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COMMENTARY



Foreshadowing consumer resilience: the mainstreaming of consumer prepping

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ABSTRACT

This commentary extends the concept of consumer resilience by exploring the everyday prepping practices of mothers from the United Kingdom who accumulate and manage consumer goods to buffer against future crises. Unlike masculinist portrayals of prepping, these practices reflect a maternal ethic of care and pragmatism. Drawing on sociological theories of risk and agency, this commentary demonstrates how consumers engage in temporally embedded actions to restore ontological security amid conditions of ‘permacrisis’. A critique of neoliberal discourses that responsibilise individuals while obscuring structural inequalities that limit access to resilience-building is also offered. Finally, calls for marketing scholars to examine the normalisation and unintended consequences of prepping, and to explore more relational and community-oriented forms of consumer resilience in the face of systemic risk, are made.

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Consumer resilience;
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Introduction

Contemporary consumers are increasingly confronted with the realities of living through what has been described as a ‘permacrisis’: a prolonged state of instability marked by overlapping disruptions such as pandemics, climate events, cyberattacks, and political unrest. Within this volatile context, marketing and consumer research must engage more critically with how consumers anticipate, manage, and respond to risk in their everyday lives. While existing scholarship has explored consumer resilience as a reactive process – emerging in the wake of disruption – resilience should be, I suggest, understood as being foreshadowed and practiced pre-emptively.

This commentary draws on ongoing research with mothers from the United Kingdom who engage in ‘prepping’: the everyday acquisition, organisation, and management of goods to buffer their families from anticipated shortages or crises. In contrast to media portrayals of prepping as apocalyptic or fringe, the findings point to the mainstreaming of such practices as rational, relational, and deeply gendered responses to societal uncertainty. This empirical grounding is used to critique the growing responsibilisation of

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consumers under neoliberal resilience frameworks, and to highlight the structural inequities that shape who can afford to be resilient. This calls for a broader, more inclusive understanding of consumer resilience as a sociocultural and political practice.

Consumer resilience, risk, and the permacrisis

Consumer resilience is a contested, incoherent concept employed to understand consumption-related behaviours that emerge when consumers are confronted with adversity, usually in the form of unprecedented restrictions over a period of time, for example, during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ingram et al., 2023). Increasingly, in contemporary society, set in the context of extended instability and uncertainty (du Plessis & Husted, 2024), consumer resilience scholarship needs to encompass consumption phenomena that emerge pre-emptively, as consumers progressively experience risk of crisis as part of their everyday framing of their consumption activities (Barker, 2022; Kerrane et al., 2021). Moreover, national governments heighten this increased attention towards risk salience for consumers through initiatives aimed at increasing the preparedness of their citizens for a range of potential future crises – for example, the French ‘survival manual’ and the German ‘survival app’ (Henley et al., 2024). Increasingly, consumers recognise the risk of a relentless cycle of crisis and foreshadow the need to be resilient in the face of threats, resulting in a range of complex and interlinked consumer activities.

Risk is something that all consumers reflexively engage with. Yet consumers are found to respond to, and approach risk, in very different ways. For example, research has explored those consumers who appear inattentive or complacent to risk (Pellandini-Simányi & Barnhardt, 2024), whereas other projects identify the hyper-vigilant who prepare for a range of negative eventualities, both real (Kerrane et al., 2021; Kerrane, Kerrane, et al., 2024) and imagined (Jones & Arnould, 2025). Following Beck (1992) and Giddens (1990), risk is conceptualised as a permanent feature of contemporary society which consumers must engage with to help regulate their actions and ensure their ongoing sense of ontological security. While risk is clearly not a new concept, the risks that contemporary consumers are exposed to appear to be changing, and at pace. The modern condition has forced consumers to engage with multiple risk scenarios, borne of what has been labelled a ‘permacrisis’ (du Plessis & Husted, 2024): prolonged periods of instability and uncertainty, stemming from a range of often interconnected events. Global pandemics, cyberattacks, political unrest, the cost-of-living crisis, infrastructure failure, global warming, threats from natural disasters, often with simultaneous, and multi-layered consequences, therefore, positions risk as top-of-mind for many consumers like never before, garnering feelings of ongoing uncertainty and unease which they must attend to.

Rather than exploring those consumers who are complacent, recent research (including my own) centres on pro-active consumers who choose to act to help ameliorate, or at least manage, the everyday risks they (and their families) are exposed to. From taking ownership of the home production of food, raising livestock including chickens (S. Bettany & Kerrane, 2011) and rabbits (S. M. Bettany & Kerrane, 2018) to feed their families should shortages or difficulties actualise, to electronically tracking children via GPS devices given safety concerns in risk society (S. M. Bettany & Kerrane, 2016), to educating children about societal dangers given the insidious threat of terrorism (Abushena et al.,

2025), to mitigating risks in the context of sexual health (S. Bettany et al., 2022), research has explored how consumers take comfort from assuming the privatisation of risk in multiple contexts via the mundane, every day, practical actions they perform as a precautionary tactic to help shield themselves from negative possibilities, however improbable.

This has most recently involved in my ongoing explorations of intensive motherhood practices (Hays, 1996) amongst a group of mothers from the United Kingdom who chose to engage in 'prepping' behaviours: carefully gathering and storing consumer goods including food, water, and medicine to help buffer the possible negative consequences (e.g. shortages of consumer goods through infrastructure failures) surrounding 'Brexit' negotiations (the UK's withdrawal from the European Union) (Kerrane et al., 2021; Kerrane, Kerrane, et al., 2024). While the Brexit negotiations passed with relative ease, with imaginings and anticipation of empty supermarket shelves proving largely unwarranted, participants felt vindicated that their prepping actions were responsible and appropriate. Their stockpiles subsequently mutated to help them and their immediate family members cope with shortages caused by the very real effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; mutating even further as a buffer to help them deal with rising energy costs, caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis in the UK. The mothers in my prepping research directed considerable time, effort, and resource to ensure a careful reading of family member (future) needs and preferences; they learnt new consumer skills to help them do so, such as canning, pickling and dehydrating food; engaged in activities to ensure their preparations were kept in good order (e.g. inventorying goods, and rotating their stock); and prepared the home to accommodate their stockpiles and efforts, ensuring that their 'stash' was kept secure from unprepared others.

Through their incremental stockpiling, prudently adding extra items to weekly grocery shops over time (often exploiting market conditions through buy-one-get-one-free sales promotions), they slowly amassed a range of consumer goods that they felt may prove useful at a later, anticipated point. In doing so, they felt they had regained a degree of control over what they read as a troubling and disruptive present, which had the potential to disturb their future. Evolving from Brexit preparations, to COVID-19 resilience, to an act of insurance against the effects of the cost-of-living crisis, participants' ongoing efforts help to demonstrate the enduring nature of just some of the everyday risks that consumers encounter and will likely continue to encounter. The lived realities of COVID-19 disruption in the not-so-distant past have encouraged a greater number of consumers to engage in prep work in the present (Geddes, 2022), helping to ensure the ongoing supply of goods (e.g. toilet paper and tinned foodstuffs) in the wake of possible future disruption and shortages. We accordingly recognise human agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, reflective of Emirbayer and Mische (1998), informed by the past, orientated to the future, and towards/practiced in the present.

The maternalisation of pre-emptive prepping

Existing research often positions consumer preparedness and resilience as associated with some form of apocalyptic, bunker-culture, end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it doomsday-type activity, fuelled by individuals who long for societal rebirth through the violent purging of adversaries due to their un-preparedness (Jones & Arnould, 2025). Ongoing

research within prepping communities in the United Kingdom, however (see Kerrane et al., 2021; Kerrane, Kerrane, et al., 2024), conceptualises prepping as an increasingly ordinary, mundane, and mainstream aspect of consumption behaviour which emerges as a precautionary response to the individualisation of everyday risks which consumers encounter (see also Campbell et al., 2019). Through ongoing engagement in prepping communities, participants in my own research, in stark contrast to the doomsday preppers identified in other projects (e.g. Jones & Arnould, 2025; Mills, 2019), actively hoped that such preparedness would be unwarranted and unnecessary, moving away from the hyper-masculine accounts of prepping, calamity, and peril often associated with explorations of doomsday prepping behaviours amongst consumers in the United States.

In Kerrane et al. (2021) and Kerrane, Kerrane, et al. (2024), a gendered reading of risk and resilience is clear. Individuals who opted-in to my prepping research were mothers, who were engaging in everyday prep work not because they longed for a simpler, more authentic way of life; or because they felt society needed to be reset through some form of dramatic uprising; or because they aspired for a better position for themselves in a new world order, which could only be accommodated through violence (Jones & Arnould, 2025). Instead, they engaged more closely with a maternal ethic of care (May, 2008) which directed their prep work towards ensuring the continual needs of their immediate family members could be met. Rather than the extreme practices of building purpose-built outhouses or nuclear fallout bunkers, synonymous with American doomsday preppers, participants' efforts predominantly revolved around foodwork (Bove & Sobal, 2006). Instead of anticipating some form of catastrophic, world-changing risk scenario, they envisaged more probable short periods of disruption to supply chains (e.g. temporary periods of food shortages through infrastructure failure, akin to those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic) or issues with energy supplies caused by, for example, the war in Ukraine. Whereas research on American doomsday preppers reflects a hyper-masculine reading of peril, risk, and exploitation of the un-prepared, with doomsday preppers revelling in others' suffering, permeated with violence and aggression, I find instead, behaviours which are more strongly underpinned by the maternal, feminist values which surround 'good' motherhood – love, nurturance, and protection (Kerrane, Kerrane, et al., 2024).

That is not to say, however, that my research encounters revealed completely altruistic motives behind such acts of consumer preparedness and resilience. The mothers in my research painfully recognised how they could not, and perhaps should not, accommodate the needs of wider others (e.g. extended family members, wider friendship groups, neighbours) through prepping. They often struggled to reconcile ethical dilemmas surrounding imagined scenarios of who they could, and who they could not, help or feed, should worst fears actualise. Aligned to this, we recognise the considerable privilege of those we spoke with (the educated, white, middle class) to better understand precautionary prepping behaviours at the everyday level.

Our participants had the necessary advantages and privilege (e.g. the financial resource to accumulate, albeit slowly, 'extra' items they envisaged could be potentially useful during disruption to everyday life; the extra space to store these carefully accumulated goods; with time on their hands to learn new skills, such as canning, pickling and dehydrating, and rotating inventory to ensure its later and ongoing usability), which was highly labour intensive, and added an additional tranche of domestic labour to our

(already burdened) female participants. This, through significant structural (i.e. class, income, and race-based) inequalities, renders the ability to prepare somewhat beyond the reach of many everyday consumers. For example, just how agentic can low-income mothers/mothers of colour be, given they are often subjugated and discriminated against, and who necessarily engage in multiple low-paid, precarious work contracts, daily (Martin, 2018; Swan & Perrier, 2019), without the time, space, financial means or the energy needed to engage in prep work (Kerrane, Kerrane, et al., 2024)? The very idea that such vulnerable groups of consumers can reach further than their hand-to-mouth existence, purchasing additional items that may/may not be needed on a 'just in case' basis, is problematic (Kerrane, Rowe, et al., 2024). Returning to Emirbayer and Mische (1998), such marginalised and vulnerable consumer groups struggle to be orientated towards anything other than meeting the pragmatic needs of the present.

Resilience as a 'whole of society' endeavour

This is, however, highly challenging within the context of the United Kingdom. The recently launched 'Resilience Framework' (December 2023) produced by the UK Government (Cabinet Office, 2023) positions resilience as a 'whole of society endeavour'. In the foreword to the framework, written by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, various threats (e.g. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, global pandemics, climate change, evolving cyberattacks) are recognised as being symptomatic of a highly volatile world, posing potentially deleterious effects felt not just in the United Kingdom but around the world. The Resilience Framework highlights how: (1) a shared understanding of the everyday risks individuals face is needed; (2) society should focus on prevention and preparation; and (3) that resilience 'requires a whole of society approach', which my own research renders problematic.

In research with Brexit prepping mothers, for example, we find how this individualisation and responsibilisation of risk and its mitigation was directed internally towards meeting the needs of immediate family (Kerrane et al., 2021). Participants were keen to stress how they were making great efforts to ensure that their family and their family alone could survive and thrive amid short periods of disruption and shortage. They revealed how this act of familial connection and love was tailored to their immediate family setting and household, and the secrecy which surrounded their prepping behaviours (for fear that unprepared others may loot their stockpile, should it be unmasked, or expect access to it as fellow citizens in need). I have argued elsewhere (see Kerrane, Rowe, et al., 2024) how this is seemingly at odds with the community-focused ethos of the UK's Resilience Framework, which calls on citizens to help wider community members during a time of need. Based on our research encounters, we find, instead, more inwardly focussed acts of preparedness, which *could* be read as selfish through motivations to protect those closest to them alone (see Kerrane, Kerrane, et al., 2024).

Before I extend critique of the UK's Resilience Framework, it should be noted, however, how other countries have equally promoted what has been labelled the privatisation of risk (Calhoun, 2006) amongst its citizens. Here, risk consciousness, preparedness, and resilience increasingly shift from political institutions to individual consumers (Hacker, 2019), underpinned by neoliberal governance, who are enrolled to help secure the success of the nation by meeting their own needs during times of possible difficulty.

Sweden, for example, re-issued a leaflet distributed to 4.7 million households in 2018¹ (first printed during the Second World War), titled 'If crisis or war comes'. The crises referred to include cyberattacks, natural disasters, serious accidents, and military conflicts. The leaflet encourages Swedish citizens to be prepared to improve *'the ability of the country as a whole to cope with a major strain'* and to envisage *'how you and people around you will be able to cope with a situation in which society's normal services are not working as they usually do'*. Advice includes the ability to have a range of non-perishable foods stored which can be prepared quickly and easily during emergencies, using little water, which includes bread with a long shelf life, tinned goods, and quick cooking pasta and rice. Alongside food items, additional consumer goods such as battery-powered torches and radios, candles, and power banks for charging mobile phones are all suggested as sensible items to acquire and keep secure. Such advice is not peculiar to Sweden. Germany, as another example, has encouraged its citizens since 2016 to have enough food stored for up to 10 days of shortage, including 5 days' worth of water (2 L of water per person, per day²); and Lithuania has offered advice to its citizens on how to prepare for emergencies,³ which includes the possible invasion by Russian forces.

Returning to the context of the UK and the Resilience Framework, UK citizens are now similarly encouraged to gather ready-to-eat tinned goods and non-perishable items, to store appropriate amounts of water (ranging between 2 and 10 L of water per person, per day, to cover drinking water, personal hygiene, and cooking needs) and other equipment (e.g. battery or wind-up torches and radios, portable power banks, a first aid kit, hand sanitiser).

In the context of governments advocating preparedness for citizens to insure themselves against various future crises, research has highlighted (Kerrane, Kerrane, et al., 2024) the problematic assumptions encapsulated in their activities to encourage consumer prepping and in building future consumer resilience into the population. These concerns highlight the need for further research on consumer resilience, and within that scope, for further research on the foreshadowing of consumer resilience in the population through such policy-driven activities.

First, research is required on how prepping can be supported in the case of poverty and disadvantage (and particularly, housing insecurity). Mobile and agile forms of prepping, already widely discussed within prepping communities, might enable more tailored approaches to ensuring consumers who do not have the ontological security of long-term housing or financial continuity are resilience ready. This is particularly prescient in the case of food security. Prepping community advice often advocates the availability always of cash, where food and online systems might collapse due to a cyberattack. The recent example of UK retailer Marks and Spencer being subjected to a cyberattack disrupting its supply chain and online shopping illustrates the precarious nature of electronic payments alone (Hooker, 2025).

A second area for research is on the development of consumer skills. Store cupboard/pantry management skills have receded in the face of a growth in small basket food shopping, and a just-in-time domestic food provisioning culture. Research is required on the extent of consumers' ability to manage a prepping 'stash', and to recommend solutions to this issue that might result in consumers' reluctance to store food, stored food becoming spoilt, and even the development of disease and illness in the population. The 'appropriate' nature of prepping and resilience also needs to be further explored, building on consumer

responses to the official channels of communication associated with the UK's Resilience Framework and its messaging to individual consumers and households. For example, driven by financial necessity or perhaps prepping curiosity, the UK witnessed a rise in house fires caused by consumers following rogue online advice surrounding how to make do-it-yourself room heaters using tea lights and plant pots (Torr, 2022). The unintended consequences of prepping and resilience, therefore, need to be further explored. This includes further exploration of how/where consumers (often desperate to ensure normality during actual or anticipated difficulties) find sources of help (both official and otherwise), and how best, from a policy perspective, to educate consumers on the ill effects of misinformation and inappropriate behaviours which they may be tempted to engage with, just in case.

A third issue ripe for further research is the extent to which consumers engage in relational approaches to developing consumer resilience. Governments rely heavily on a neoliberal governmentality-based approach, where citizens are encouraged to prepare for themselves and their families, and more recently, a 'whole-of-society' duty of care. It would be illuminating to uncover aspects of community-based prepping behaviours/networks and the development of resilient communities, where lessons can be learned about how to support and encourage these more effective means of developing resilience.

Finally, given that prepping is becoming a more widespread and practiced phenomena, future research should explore the legitimisation of prepping and its associated consumption behaviours, as practiced by an increasing number and range of consumers and family types. Researchers should, however, tread carefully here. Research within prepping communities recognises the stigma that such consumers feel surrounds their actions (Kerrane et al., 2021), which they feel legitimises their secrecy. Preppers are often positioned in the media as 'tin-foil hat wearing loons', on the margins of society, stigmatised because of their delusional views. Faced with the effects of the permacrisis, and the very real threat of war and a series of interconnected disruptions, is it, after all, lunacy to have a small stockpile gathered to ride out a period of disruption? The UK Government, and others around the world, do not think so: the legitimacy of *everyday* prepping is ripe to explore.

Notes

1. <https://rib.msb.se/filer/pdf/30874.pdf>.
2. https://www.bbk.bund.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/EN/Mediathek/Publikationen/ratgeber-englisch-disasters-alarm.pdf?__blob=publicationFile.
3. <https://kam.lt/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ka-turime-zinoten-EN.pdf>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Ben Kerrane is Professor of Marketing at Manchester Metropolitan University Business School. His research interests include family consumption, fatherhood, childhood, gender relations and consumer socialisation. He has presented his research to a range of audiences and has published in *Sociology*, *Gender*, *Work & Organisation*, *Marketing Theory*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of*

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