively reconstruct disruptive life events for consumer identity growth. Second, restorative resilience narratives negatively reconstruct disruptive life events for consumer identity reclamation. Our findings extend the literature on dynamic resilience trajectories and coping behaviours, highlighting how past disruption influences different types of resilience through identity reconstruction and lasting lifestyle alterations.

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Introduction

Consumer research increasingly considers people's encounters with disruptive life events over which they have limited perceived control. Such events include illness (Bettany, 2022; Pavia & Mason, 2004), natural disasters (Hüttel & Balderjahn, 2022), terrorist attacks (Marcoux et al., 2017), bereavement (O'Donohoe, 2015; Turley & O'Donohoe, 2012), homelessness (Barrios et al., 2012), or involuntary job loss (Karanika & Hogg, 2016; Szmigin et al., 2020). Some of these forced life transitions (Barrios et al., 2012) may also be accompanied by other unwelcome disruptions, such as the loss of valuable possessions, established routines, social standing, or economic resources. These disruptions can lead to existential crises and a shattered sense of self (Campbell et al., 2020). In response to disruptions, the literature has indicated varying adaptation strategies used by consumers. Of relevance to this paper is consumers' adaptive strategies in contexts of relative poverty where limited access to socially acceptable living standards is particularly pronounced in societies with a strong ideological hold on consumption (Hamilton et al., 2014). Here, consumers'

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ways of 'bouncing back' can be as varied as protecting their threatened identity (e.g. by keeping up appearances), engaging in self-care practices to support emotional well-being and/or adopting disciplined approaches to budgeting (Caldwell & Henry, 2017; Hutton, 2016; Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013; Szmigin et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2018).

While recognising the importance of researching (newly) impoverished consumer populations, we contend that the current understanding of resilience – defined as the ability to adapt positively and recover from significant adversity (Masten & Reed, 2002) – is lopsided within contexts of relative poverty. Previous research has largely focused on downward life trajectories, offering limited insights into financial recovery and identity reconstruction. Although some studies have explored retail spaces that facilitate consumers' transitions out of relative poverty (McEachern et al., 2024), the broader lived experiences and identity negotiations that accompany economic recovery are overlooked. A key consideration is whether adaptive strategies serving resilience are temporary responses to disruptive life events, or whether (some) consumer responses and adaptions 'stick', forming integral components of a more enduring process of self-transformation. Exploring this distinction allows for deeper insights into the dynamic developments of resilience, particularly as to how individuals may navigate and recover differently from adverse circumstances (Leipold & Greve, 2009).

Such a comprehensive inquiry requires a narrative approach that examines how consumers' life circumstances change over time (Giesler & Thompson, 2016; Leisering & Buhr, 2012; Ourahmoune, 2016) and considers various twists and turns along the way (McAdams & Bowman, 2001), including instances of downward and subsequent upward mobility and their cumulative impact on individuals' social identity construction. By broadening the scope in this manner, we address the need to extend our theoretical understanding of long-term identity formation after disruptive life events (Baker et al., 2015; Campbell et al., 2020), particularly when consumers have dealt with 'identity loss' (Schau et al., 2009, p. 273). In doing so, we consider consumers' identities, including their developments and changes over the life course, as structured in terms of coherent, culturally constituted narratives (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; McAdams, 2006, 2013). Our research is, therefore, guided by two research questions: How do experiences during major disruptions associated with poverty shape consumer resilience and identities formed in response to (perceived) financial hardship? What narrative connections exist between consumers' pre-disruption identities, the identities they adopt during poverty, and their post-disruption identities as they adapt to regained economic stability?

Our study was conducted in Germany and insights are developed from a qualitative two-step narrative approach involving published autobiographies and long interviews. All informants dealt with temporary and recurrent income drops over their life courses, falling below the relative poverty line of earning less than 60% median income (Federal Government, 2025). Acknowledging that poverty extends beyond financial hardship (Hamilton et al., 2014; Želinský et al., 2022) informants also faced subjective poverty, tying their well/ill-being to past stability, such as secure employment (Diener, 1984; Hamilton & Catterall, 2006). Germany provides a particularly strong empirical context for studying subjective poverty. Its meritocratic social structure places emphasis on employment as a key determinant of social integration and self-worth (Gurr & Jungbauer-Gans, 2013). Moreover, the country's shift from

a protective to an activating welfare state has reinforced the notion of poverty as a personal failure, intensifying feelings of exclusion (Lessenich, 2015). Hence, reliance on social assistance can foster identity strain and social stigma (Gross et al., 2020).

To enable our theorising, we draw on McAdams' (2006, 2013) perspectives on narrative sense-making and reveal two differing identity narrative pathways of poverty survivors. First, redemptive resilience refers to narratives that positively reconstruct disruptive life events for consumer identity growth. Second, restorative resilience refers to narratives that negatively reconstruct disruptive life events for consumer identity reclamation. Although both narratives relate to upward life trajectories, they are grounded in opposing storylines (plots) and cultural discourses. The dominant narrative in our data was redemptive resilience when consumers emphasise a critical reflexivity towards consumer culture and is reflective of therapeutic socio-cultural discourses surrounding the promotion of personal growth through finding benefit in the adverse effects of low income. Although less common, we also found evidence of an alternative narrative when consumers adopting restorative resilience reject their past transitory poor selves that had been marked by restricted market choices. In turn, they intend to reclaim their pre-poverty identity and their narratives of resilience are entrenched in consumer culture's marketplace ideology and a neoliberal subjectivity of viewing the marketplace as a core therapeutic function to attain a happy life.

Hence, the substantive contribution of this paper is to advance our understanding of how past disruption shapes different types of resilience through identity reconstruction, terming these redemptive resilience and restorative resilience narratives. We extend the literature on the evolving nature of resilience and coping behaviours over time, demonstrating how resilience can impact transformation, a relationship that has not been fully explored by prior studies. In particular, we provide novel insights into how resilience can lead to lifestyle alterations and tangible behavioural outcomes.

Literature review

This review explores poverty transitions and their implications for consumer behaviour, identity reconstruction, and resilience. In line with the focus of prior research, we concentrate on downward mobility as a pathway to poverty and associated coping strategies. We then explore narrative sense-making, using McAdams' (2006, 2013) cultural narratives of redemption and contamination to understand how individuals construct their identities and display resilience differently following disruption.

Downward mobility as a pathway to poverty

Macro-social theorisations of risk in everyday life (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Bonoli, 2007; Gabriel & Lang, 2008) have asserted that life trajectories in Euro-American societies are now increasingly uncertain. Various social risks, such as the destandardisation of employment (e.g. rising temporary work contracts), increased familial instabilities (e.g. marital and partnership dissolution), health pandemics, alongside welfare state restructuring and its diminishing reliabilities, are rendering more segments of society vulnerable to social downward mobility (Atanasova et al., 2024; Campbell et al., 2020). In fact, downward mobility is an unpleasant and disruptive life

event. Involuntary downward mobility threatens consumers' sense of order, meaning and social frameworks, because it is often accompanied by a loss of income and status (Social Mobility Commission, 2020), pushing individuals or families below the relative poverty line (Vandecasteele et al., 2021). Becoming downwardly mobile and slipping into relative poverty may be particularly extreme to middle-class consumers, who may face increased vulnerability from identity conflicts (Ulver & Ostberg, 2014). Such conflicts arise from mismatches between their identity and status in terms of adjusting to new and unfamiliar social and consumption environments (Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013; Thompson et al., 2018), exacerbating feelings of reduced self-worth (Hamilton, 2012; O'Loughlin et al., 2017) and shame (Chase & Walker, 2015).

A small but growing number of consumer research studies have taken such downward movements into account. Research has considered downward mobility within contexts of involuntary job loss, job insecurity and family disruptions (Caldwell & Henry, 2017; Hamilton & Catterall, 2006; Karanika & Hogg, 2016; Thompson et al., 2018), austerity measures (Szmigin et al., 2020), moving to and living in a low-status mobile home neighbourhood (Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013), or becoming homeless (Barrios et al., 2012). In these studies researchers have sought to unpack consequent (social) identity strains and (re-) configurations of the self in light of adaptations to limited consumption opportunities and new and unfamiliar settings.

Coping with downward mobility and relative poverty

Adaptations to adverse life events are commonly classified as problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused strategies associated with moving into poverty are solution-oriented and involve actions such as disposing of possessions, budgeting, seeking social or financial support, and finding creative alternatives outside the marketplace (Bräuer et al., 2023; Hamilton, 2012; Hamilton & Catterall, 2006; Karanika & Hogg, 2016; Wendt, 2011). Emotion-focused coping aims to reduce emotional distress (Carver et al., 1989) and involves, for instance, prioritising non-material goals such as social relationships, memories, or religious beliefs. This can lead to changes in self-identity as individuals question previous lifestyles and prioritise mindful consumption and immaterial assets like health and social connections (Barrios et al., 2012; Hamilton & Catterall, 2006; Hamilton et al., 2014; Hill, 1991; Hutton, 2016; Karanika & Hogg, 2016; Sarmento et al., 2019; Szmigin et al., 2020). Conversely, some consumers may 'grieve their former good life' (Ulver-Sneistrup & Ostberg, 2011, p. 226) and resist adjusting their consumption practices, striving to maintain their pre-downward mobility identities (Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013; Thompson et al., 2018). These consumers may, for example, avoid necessary budgeting strategies to sustain previous consumption patterns (Thompson et al., 2018).

Szmigin et al. (2020) distinguish between consumer coping, as reactive responses that are often employed to deal with short-term crises, and persistent resilience. Persistent resilience is enacted in response to more sustained experiences of downward mobility and may involve 'significant life changes over extended time-periods' (Szmigin et al., 2020, 1885). Despite the dynamic nature of persistent resilience and its potentially long-term impacts, consumer research tends to consider only one-way downward life trajectories (Barrios et al. 2012; Caldwell and Henry 2017; Hamilton and Catterall 2006; Hutton

2016; Karanika and Hogg 2016; Thompson et al. 2018; Ulver-Sneistrup and Ostberg 2011). As a result, there is limited understanding of middle-class consumers' responses to emerging from economic deprivation and the long-term impact of their coping and resilience pathways following disruption.

While marketing research on persistent forms of economic insecurity suggests that economic loss and identity threats may trigger value realignment shifting consumption practices in fundamental ways (Szmigin et al., 2020), little is known about how and why such changes persist (Baker et al., 2015; Campbell et al., 2020). As such, it remains unclear whether coping strategies serve as temporary adaptations or if they contribute to enduring self-transformation serving long-term resilience. Building on prior research (Bonanno, 2004; Leipold & Greve, 2009; McAdams & Jones, 2017), our study adopts a broad understanding of resilience as an individual's ability to maintain stability, recover, or even grow following significant adversity. By additionally framing resilience as a dynamic and potentially transformative process (O'Loughlin et al., 2023; Szmigin et al., 2020), we seek to provide a more nuanced understanding of how consumers reconstruct their identities through multiple transitions over time, particularly post-disruption.

Narrative sense-making and resilience

Life stories or narratives are a basic mode of thought through which people make sense of the world in general and themselves in particular (Bruner, 1986; McAdams, 2006, 2013; Polkinghorne, 1991). Accordingly, life stories do not solely consist of recapitulating and recounting past events and episodes. By contrast, they involve retrospective meaning-making by actively and creatively shaping and ordering past experiences into a meaningful whole – especially after major shifts in people's assumptive worlds brought about by disruptive life events (McAdams & Bowman, 2001; Rojas-Gaviria & Bluemelhuber, 2010; Schau et al., 2009). As such, stories give meaning to lives in the past, present and anticipated future (Polkinghorne, 1991).

Although stories of meaning-making are deeply personal, they do not occur in a social vacuum. The re-construction of a person's narrative identity is also influenced by the stories of the culture within which their life is deeply enmeshed. These narratives often reflect overarching and common cultural plots that detail the most adaptive and socially acceptable means to draw meaning from disruptive life experiences (Hammack, 2008; McLean & Syed, 2015) and develop resilience (Horstman, 2018). Two of the most enduring cultural narratives are romanticism/redemption and tragedy/contamination (Frank, 2013; McAdams, 2006; 2013; Rogers et al., 2023; Stern, 1995).

Romantic or redemptive plots consist of one or several episodes in one's story in which the narrator experiences challenges or threats in their past and through a series of struggles emerges victorious (Gergen & Gergen, 1988; McAdams & Jones, 2017; Rogers et al., 2023). For example, a victim of a violent crime may have to abandon the past belief that the world is entirely good. However, when re-narrating the story with a focus upon the people who came to their aid, such a redemptive spin may result in a new faith in the power of human beings to support, care for, and heal one another. This slight, yet powerful narrative re-construction of a bad event into a sequence of redemption, in turn, may encourage the decision to assist other crime victims in the future (McAdams & Jones, 2017). The key takeaway here is that narratives of

redemption are intertwined with the processes of meaning-making, personal growth, and shifts in life philosophy following adversity (McAdams, 2011). As such, the positive sense-making of adverse life events, as emphasised in redemptive narratives, is essential to fostering resilience (Horstman, 2018; Rogers et al., 2023). This perspective has led to resilience being linked with positive psychology and therapeutic cultural discourses that underscore positive emotions in response to significant life events (Bonanno, 2004) and adaptive adjustments to adversity, such as poverty (Orthner et al., 2004).

Revised life stories that affirm growth and self-realisation are evident in the literature on consumer vulnerability further underscoring the connection between narrative sense-making and resilience. To illustrate, research on those who have experienced economic and social downhill life trajectories (Caldwell & Henry, 2017; Hamilton & Catterall, 2006; Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013), and suffer from persistent types of financial distress (O'Loughlin et al., 2023; Szmigin et al., 2020), or long-term poverty (Hamilton, 2009; Hill, 1991; Hutton, 2016; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013) often stress positive adaptations to adversity and forced consumer constraint as previously highlighted. In this context, studies indicate that consumers find positive meaning within adversarial circumstances, echoing the redemptive linguistic system of recovery, emancipation, enlightenment and development (McAdams, 2006, 2013). To exemplify this, Szmigin et al. (2020) assert that some individuals experiencing economic adversity and downward mobility detach from their pre-disruption consuming identities and values. By rejecting these past identities, they further cultivate persistent resilience amid prolonged economic challenges.

Contrary to redemptive stories, identity narratives of tragedy or contamination regress and decline from a positive life scene to an emotionally bad outcome after adversity. As such, people may construct narrative identities that had a good, or neutral life to be followed by steep falls (McAdams & Bowman, 2001). People who see the past as an evolution of good into bad may be less optimistic about the present and the future, often resulting in stagnated or fixed storylines (Tomkins, 1987). The adoption of a fatalistic narrative with no prospect for substantial improvement in future circumstances has been explored in consumer research on downwardly mobile consumers (Roberts, 1991; Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013). In particular, Saatcioglu and Ozanne (2013) studied how downward life trajectories of American trailer park residents have altered these consumers' identities, resembling narratives of contamination. They identify 'Outcasts' as individuals experiencing a gradual social decline over time, leading to an indifferent attitude towards themselves, fellow residents, and society at large in their narrative sense-making. Consequently, these consumers engage in self-destructive behaviours, such as adopting a hedonistic lifestyle involving drug abuse and transforming their homes into party venues.

Contamination narrative plotlines often result in stagnation and potential self-preoccupation (McAdams, 2006, 2013), undermining traditional resilience-themed narratives (Mahdiani et al., 2021) in terms of maintaining 'healthy levels of psychological functioning' (Bonanno, 2004, p. 21). Still, such a declining story type may provide individuals with a tool to make sense of and provide some degree of meaning and stability to their lives, albeit infused with a negative rhetoric (McAdams & Jones, 2017). In this sense, meaning making occurs through re-constructing past (unpleasant) turning point moments into tragic and negative life episodes that may overshadow one's present and

future self (McAdams, 2006, 2013). Despite the prevalence of negative emotions in such narratives, research on how consumers reconcile their contaminated identity narratives remains limited (Ulver-Sneistrup & Ostberg, 2011).

In summary, culturally informed personal storylines of redemption (shifting from negative to positive life experiences) and contamination (moving from positive to negative life experiences) shape how individuals rebuild disrupted identity narratives. These narratives draw on past consuming selves in different ways, influencing identity reconstruction, resilience, and the adoption of newly acquired, revised or revived consumer behaviours (Schau et al., 2009). Therefore, in our study, we utilise these narrative structures both as an enabling theoretical template (Arnould et al., 2006) and methodology to examine long-term effects of disrupted identity narratives and resilience (Clark et al., 2018).

Methodology

Consumption theorists have underscored the usefulness of tracing consumers' identity developments over time considering a longitudinal set of events, which can range over years, but are narratively linked together (Giesler & Thompson, 2016; Shankar et al., 2001). According to this perspective, an individual's identity is not sudden but rather emerges as a coherent narrative woven from self-relevant events across time, shaping both the present self and future goals (Gergen & Gergen, 1988; McAdams, 2006, 2013; Schau et al., 2009; Thompson, 1996). Thus, a narrative methodological lens is deemed ideal for studying consumption behaviour longitudinally, particularly in the context of significant life disruptions (Giesler & Thompson, 2016; Shankar et al., 2001).

For this study, a combination of published autobiographical works and long interviews (McCracken, 1988) were chosen to track long-term identity formation post-disruption. These methods yield 'big stories' capturing culturally coherent narrative identity formation (Bamberg, 2007). The value of both long interviews and autobiographies as sources of insight into personal histories and the meanings underlying consumption practices, particularly post-disruptive events, have been recognised for some time (Hirschman, 1992; Klein et al., 2015; O'Donohoe, 2015; Shankar et al., 2001; Turley & O'Donohoe, 2012).

Data were collected between 2016–2020. To identify appropriate autobiographical works and recruit participants for long interviews, we employed purposive sampling in a German context. Here, we sought to define a sample that represented formerly income poor people across different age groups and various poverty transition triggers (e.g. divorce, unemployment, illness) to get multiple perspectives and a rich understanding of the phenomenon. As a first step we sought autobiographical accounts that incorporate subjective and lived experiences of surviving poverty and repairing a shattered self through storytelling (Frank, 2000). All their experiences take place in an objectively measurable setting of transient relative poverty in terms of living on benefits temporarily (Leisering & Leibfried, 1999; Vandecasteele, 2011). In line with Klein et al. (2015) the search was facilitated by Google Books and amazon.de as a sampling frame. Exemplary key search words used were: 'Overcoming adversity', 'Surviving poverty', or 'How I survived poverty/Hartz IV'[1]

The search resulted in a total of four autobiographies that were analysed by the first author. Due to data confidentiality reasons, no author names or book titles are revealed as

all autobiography authors participated in subsequent interviews. This approach addresses a major shortcoming with autobiographical data: 'Written accounts are inevitably restricted to the material presented by the author', making it impossible for the researcher 'to seek elaboration or reflection on particular aspects of an experience' (Turley & O'Donohoe, 2012, p. 1338). Indeed, our occasional impression when reading specific parts from these autobiographies was that authors' sense-making efforts are, borrowing the words from McAdams (2006, p. 261), 'too upbeat to be true', which resulted in unanswered questions. To address the perceived stylised nature of autobiographies (Bamberg, 2007), the first author conducted additional long interviews with autobiographers. This allowed for engagement and dialogue, prompting informants to elaborate on consumption content described in their books.

Apart from autobiography authors, 10 additional informants were recruited through newspaper advertisements and snowball sampling in urban areas known for high levels of perceived social inequality. All came from lower-middle-class backgrounds and had experienced temporary or recurrent significant income drops. In line with sampling criteria for autobiography authors, the research team did not impose relative poverty income thresholds or reliance on social benefits as sole participation criteria. Instead, we also focused on individuals' subjective perception of poverty and self-assessment (Flik & Van Praag, 1991; Želinský et al., 2022) relative to their pre-poverty lives (see Table 1 for demographic information and life trajectories). As Table 1 demonstrates, the triggers of poverty for informants were varied. Although some were related to austerity policies, such as job loss, many triggers were more broadly related to the individual's lived experience, such as divorce, illness or addiction. Although poverty duration varied from 10 months to five years, this imbalance is secondary due to its subjective nature. Even short poverty spells led to identity strain and reconstruction, with informants self-assessing their experiences as 'formative', or 'traumatic'.

Interviews were conducted in informants' homes to ensure a secure setting. A prepared yet flexible set of probing questions (McCracken, 1988) was used to capture identity re-constructions, focusing on how things were done before, during and after poverty.[2] Following prior research, we focused on turning points in life stories to enhance self-reflection (Frank, 2013; Shankar et al., 2001). For those without published autobiographies, auto-driving (McCracken, 1988) facilitated their reflection by using artefacts, such as photo albums, newspaper articles, and social benefit documents. These stimuli foregrounded past experiences and created rich life narratives (Schau et al., 2009).

Interviews lasted between 90 minutes to three hours, often requiring multiple sessions to capture all relevant consumption phenomena and understand how informants framed their stories (Mishler, 1995). All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and pseudonyms are used to protect informants' identities. Institutional ethical approval was obtained, and all interviewees gave informed consent that included their agreement that the results of the research would be disseminated through published articles. Interviews concluded when no new information emerged.

We used a mixed thematic analysis framework, combining content and structural approaches, to code and interpret data from interviews and autobiographical sources (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Riessman, 2008). This method allowed us to examine narratives of transient poverty and associated consumption practices, while also analysing how informants linguistically integrated their experiences

Table 1. Overview of informants.

Pseudonym	Age	Poverty Trigger	Current Occupation	Pre-Poverty Occupation	Duration of Poverty Spell	Duration between Publication/ Interview & Transition out of Poverty
Tristan	60s	Job loss, divorce	At-home father	CEO of different companies	4–5 years	Publication: 1 year after Interview: 10 years after
Emily	40s	Divorce	Company owner	Housewife	4 years	Publication: 10 years after Interview: 14 years after
Wiebke	30s	Divorce, indebted	Politician, self-employed	Public servant	3 years (re-current)	Interview: 1 year after
Christina	40s	Divorce	Instructor at job centre	Dressmaker & housewife	4 years	Interview: less than one year after
Linda	20s	Illness	Student	Student	2–3 years	Interview: less than one year after
Irene	40s	Job loss(es)	School teacher	Marketing manager	2 years	Interview: 8 years after
Johanna	40s	Job loss, divorce	Secretary	Secretary	3 years	Publication: 1 year after Interview: 2 years after
Gwen	50s	Divorce, job loss	Nurse	Chemist's assistant & housewife	5 years	Interview: less than two years after
Emma	60s	Eviction, loss of home	Music teacher	Music teacher	10 months	Interview: 1 year after
Sophie	30s	Job loss	Journalist	Journalist	14 months	Publication: 1 year after Interview: 7 years after
Ralph	60s	Drug abuse	Social worker	Military man & drug dealer	3 years	Interview: about 15 years after
Tim	60s	Drug abuse, illness	Pensioner & landlord	Stockbroker	4–5 years (re-current)	Interview: about 12–13 years after
Estefania	30s	Insolvency, divorce	Restaurant owner	Restaurant owner	2 years	Interview: less than one year after
Patricia	50s	Divorce	Geriatric nurse	Housewife	3 years	Interview: 5 years after

into a comprehensive narrative connecting past events with present and future concerns (Thompson, 1996). Using narrative coding techniques (Saldaña, 2013), we categorised content based on pre-poverty, poverty, and post-poverty lives, employing McAdams' (2006, 2013) redemption and contamination sequences to elucidate long-term identity reconstructions. Redemption sequences included recovery, enlightenment, development, and emancipation, while contamination sequences involved tragedy, stagnation, and regression (Frye, 1957; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Ourahmoune, 2016). We also analysed narrative tone (positive, negative, optimistic, pessimistic) regarding the identified content (Saldaña, 2013). Table 2 provides an exemplary illustration of how both the content and structure of informants' narratives were combined through different coding techniques. Combining content and structural codes, we clustered themes within and across narratives (Spiggle, 1994), achieving a higher level of theorisation of identity reconstruction post-disruption.

The dominant narrative that emerged from this coding process related to consumers' positive reconstruction of poverty survival that we refer to as redemptive resilience. In line with a desire to ensure the authenticity of our interpretation (Hogg et al., 2008), our analysis included a focus on any negative cases in our data that offered an alternative storyline to this emerging theorisation (Hymer & Smith, 2022). This led us to the identification of restorative resilience as a less common,

Table 2. Examples of coding.

Coding Technique	Content (Exemplary) (What is said?)	Linguistic Genre (How is it said?)	Narrative Tone (How is it said?)
Descriptive	Learned how to structure life (during poverty)	Development	Optimistic
In Vivo	'Experiencing true happiness affords suffering' (post-poverty)	Enlightenment	Positive
Interpretive	Coping with downward mobility through resembling pre-poverty life	Stagnation	Negative

but nevertheless important, alternative narrative of poverty survival. As noted by Hymer and Smith (2022), '[i]nstead of sweeping a negative case under the rug, researchers can frame a negative case as a positive opportunity to further refine theory'. Acknowledging both narratives therefore offers a theorisation that is truer to the experiences of participants, enabling us to link data elements as parts of an unfolding temporal development, distilled into socio-culturally-constituted narrative typologies (Giesler & Thompson, 2016; Riessman, 2008). To offer findings that are clearly grounded in and driven by our data, we include examples from both interviews and published autobiographical works to illustrate the fit between the data and our interpretation (Golden Biddle & Locke, 1993; Hogg et al., 2008).

Findings

Our findings reveal multifaceted narratives of poverty survival that we term 'redemptive resilience' and 'restorative resilience'. Redemptive resilience refers to narratives that positively reconstruct disruptive life events for consumer identity growth. Restorative resilience refers to narratives that negatively reconstruct disruptive life events for consumer identity reclamation. The majority of informants fell into the redemptive resilience category, but we present both to underscore the different pathways of coping and recovery in the aftermath of significant life disruptions.

Redemptive resilience narratives

Meaning-making

Personal narratives forming part of the redemptive resilience typology display strong degrees of positive meaning-making in the wake of an unpleasant and disruptive experience, such as social downward mobility and poverty. To illustrate paths towards an enriched life perspective brought about by adversity, Tim (60s), a now retired pre-poverty stockbroker discusses the following during the interview:

> [. . .] I think you have to go through a lot of pain and negative experiences to really understand this . . . Happiness comes from within. And you have to free yourself from this thinking of owning things and so on. But this is really hard I guess. But, like I said, you have to really, really hit rock bottom. I mean like financially obviously, but also psychologically and physically. If you survive this, then you are indestructible. And that's what I would like to recommend to every human being out there. I mean to get rid of all of this having-shit and just say goodbye [. . .]. (Tim/interview)

Referring to himself as 'indestructible', Tim conveys a positive development of self from the trauma and suffering associated with his past poverty. His life story reveals that before his financial crises, Tim's immersion in materialism and extravagant consumer identity projects led him to care only about appearances. He labels this conspicuous lifestyle as the cause of his economic instability during the interview. His poverty experiences, however, helped him understand that happiness comes 'from within', not from 'outer riches'. This realisation allowed him to construct a positive resolution (Pals, 2006) and create a redemptive narrative (McAdams, 2006, 2013), moving from suffering to feeling liberated. Tim's post-poverty identity is now non-materialistic and free from external influences in finding 'happiness'.

By way of a second illustration, in her autobiography Emily (40s) describes a similar re-evaluation of her pre-poverty extravagant consumption:

> Although at that time, there were not too many positive things you could say about the breakdown of our middle-class existence, the new critical attitude towards consumption was definitely a positive one. I realised that I had been such an ignorant person in my old life when going to the supermarket, my wallet filled with money, ignoring any special offers, or not noticing extremely cheap package sizes. I was just a mother of four who went to upscale department stores wearing high-heels and paying with a golden customer card for a set of cocktail glasses. (Emily/autobiography)

Both Tim and Emily's narratives emphasise a renewed criticality towards the role of material objects in their identity reconstruction. Emily adds nuance to this perspective by also drawing attention to the realm of productivity as another important driver of identity reconstruction. Pre-poverty Emily was an upper-middle class homemaker and she is currently a post-poverty entrepreneur. During the interview she discusses how she has changed her life for the better through her poverty experience:

> I suddenly had this inner freedom, some kind of inner independence . . . in my past life I was in a much more dependent situation, a role that really didn't correspond with who I really am. Basically, this breaking down of my middle-class existence was a catharsis. It was a chance to get rid of certain aspects of my former self and maybe also to come out of it in a cleaned way. Although it was really tough at that time. Now reflecting upon this time is much easier I guess. During that particular moment, if there had been a wise person sitting at my table and telling me: 'Emily, look! It's a catharsis!' I am pretty sure I would have thrown this person out of my home. When you find yourself in such a situation it's just like, you just want to survive somehow. (Emily/interview)

Emily perceives one of the main benefits stemming from her poverty experience is she now has an established professional identity. Her experience of poverty forced a move away from the dependency associated with her former identity position that was anchored in domesticity, a shift that has enabled Emily to experience a more authentic sense of self. She refers to 'catharsis' to credit her experience of temporary downward mobility as a route to finding personal development and self-actualisation. Despite the ultimate benefits, Emily injects a critique of an overly romanticised view of her poverty experience, highlighting that survival needs during times of threatened social existence often take precedence over reflecting on becoming a better, happier person. This corroborates with McAdams (2006, 2013) who cautions against believing all suffering can be redeemed within narrative identities. He suggests that acknowledging the limitations of our stories can help us cope constructively. Emily, therefore, does not

overly extol her personal growth, acknowledging the hardships of being a low-income single mother.

In fact, all informants adopting a redemptive resilience narrative reinforced how experiencing temporary poverty was associated with various vulnerabilities and hardships. In dealing with the initial shock of poverty, they expressed sentiments of 'tilting against windmills', 'being in the wrong movie', 'feeling small', 'traumatised', 'burned out', or even 'suicidal' to underscore various rock-bottom moments of economic, social, and lifestyle displacements. These displacements were discussed within various settings, such as relocating to smaller (council) flats in less affluent neighbourhoods, reporting to job centres, being forced to give up valued self-extending possessions (Belk, 1988), and involuntarily adopting new consumption practices such as shopping at discounters. To temporarily ease the looming loss of their previous middle-class status, informants went so far as to admit to engaging in dysfunctional coping behaviours like comfort eating, excessive sleeping, overspending through retail therapy, or accumulating stuff excessively.

However, the longitudinal perspective enabled by our narrative methodological lens captures not only these negative experiences but also more positive ones. As well as acknowledging the hardships experienced during temporary descent in social status, we also reveal how such experiences can have an equally liberating and cleansing effect in the long run. Ultimately, many informants challenged their pre-poverty lifestyles and initiated a re-cultivation of their consuming identities. Similar to Emily and Tim, other informants aligned themselves with a therapeutic cultural discourse of psychological healing and progress (Gopaldas, 2016; Hyman, 2015), frequently using expressions such as: 'rising like a Phoenix from the ashes' (Ralph), being 'newborn' (Wiebke), having achieved a 'deep understanding' (Sophie), or newfound 'authenticity' (Emily/Tristan). This finding explicitly challenges snapshot depictions of reactive coping in response to lifestyle displacements and loss of social status (Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013; Thompson et al., 2018; Ulver-Sneistrup & Ostberg, 2011). Unlike previous portrayals, the informants did not express a desire to regain their pre-poverty social positions and lifestyle structures. Instead, they employed a demarcation strategy (Ahuvia, 2005) by consciously rejecting their pre-poverty identities while selectively incorporating elements of their poverty experience into a new, self-defined identity. As such, they retrospectively perceived the poverty experience as a revitalising change, feeling liberated by the opportunity to redefine their identities outside of their former normative backgrounds of pre-poverty middle-class existences.

In the next two sub-sections, we will highlight how informants have incorporated new consumption routines and pro-social behaviours in their post-poverty lifestyles that are in line with their alleged enriched life perspectives.

Anti-materialist consumption

To express their learning journeys and narratives of personal growth, informants reported that their consumption routines adopted during poverty have informed their post-poverty lifestyles. As such, many of their current post-poverty consumer behaviours are characterised by more simple consumption practices compared to pre-poverty lives. Tim (60s) comments on how his volatile life trajectory of financial and associated emotional

turbulences has had a longstanding effect upon his current post-poverty consumption. He further adds how these experiences shaping his current consumption affect his well-being in a positive way:

> I have gone through a lot of pain [. . .] Overcoming pain means real happiness to me. [. . .] take a very stale piece of bread for example . . . you start to enjoy it only when you have endured week-long periods of hunger beforehand maybe. Yeah, that's another thing . . . I often buy things and then put them away for a few days, so that the desire and my own taste for these things can ripen. I never eat anything right away. Because everything is available these days, it's all inflationary. Yeah, I do that with anything I buy. Any fruit. Chocolates. In the past [refers to pre-poverty life] I would have eaten a box of chocolate right away. But I don't do anything anymore right away. And sometimes, I do the same when being hungry . . . I am trying to get real hungry with rumbling tummies and so on. And then, I try not to gorge. Instead, I really try to enjoy it with a different awareness. (Tim/interview)

Literature on psychological health and wellbeing following adversity (Bonanno, 2004; Frank, 2013, Gopaldas, 2016; Illouz, 2007; O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995; Rogers et al., 2023; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) shows that people like Tim who juxtapose clearly negative past events with positive outcomes tend to score high on emotional wellbeing. In light of such prior research, interestingly, Tim's full subscription to his narrative account of redemption has translated into post-poverty consumer behaviours which prompt him to replay sequences of overcoming pain and deprivation, leading to emotional wellbeing. Consider, for instance, his deliberate practise of self-denial and deferred gratification regarding food consumption in order to produce long-term rewards of 'desire', 'pleasure', and 'real taste'. In doing so, he reinforces his changed self-definition as a consumer towards having become more self-controlled and conscientious, putting emphasis on a deeper experiential benefit gained.

Taking a wider socio-cultural perspective concerning mainstream Western consumption, Tim critiques the 'inflation' of endless consumer choices. Thus, his post-poverty practice of delaying need satisfaction can be seen as distancing himself from consumerism and capitalism, which are critiqued for offering short-term gratification rather than sustainable well-being (Shankar & Fitchett, 2002). Similar to Tim, other poverty survivors positioned themselves as distinct from more materialistic others in their narratives. To further illustrate, Wiebke (30s), who lived 3 years on a low income due to divorce and job loss prior to starting her own business, gave further weight to this aspect:

> I would have never learned how to save properly. Like, I had to think about everything [referring to poverty phase]. For example, the toothpaste tube that needed to be cut open [. . .] even the water from the hot water bottle that went into my flowers afterwards [. . .] And I do this now [referring to post-poverty life], because I am convinced of it really. I mean, I don't have to do it anymore, but I really want to continue with it. Because I think we really live in a consumer society, we live in excess, no one really thinks about these things today, what it really means to buy new stuff, like clothing if there is just a hole in it or so, and they just throw away the broken trousers. I don't do these things anymore. I, personally, go to the tailor and get it fixed if something is wrong. [. . .] I learned these capabilities [. . .] this is something that is really positive. I mean when I go through the city I always think: 'Good god, look at yourselves. How can you clutter up yourselves with all this stuff?' (Wiebke/interview)

Wiebke stresses how her current post-poverty consumption routines are informed by a philosophy of deliberately living a simpler and more conscientious lifestyle as a positive

result of the simplification forced upon her while being poor. Here we see how the practical consumer skills acquired during her poverty experience, such as practising frugality or repairing clothes rather than dispossessing of them, supported Wiebke to overcome financial difficulties. Building on previous research that has identified similar instances of day-to-day coping as important to maintain resilience during economic challenges (Szmigin et al., 2020), we find these newfound skills are so deeply embedded that they are sustained even when they are no longer an economic necessity. Simultaneously, this learned enactment of a post-poverty simplified lifestyle serves as a further way of distancing and distinguishing herself from others who are, as she claims with some degree of contempt, deeply immersed in a consumerist and capitalist market logic.

According to Hyman (2015), Western consumers tend to increasingly situate themselves within socio-cultural therapeutic discourses of happiness, which, amongst other things, promote the idea of having a non-materialistic identity. The previous (redemptive) quotes from both Tim and Wiebke reveal that those having overcome adverse life circumstances, such as moving into poverty, forcefully subscribe to such a culturally-informed non-materialistic outlook upon life. Following McAdams (2006, 2013), it may be argued that they do this to reinforce, justify, sustain and also extend their stories of resilience in terms of the successful recovery, growth and self-authentication attained from assigning positive meanings to their poverty experiences.

Prosocial consumer behaviours

People who narrate their stories in redemptive terms, turning bad experiences into positive outcomes, often feel empathy for those less well-off in society and want to create good outcomes for them as well (Rogers et al., 2023). Informants expressed similar pro-social commitments, using their past adversaries as motivation to support others. The following quote from Sophie's (30s) autobiography, a journalist who joined the breadline for more than a year, is indicative of such a pro-social post-poverty empathy:

> Hardly anyone seriously cares about pesticide-free potatoes or toxin-free sweets when they have only 13 Euros a day to live on. No one officially receiving benefits even considers sustainably produced shoes [. . .] Let's allow those who have little money and perhaps don't read the 'right' things to enjoy their own possessions. Brightly coloured plastic phones matter to them just as much as real wood interiors do to others. (Sophie/autobiography)

Sophie demonstrates her empathy through challenging negative societal perceptions of low-income consumers, advocating for a more inclusive understanding of their consumption choices. Other informants' efforts to equally express empathy and enact their commitments to 'give something back' to society was reflected in several consumption practices. For example, poverty survivors stressed that they make regular charitable donations (e.g. financially, giving away clothing or furniture) to help others as highlighted in the following excerpt from Emily's (40s) interview:

> [.] in the past, I have never even thought about if, for example, when we had parents' evening and then I remember we had been asked to pay 10 Euros extra per child for this school trip and then there were parents complaining: 'Nah, this is a bit too much for us at the moment' where I thought: 'Oh my god, why are they making such a fuss about it?'. Today my thinking has changed completely. So, nowadays I would say and do something that had never crossed

> my mind before, that I would chip in 20 Euros instead of 10. And this heightened awareness, for instance by spending an extra amount of money for someone else to help was not there [. . .] It wasn't clear to me that 10 Euros may help and make a real difference. (Emily/interview)

Emily's quote indicates that experiencing poverty fostered empathy and sensitivity to the needs of the financially deprived, leading to a desire to help others post-poverty. Similarly, Wiebke (30s) describes organising donation campaigns for homeless people. Wiebke adds that the social support she received during her poverty spell inspires current socially responsible actions now that she has regained financial stability:

> This has really grown within me, to think about people who don't have anything, and to give them something back. I know I might not be able to entirely change their current situations, but I exactly know how much it means when someone comes along and says: 'Hey, look! Here you go – I have this pair of shoes that I don't need anymore' . . . like, for me today or you this is not imaginable maybe that such donations could mean the world to someone in need, because you and I have everything that we need. But at that time [refers to poverty experience] I didn't have anything at all. And it really meant a lot to me when someone came along and said: 'Hey, I have cleared out, don't want all of this'. (Wiebke/interview)

Reciprocating the social support received during times of poverty highlights the importance of empathetic and individual support as a coping strategy for the income poor (Bräuer et al., 2023; Hamilton, 2009; Hutton, 2016). Our longitudinal perspective reveals that communal and socially responsible post-poverty consumption practices have significant long-term implications. Those who have emerged from poverty extend their care beyond the situational aid experienced, creating a pro-civic chain reaction that benefits other vulnerable populations. Following this logic, other informants' redemptive resilience narratives echoed such community engagements. For example, they reported supporting religious organisations, offering social support in their neighbourhood communities, or actively approaching homeless people in the streets. Additionally, they expressed a desire to spend their money in more ecologically, conscientious ways by directing their expenditures towards local, organic or fair trade products, avoiding 'unethical' global brands, or taking strict steps to keep down household energy consumption. This line of argumentation corresponds with McAdams' (2006) claim that people, in their quest to infer meaning from their past life crises through redemptive self-narratives, often try to make over the world. These findings underscore that consumers try to further uphold and extend their stories of positive change and resilience following adversity by subscribing to simpler lifestyles (Elgin, 1993), including the enactment of pro-civic qualities (Alexander & Ussher, 2012).

However, not all narratives follow this redemptive and progressive script. In the following section, a contrasting view will be presented of restorative resilience.

Restorative resilience narratives

Seeking distance

Similar to the informants who adopted a redemptive narrative to make sense of their poverty experience, those adopting restorative resilience narratives also experienced volatile life trajectories. They faced a sharp decline in their incomes, leading to downward mobility and poverty, yet managed to re-climb the socio-economic ladder over time.

Although the sample only included two informants (Emma/Gwen), they still shared a common narrative script of putting behind their disruptive experiences associated with relative poverty. For these informants, emerging from poverty triggered a consumer identity renaissance that revitalised pre-poverty identity projects (Schau et al., 2009). Unlike redemptive resilience, these informants did not assign new and positive meanings to their poverty experiences that might inform an enduring identity and lifestyle shift. On the contrary, they demonstrated in their retrospective accounts of both going through and coming out of poverty a strong sense of perseverance and attempted to avoid unpleasant thoughts, emotions or memories linked to experiences of loss and disruption. This non-identification with their poverty experiences was narratively expressed through emphasising the maintenance of important aspects of their pre-poverty consumer identity. For example, Emma (60s), who became homeless for 10 months prior to finding a new permanent home and job as a music teacher, draws upon preserving a familiar pre-poverty lifestyle after slipping into poverty:

> I just continued with my life as if nothing had happened. I went swimming [. . .] and I also attended cultural events, went to the opera. I also subscribed to a cultural project [. . .] I don't know if you are familiar with art and theatres, but there was this project, an oratorio for two months in which I participated and was singing in their choir. Yes, that's how I continued my life . . . (Emma/interview)

Emma's reluctance to sacrifice the status associated with her pre-poverty lifestyle is evident in her continued spending on leisure and cultural consumption. This spending was at odds with the significant financial challenges Emma faced, and indicated her hope of regaining her pre-poverty consumer identity through pursuit of a reactive identity goal (Thompson et al., 2018).

Similarly, Gwen (50s) maintained her pre-poverty consumption habits despite reduced financial resources. Her downward mobility was triggered by a divorce, leading to a one-bedroom council flat before re-marrying and improving her social and socioeconomic status. Gwen emphasised the importance of buying organic products, even considering using savings to avoid discounters. This economically counterproductive decision reflects her attempt to distance herself from the experience of downward mobility and maintain her pre-poverty middle-class consumer identity:

> I would have spent my last penny on organic products. Also my savings. I still had a bit left. I would have never imagined to go to Aldi. Nah, No! That would have been a real bummer. It would have reduced quality of life drastically. These artificially flavoured yogurts, you can't eat this when you have done it differently all those years.(Gwen/interview)

Unlike the newly-developed frugal ways of coping employed by informants who align with the redemptive resilience narrative, Gwen was able to rely on the savings acquired during her precrisis lifestyle to avoid compromising on her perceptions of good taste. Gwen's life story is unique as she grew up in former socialist East Germany, transitioning to a higher social status post-reunification. This background adds complexity to her resilient efforts, as she internalised a consuming identity associated with her higher social status, which she was unwilling to give up. Her resistance made navigating the lower social sphere undesirable, a sentiment further symbolised by the self-reported clutter in her small council flat, which was filled with oversized furniture and skiing equipment from her pre-poverty life.

In summary, both informants forming part of the restorative resilience narrative did not assign any positive meanings to their poverty experience. On the contrary, their negative assessment of their poverty experiences involved drawing on their reserves of cultural and economic capital acquired pre-poverty to maintain many consumption habits emblematic of their former 'good life'. In doing so, they distanced themselves both emotionally and behaviourally from their move into an economically strained situation. Such emotional disassociation from a negative life event is a cardinal feature of resilience (Baker, 2009; McAdams & Jones, 2017). Restorative resilience narratives in our study followed Silver and Updegraff's (2013) understanding of resilience. According to these authors, resilient people's disruptive events do not shatter their previously held beliefs and assumptions about their pre-crisis life. They show efforts to put the disruption behind them and move forward with their old lives. Hence, after re-embarking on an uphill life trajectory, both informants attempted to fully rebuild their pre-poverty identities by resuming their previous lifestyles.

Revisiting pre-poverty lifestyle

After overcoming their financial strain and status descent, restorative resilience narratives emphasised that retrieving their former social standing and ability to consume 'normally' again increased wellbeing. These consumers revived pre-poverty consumption routines and possessions, feeling relieved to forego budgeting strategies adopted during poverty. For example, Gwen celebrates her regained financial freedom through spontaneous and carefree spending, exemplified by dining at upscale restaurants and purchasing premium kitchen appliances:

> [. . .] I am financially much more relaxed I suppose. [. . .] For example, right after Christmas I was yelling at my husband 'Hey, let's go [. . .] and have some Thai food'. That place we go is really great, vegetarian and all fresh. Really good food there [. . .] Before that I might have said: 'Ok, money is tight.I just go to the restaurant only once a month'. Or the other day we bought this Thermomix [premium kitchen appliance] . . . 1,200 Euros. . .Gosh! Isn't that great!? (Gwen/interview)

Such stories of overcoming poverty is rather reflective of a neo-liberal subjectivity in that re-gained consumer freedom is used as a core therapeutic function to attain a happy life (Gabriel, 2015). Therefore, these informants further reject the simplicity forced upon them while being poor (e.g. they no longer need to engage in practices of deferral) (Thompson et al., 2018). In more general terms, these consumers counteract their transitory poor conception of being a failed consumer by trying to re-claim the status of a fully-fledged consumer (Bauman, 2005) after escaping poverty, as reinforced by Emma:

> [. . .] when I go into stores these days, I feel like a real human being again, well, like a potential customer again, and not like someone who just gawps and doesn't buy. (Emma/interview)

Similar to redemptive resilience narratives, Gwen and Emma try to adopt a demarcation strategy (Ahuvia, 2005) when re-constructing post-poverty identities. However, despite their deliberate efforts to distance themselves from past poverty identities, vulnerability and insecurity persist, undermining their restorative resilience narratives. Gwen, for instance, contradicts her initial excitement over newfound financial freedom by expressing anxiety and difficulty in embracing carefree consumption:

> [. . .] the other day I said to my husband: 'Actually, we have money again, right? But I have to still learn "to feel" it'. Because this thriftiness [refers to poverty experience] was maybe a bit exaggerated sometimes [. . .] I remember that I was so [. . .] so stressed. You can either go to dancing class for 6 Euros or you can go to an Indian restaurant for 6 Euros [refers to poverty experience]. So I went to the bookstore and started studying a book [. . .] about money. For one hour I was reading this book and making notes, without even buying it for 20 Euros . . . that says it all I guess that I have not even bought it. How your attitude towards life has been affected by this. (Gwen/interview)

Similarly, Emma struggles to re-engage with once-cherished possessions due to the trauma associated with losing them during her poverty experience:

> [. . .] I have managed to get some of my CDs back, and a lot of the musical scores too from second-hand shops and also the library. But how is it possible to throw all of this away, right? This is still really traumatic for me when I just think about it. And because of that I have not started to strike the keys of my piano again in all these months. It's just standing there now [. . .]. (Emma/interview)

Gwen's and Emma's narratives of overcoming poverty suggest absorbed and, thus, unresolved vulnerabilities. Rather than adopting a synthesising strategy as suggested in previous research (Ulver-Sneistrup & Ostberg, 2011), or fully embracing a single identity through demarcation, they fluctuate between reclaiming consumer agency and grappling with emotional imprints of poverty. This study suggests that negative experiences associated with downward mobility may linger beyond poverty, contaminating (McAdams, 2006, 2013) post-poverty consumer identity work and resilient pathways. Ultimately, demarcation strategies (Ahuvia, 2005) may allow consumers to outwardly reject their poverty identity, yet internalised vulnerability in the form of insecurity remains a latent, unresolved force within their post-poverty identity re-construction.

Discussion and conclusion

Despite extensive literature in other disciplines on finding meaning and personal growth after disruptive experiences (e.g. illness, sexual assault, being taken hostage, bereavement, genocide) (Frank, 2013; Huemmer et al., 2018; McAdams & Jones, 2017; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), the nature of positive changes and their behavioural consequences remain less understood (Infurna & Jayawickreme, 2019; Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014; Rogers et al., 2023). We extend the humanistic socio-psychological literature on redemptive self-narratives (McAdams, 2006, 2013; Rogers et al., 2023) into the consumption context. This study has adopted a narrative approach to understand how consumer experiences of disruptive life events, such as experiencing poverty, shape approaches to resilience and post-disruption identities. The narrative approach offers us longitudinal insight that contributes to understanding how resilience can impact transformation, a relationship that has not been fully explored by prior studies.

Baker et al. (2015) suggest that personal transformation involves a temporary phase of vulnerability that can provoke lasting change in the service of consumers' resilience. However, they do not fully explain how and when vulnerability leads to positive changes for consumers. Szmigin et al. (2020) demonstrate how persistent resilience can foster transformation in consumption practices in terms of how and what people consume. Exploring what happens beyond financial hardships is outside the scope of their analysis

but they note it is possible that such transformations 'will lead to a long-term realignment of values coupled with a fundamentally different approach to living and consuming' (p. 1900). Our study confirms that transformations in consumption practices can indeed become long-term and we provide novel insights into how consumers construct meaningful and positive stories in the aftermath of challenges, as evidenced by redemptive resilience narratives. The majority of informants align with the redemptive resilience narrative revealing prolonged changes in interactions with the marketplace.

However, Szmigin et al. (2020, p. 1900) also note that transformation 'cannot be an inevitable outcome for everyone' and caution against overlooking 'differences and inconsistencies in participant experiences'. In our study, we acknowledge diversity of experience and reveal how a smaller number of informants align with a restorative resilience narrative and display no long-term evidence of transformation. This highlights a potential dark side and draws attention to the long-term negative disruptive consequences of poverty on consumer resilience and identity formation, even after individuals have managed to escape poverty. This dual perspective allows for a comprehensive understanding of both the positive and negative impacts of poverty on personal development and consumption behaviour. Table 3 lays out the main differences between the two identified narratives.

On the one hand, consumers adopting a redemptive resilient narrative attempt to permanently leave behind their pre-disruption selves, with new identities formed during the poverty experience becoming more dominant and enduring. For consumers exhibiting redemptive resilience, adaptive consumption routines adopted during poverty linger beyond the end of

Table 3. Resilience narratives: redemptive vs. restorative approaches.

Narrative-defining factors	Redemptive Resilience Narrative	Restorative Resilence Narrative
Making Meaning of Disruption Experience	Narratives involve positive meaning-making to cope with the pain and misfortune of disruption. These individuals find value in the adversity they faced, accepting and embracing their past struggles.	Narratives adopt a negative and pejorative narrative tone largely distancing themselves from unpleasant life episodes.
Consumer identity re-construction	Individuals perceive the disrupted life experience as a revitalising change retrospectively that is reframed to support consumer identity growth.	Individuals largely exclude the disruption experience, instead relying on consumer identity revival and reclamation of pre-disruption selves. However, their efforts at identity reconstruction are complicated by lingering negative effects perceived as residual debris from the disruption experience.
Cultural Discourse	Narratives are rooted in therapeutic socio-cultural discourses that promote self-knowledge, personal growth, and moral development. Individuals use these discourses as a framework to reinforce their stories of positive change, framing their experience of disruption as a catalyst for improvement and self-actualisation.	Narratives are rooted in consumer culture's marketplace ideology. Individuals adopt a neoliberal view of the marketplace as a therapeutic tool for achieving happiness, providing freedom through consumer choice and the ability to define oneself via material possessions.
Manifestation in narratives of poverty survival	Voluntarily maintaining simplified lifestyles forced upon them during poverty (e.g. energy saving) and enacting pro-civic behaviours (e.g. through directing expenditures towards local products).	Rejecting the simplicity forced upon them during poverty and counteracting their transitory poor conception of being a failed consumer by resuming pre-poverty lifestyles and re-gaining the status of a fully-fledged consumer (e.g. moving to a more spacious home in an upscale neighbourhoods post-poverty).

the poverty spell yet are imbued with altered meanings. They feel liberated by the opportunity to re-define their identities outside of perceived normative backgrounds of former pre-poverty middle-class existences. More precise, consumers both value and celebrate their post-poverty consumption consciousness (e.g. budgeting, buying second-hand), simplicity (e.g. removal of clutter), and social responsibility (e.g. supporting others).

On the other hand, consumers who adopt narratives of restorative resilience heavily draw on their pre-crisis identities to move forward, largely denying the disruptive experience in their post-crisis selves. However, they are not always successful in this quest. This showcases a potential dark side of resilience, as they construct the poverty experience as a contamination sequence in their narratives. This sequence reinforces the belief that their former good life (pre-poverty) has been disrupted and negatively sullied by their experiences of slipping into poverty (Tomkins, 1987). Consequently, this pattern partially overshadows their post-poverty consumer identity reconstructions and lifestyles, refuting conventional wisdom that resilient pathways always inhibit uplifting change (Aldwin, 2007; Baker et al., 2015; Price et al., 2017; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Following this logic, we challenge notions that consumers build resilience after disruptions by formulating new consuming identities from scratch and adopting a future temporal focus (Price et al., 2017). Fundamentally, we reveal that consumers making sense of identity threat and loss after disruption draw on the past to re-construct their identities (Schau et al., 2009). Our study demonstrates that consumers are influenced by past experiences in terms of finding either benefit or disadvantage in transitory poor selves in ways that encourage them to either reject or retrieve pre-poverty lifestyles. In particular, we suggest that the way consumers respond to periods of relative poverty impacts their resilience narrative pathway. Those who embrace frugal coping measures align more with a redemptive resilience pathway, whereas those who engage in discordant taste performances (Thompson et al., 2018) during poverty experiences align more with a restorative resilience pathway. As the more dominant narrative, redemptive resilience reinforces how adverse life events can foster growth, leading not just to a return to the baseline but to profound improvement from pre-event lives (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Attempts to measure growth and prosocial behaviours may oversimplify these experiences (Rogers et al., 2023). With our narrative approach, we reveal that disruptive experiences, such as slipping into poverty, can lead to enduring lifestyle changes towards simplicity and less materialistic, less conspicuous consumption. This finding challenges claims made that resilience attained through narratives is merely an emotional coping strategy to understand past experiences (Tennen & Affleck, 2002), and therefore constitutes pseudo growth (Lechner & Antoni, 2004). Instead, our research shows that resilience manifests in sustained transformations in consumption behaviours.

Building on the previous contribution, this study extends knowledge on how adversity-exposed individuals exhibit empathy as a sign of personal growth after overcoming a crisis (Staub & Vollhardt, 2008). Our findings reveal that informants adopt post-poverty consumption practices of social responsibility. These altruistic acts support their narratives of self-change and moral development. Reciprocating past social support received during poverty motivates engagement in prosocial consumption. This insight extends the understanding of social support as a coping strategy for the income-poor and consumers experiencing disruption (Bräuer et al., 2023; Hamilton, 2009; Hutton, 2016). The extended care for others through socially responsible consumption post-crisis shows

that 'relational coping' (Hutton, 2016) can foster a chain reaction of support, benefiting other vulnerable populations (Caldwell & Henry, 2017).

From a macro-social perspective, a shift towards less individualistic and more community-focused consumption practices (Kilbourne et al., 1997; McGouran & Prothero, 2016) can be further encouraged. Instances of relational coping could be embraced by social policymakers. For example, job centres and social welfare providers could invite poverty survivors to share success stories of overcoming adversity. Financially struggling consumers may find inspiration in others' post-poverty consumption practices, fostering optimism and hope. These narratives may empower poor consumers, countering top-down activation policies that are perceived insensitive (Betzelt & Bode, 2018; Bräuer et al., 2023).

This research is not without limitations that constitute opportunities for future research. Our study is based on a small sample of German consumers, necessitating further research to understand culturally grounded differences in self-transformation and resilience. While therapeutic redemptive resilience identity stories may have universal relevance (McAdams & Guo, 2017), cross-cultural variations exist. For example, Hammack (2010) found that Israeli and Palestinian teenagers' life stories differ based on historical contexts, affecting their optimism and life trajectories. Thus, future research should explore how cultural backgrounds impact consumer resilience narratives, influencing why some consumers embrace change while others struggle to adapt, or remain unaffected (Szmigin et al., 2020). A further limitation of this study is its focus on individual identity reconstruction and resilience after critical life events. Future research should expand to include other family members' experiences, considering how disruptive events like poverty affect the entire household. It may be that consumer redemption is a collective identity narrative (Epp & Price, 2008) that deserves further study. Lastly, including more informants from redemptive resilient consumers' social networks could validate self-growth reports after adversity (Infurna & Jayawickreme, 2019). Third-party accounts can shed light on the accuracy of informants' narratives of growth and moral development, addressing potential misremembering of past selves (McFarland & Alvaro, 2000; Tennen & Affleck, 2002, 2009).

Notes

1. 'Hartz IV' (pronounced 'Hartz four') is the publicly used term for the German benefit system and a customary term in the German language often used as a synonym for personal failure, unemployment, precarious income conditions and social exclusion (Gurr & Jungbauer-Gans, 2013).
2. Please see the appendix for a discussion guide used for non-autobiography authors.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix

Narrative interview discussion guide

Interview Section	Purpose	Sample Questions
Introduction & Background	Establish rapport, explain purpose of study and confidentiality, gather and re-confirm demographic data	'Can you tell me a bit about yourself?' 'Who are you?' 'What do you do?'
Onset of Disruption & Experiences During Poverty	Learn about reasons for having experienced disruption; discuss coping strategies, consumption changes, day-to-day life and social implications during poverty spell	'So, what happened?' 'How did this rupture occur in your life?' 'Could you please describe the event(s) having led to a phase of reduced disposable income?' 'What challenges did you face during that time?' 'What changes did you notice in your daily life and sense of self?' 'What did a typical day at that time look like for you?'
Life Before Poverty	Understand informants' lifestyle, consumption practices, employment and identity prior to poverty experience	How would you describe yourself before the disruption?' 'What were your key routines and goals at that time?' 'How would you define self-worth when thinking back at that time?' 'How would you describe your lifestyle at that time?'
Recovery/ Moving Out Of Poverty	Reflect on perceptions of self and consumption post-poverty with the aim to identify any identity transformation	'How did you move out of this situation?' 'How would you describe your current lifestyle?' 'Has anything changed in your values, or sense of self?' 'Does your current lifestyle differ from the one you had during your period of low-income and before?' 'Did this rupture in your life bring about anything positive?' 'How has it affected your future plans?'