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Rasmussen, Tove Arendt

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Experience and Sustainable Consumption

Abstract

Experience understood as experience-based consumption is by now fairly absent from the research agenda of the different theories on sustainable consumption. On the basis of Colin Campbell's notion of romantic ethics and emotional sentimentality in modern hedonism, I claim that sustainable consumption may re-enchant ordinary consumption and thereby even become a part of marketing and the experience economy. New layers of meaning are at stake and altruistic motives come into play; doing something good for someone or something, aside from oneself, is a very strong trigger of positive emotions. Very often, however, the actual purchase does not live up to the demands of doing good in the sustainable consumption chain, and the individual might end up with a guilty conscience, which again is a possible trigger for lingering in a sentimental mode of guilt. Emotions of sentimentality may actually convince the individual that she really does care for others and thereby provide a positive experience of feeling good – even if it takes place in the universe of consumption fantasies only.

Key words: Experience, sustainable consumption, modern hedonism, CCT, emotions, guilt

Background

The experience-based aspect of sustainable consumption is missing or examined to a very limited extent in the extensive literature that exists on different forms of sustainable consumption, e.g. green, ecological, ethical consumption. This is true both for the dominant decision-oriented research (Beckmann 2001, Young 2009, Fraj 2006, Freestone 2008, Thøgersen 2006) and for the sociologically oriented research in the area (Caruna 2007, Jørgensen 2007, Connolly and Prothero 2008, Halkier 2010) as well as for *Consumer Culture Theory*, CCT (Ozcaglar-Toulouse 2007). I consider this a great problem – both theoretically, which is the reason for this paper, and practically with regard to working with policy, strategy, communication, and even experience economy. In some literature, sustainable consumption is

considered a dimension of experience research, as in e.g. Jantzen, Bouchet and Vetner (2011: 91) who emphasise that the idealistic actions of consumers are also experience-based, in that the experience of doing the 'right thing' engages emotions and gives one a sense of personal meaningfulness. In the writings of Kate Soper (2007, 2008) and Graig Thompson (2011), we find some considerations about the sensual and enhanced aspects of sustainable consumption. Soper argues e.g. that the so called 'alternative hedonist' is motivated partly by altruism and partly by self-interest in the experiential pleasures of consuming differently e.g. by cooking slow food or using the bike.

It was in connection with a study of young city dwellers' relation to food from smaller manufacturers – including different organic products and manufacturers – that the connection between sustainable and experience-based consumption became clear to me. The present article which is mainly a theoretical discussion, uses empirical examples from two projects which I have supervised. The empirical data in the form of focus group interviews have been thoroughly analysed in Danish (Rasmussen 2010 and Rasmussen 2007). In the focus group discussions, the participants expressed, among other things, a number of nostalgic values and emotions which undoubtedly generated positive experiences in connection with sustainable consumption; at the same time, consumption was characterised by ambivalenceⁱ. E.g. Kathrine explains why she likes to go to small health food shops.

Kathrine:

Do you know "Solspejlet" on Blågaardsplads?

Other participants: No

Kathrine:

It is sort of an old grocery store. There is an old wooden counter and cookies in glass cases and vegetables just well filled in the back of the store. There is such an old-fashioned atmosphere..

Moderator: Yes...

Kathrine:

...which I find nice and cosy, instead of glaring white light and muzak. That's not me. So Føtex and ISO are not for me....(Føtex and ISO are big traditional supermarkets)

Moderator:

Why do you think you like this old-fashioned place?

Kathrine:

Because I want to live in the Middle Ages (everybody laughs) ...

No, I think I am like a romantic ... I like to dream of the old days. So I just think ... well, I suppose I appreciate aesthetics and that things have a certain beauty to them ... purity as well ... that there is something nice for the eye to look at. (Rasmussen et al 2007: 373.)

The nostalgia and the identity aspects of these experiences point to emotional gratification and cultural meanings, providing the participant with meaningfulness in a more extensive way than mere politically correct actions or social distinction mechanisms.

Ambivalent feelings in sustainable consumption are expressed by Christina – and some of the other participants in the next paragraph. The focus group is discussing a theme which they call “buying with the heart or buying with the brain”. At some earlier points in the dialogue, ‘heart’ means ecology but in this extract Christina, Else and Anne Kirstine follow another almost opposite argument as they talk about how difficult it is to be a ‘conscious’ consumer when the ‘brain’ takes over.

Christina: Yes, that’s the brain entering the scene. That’s how I think it, you see. There are two things....well sometimes I spend so long time shopping because I have to weigh all those things

Anne Kirstine: I know that

Christina: I can go into overdrive because of it. It is simply so annoying.....It looks delicious...but it is from a country where they.... I think “there is something politically wrong there....no, I do not want to take that into consideration”. The conscious consumer is so.....

Anne Kirstine: There is a whole new world appearing

Marylin: It must be funny shopping with you

Christina: Well maybe sometimes...luckily it does not happen every time....

Else: It is a lot to carry on your back....

Christina: Yes rather silly. ... But it is enormously difficult if you want to be ... both in relation to food and in relation to being a person who support the right things. ...well, we are told opposite things all the time: sun blocker not sun blocker and so on...

Else: I have tried that, too, don’t want to hear it all

Christina: Yes, it is immensely difficult to be a considerate consumer because you are ... it becomes a bit “gefühl”

like(Bagger et al 2003: appendix p. 13).

The uncertainty and the ambivalence in being a good person and doing the right thing as a 'considerate' consumer is expressed by Christina and echoed to some extent by both Anne Kirstine and Else whose comments are supporting Christina's argument whereas Marylin's remark is ironic and funny.

In another project, we also found strong ambivalences and uncertainty. We investigated the interests of local residents in contributing to make the small Danish city of Frederikshavn into a CO2 neutral 'energy-city'. We did three focus-group interviews and one creative workshops with a group of citizens and the main result was that participants wanted to do something for the environment and the climate but mostly they thought of their personal convenience and expenses. A common denominator for all was the idea of branding Frederikshavn for the benefit of inhabitants. As a result of the different and often opposing information from the media, participants were insecure about the climate threat as Jacob expresses it: "What is right and what is wrong in all this. You are two individuals, two different thought processes and what should you believe in? That is what is hard". (Rasmussen, Wael and Nielsen 2010: 7).

Gerhard Schulze's theory of subjective and situational thinking (Schulze 1997) was applied in order to interpret the ambivalent and sometimes antagonistic discourses of the participants. According to Schulze, there is much to indicate that, today in the rich part of the world, we occupy ourselves with subjective, individualistic thinking in which consumption primarily serves to satisfy inner goals and fantasies such as self enhancement and experience-oriented consumption. Alongside this subject oriented thinking, however, more situational and collective oriented thinking seems to emerge where focus is upon less waste of food, recycling and second hand shopping in many different forms. Our investigation in Frederikshavn revealed that people do wish to restrict energy consumption. However, this wish seems far removed from any real changes in energy consumption since, as noted above, this involves big personal and economical effort – e.g. reduction of private car-use and holiday air travel. Schulze points to this

schism: “Many consumers are in a state of moral schizophrenia. They continue to mobilize anything in the hope of feeling good, and they feel bad in doing so”. (Schulze 1997: 56).

These problematic aspects of sustainable consumption imply ambivalence and insecurity for consumers. This is supported by a number of other studies such as Connolly and Prothero (2008), Halkier (2010), Merkkula and Moisander (2012), Broström and Klintman (2009). All these studies imply that ambivalence and feelings of guilt are frustrating and somewhat harmful for the consumersⁱⁱ. We have found quite a lot of ambivalence and uncertainty in our investigations as well; my point, however, is to discuss the nuances and potential emotionally gratifying aspects of guilt in an experience-oriented perspective.

For most consumers sustainable consumption takes place within the overall context of the consumer society which means that sustainable actions and interpretations will interact with or even be framed by the overall individualistic, symbolic and experience-oriented consumption processes of this society. This argument is reflected in the 2009 special issue of *International Journal of Consumer Studies* where the guest editors call for more consumer oriented research into “...the complexities, conflicts and compromises involved in the pursuit of more sustainable consumption *within* the consumer society” (Peatie and Collins 2009: 112, my Italics).

The extension of consumer theory

The complexity of sustainable consumption combined with my focus on the inner-oriented and dreamlike aspects of this kind of consumption call for an interpretative approach. Therefore, it is useful to view the experience-based aspects of sustainable forms of consumption in the broader perspective of *Consumer Culture Theory* (CCT) developed over the past 25 years. Traditionally, behaviour-oriented consumer research has focused primarily on the act of purchase and consumers’ rationale for making the purchase, whereas marketing has focused on strategies for affecting consumers’ purchasing decisions. CCT addresses the symbolic, identity-based and social context of which consumption in the widest possible sense is a part. In this wide sense of the word, consumption is an extremely important factor in late modern culture, in that we

spend the majority of our time consuming. From this perspective, e.g. electronic media do not merely make up a 'living wallpaper' in the household; they are parts of a continuous social and cultural consumption pattern which, together with mobile media, sports, tourism and shopping, constitute the things that make life worth living for most people. CCT is critical of the mediated ideologies; however, inspired by audience- and cultural studies, ideologies and the role of the consumer as actor and interpreter of meaning are considered dialectically.

As a consequence of this extended concept of consumption, it is interesting to consider the following key words from 1992 in which Holbrook and Hirschmann take the view of the interpretative method in consumer theory '... all consumer behaviour might be regarded as a text in search of interpretation' (Holbrook 1995: 99). This interpretative turn was at the same time a methodological and theoretical extension of consumer research itself which is highly relevant in relation to the understanding of the experiential aspects in sustainable consumption.

Experience and consumption

The experience orientation of consumption was described by Holbrook and Hirschmann with the telling article title "The Experiential Aspects of Consumption. Consumer Fantasies, Feelings, and Fun" from 1982, which particularly addresses the emotionally uplifting and thus experience-based aspects of consumption. This is an excellent example of the extension of consumer research's understanding of consumption as such – and a programmatic contrast to previous research, in the words of Holbrook: '... "*the experiential aspects of consumption*" focused on a series of systematic contrasts between the older decision-oriented perspective and the emerging experiential view' (Holbrook 1995: 81).

Today, however, research in sustainable consumption is still characterised by the decision making models. When the social sciences and critical approaches formulate their critique of the decision models it often happens on the basis of analyses of consumers' experience of ambivalence and uncertainty in the contextual practice of everyday consumption of which sustainable consumption makes up only one aspect of the overall consumption, often subject to

other more pressing social demands and needs (Halkier 2010, Broström and Klintman 2009, Markkula and Morisander 2012, Jacobsen and Dulsrud 2007). These critical studies include more diverse aspects than market-oriented approaches, as they point out the ingrained ambivalent nature of sustainable consumption but both the emotional and experiential aspects are downplayed.

This is where CCT may strengthen the diversity of the understanding of sustainable consumption by emphasising the positive and negative experiences in this form of consumption as it takes place within the overall context of the consumer societyⁱⁱⁱ. It is my assumption that, for many consumers, cultural, social and experience-based forms of gratification and needs go hand in hand with the more critical action-oriented aspects of sustainable consumption, which, overall, may explain why the consumer is not always a strictly sustainable consumer – but chooses sustainability in specific situations (e.g. when she can afford to or feels like it) and with regard to specific goods (e.g. organic milk).

Modern hedonism and sustainable consumption

In his extensive analysis of the relation between production and consumption in capitalism, Colin Campbell (2005) takes his starting point in and inspiration from Max Weber's understanding of the connection between puritanical protestant values and the emergence of early capitalism and early forms of value build-up in the 16th century. Weber (Weber 1930) considered the puritanical and ascetic outlook on life the reason why people start to work and renounce for their own sake. This means that economic values are accumulated rather than 'squandered' away. Campbell does not question Weber's analysis as such, but he points out that capitalism will not be able to expand without consumption to counterbalance production. At the same time, Campbell believes that renunciation and sacrifice mean that new sensitivities awaken in the individual, such as sentimentality, guilt and melancholia. In a way, one is 'possessed' by this sensitivity and learns how to find a form of delight in controlling one's emotions in a particular direction.

On the basis of Campbell's analysis, Jantzen, Fitchett, Østergaard and Vetner (2012) explain that the puritanical sacrifice is the historical hotbed of the experience-based aspect of modern consumption, which is precisely a matter of being able to manipulate and control one's emotions and fantasies for the purpose of achieving gratification. In the late 18th century, the Romantic replaces the Ascetic, intensely preoccupied with sensibility and feelings of pleasure, which Campbell describes as follows: 'Thus the Romantic was someone who had an ideal sensitivity to pleasure, and indicated this fact by spontaneity and intensity of his emotions' (Campbell 2005: 193). Both cultural consumption and fashion are associated with ideal dreams and fantasies of a better life, and the search for pleasure is made legitimate in its own right.

This gives rise to the preconditions for modern hedonism, as described in the following quote: 'The romantic ideal of character, together with its associated theory of moral renewal through art, functioned to stimulate and legitimate that form of autonomous, self-illusory hedonism which underlies modern consumer behavior' (Campbell 2005: 200-201). In other words, there is a form of ethics in modern hedonism that Campbell refers to as 'romantic ethics' which go hand in hand with Weber's 'protestant ethics' in the basis for understanding the historical development of capitalism.

We thus assume that the religious pattern of behaviour loses ground, as described by Weber in connection with the secularisation and rationalisation of society. However, at the same time, consumption may be seen as the new 'irrational' and value-oriented realm in which sensitivity and pleasure rule and where the goal is to achieve emotional gratification and the ideal or ethics may be one of the ways in which it is achieved. This interpretation of consumption may be seen as a 're-enchantment' (Ritzer 1998) of life via e.g. sustainable consumption. Thus, this form of consumption may be seen as deeply rooted in the emotions and is perhaps based on romantic ethics.

In our investigation of the younger city dwellers, we found that they had hedonistic and nostalgic dreams and fantasies about non-industrialized small farms. E.g. Christina: "I was

convinced that it (Årstiderne – a big ecological distributor of vegetables) was a giant kitchen garden...” and Else continues: “We have these wonderful ideas that the apples are plucked and the cow milked by hand. And it is Gudrun – you know. It is not only a cow...it is actually Gudrun standing there” (Rasmussen et al. 2007: 364). The nostalgic fantasies are expressed with a great deal of irony and self-reflexivity in the focus group discussion.

Romantic and sentimental Ethics

Campbell describes the sentimental and romantic ethics of consumption as follows: ‘... self-illusory hedonism can link up with a self-centered, moral idealism; while the search for pleasure may itself lead to the generation of guilt and a consequent need for signs of one’s goodness’. (Campbell 2005: 215). It is interesting that the sentimental and romantic ethics mean to make sublime objects of the emotions while, at the same time, praising the natural and altruistic, wanting to do good and thus achieving positive emotional gratification. On this basis, sustainable consumption can, in itself, be considered a mix of the rational ‘puritanical’ sacrifice and – in that people in late modern consumer society generally are unable to/unwilling to make sacrifices – an eternal ‘guilt’ towards the other/others: a guilt which may be atoned for via emotionally gratifying sustainable consumption.

In the next paragraph, the young city dwellers were asked to discuss their own attraction to sustainable consumption and again they are very self-reflexive and aware of their own role as consumers in the rich part of the world:

Line: Sometimes I think that you ... sort of make an excuse for the enormous overconsumption...

Marie Louise: Double-standard...

Line: Yes sort of...then you buy some oranges which are transported by plane from Israel

(everybody laugh) so I think that you are helping your good consciousness there

Signe: It is also part of an enormous abundance ... Well... we could never feed the population of the earth on an ecological basis...but anyway we like to buy ecological because we have a surplus of everything. We are able to it a better way and support farming which is better for the future of the earth and such things. But it is only because we have the option. It is because we can.

The participants are reflecting about their own economic options and the abundance of rich societies as such. In their view, ecological consumption becomes an option for doing the right thing and thereby they may 'earn' a good conscience. Sustainable consumption may even be considered as a sort of double standards because of the relation between option and abundance.

An even more complex and ambivalent understanding, I might add, is that 'guilt' may potentially be extended into an emphasised guilty conscience – á la the type of everyday ritualization expressed by some people who often mention their guilty conscience with regard to their weight and bad habits of exercise . As an example, the host in a popular Danish radio programme *Café Hack*, Søren Dahl, very often points to his own physical appearance when making a joke about quite other matters. The reference to the weight is turned into a sign of self-reflexion and it may even work as a kind of ritual down-grader with reference not to the weight itself but to the guilty conscience which may be a subtle way to indicate that you do carry out emotional control of the self no matter the weight.

In the Frederikshavn case, we found that the most considerate energy consumers were worried and their discourses were characterized by emotional and perhaps even sentimental utterings about the future for "our" children and grandchildren. Camilla puts it like this: "I also think about how life will be for our children and grandchildren on this planet. I just think something or other needs to be done". And Lars says: "I think a lot...it is a bit neurotic what we are doing to our planet. And then I think a lot...not so much about my own children perhaps but my grandchildren and their children" (Rasmussen, Wael and Nielsen 2010:5). The emotional and sentimental aspect comes into play when Camilla talks about "our" children - yet she has no children of her own. At the same time, she is not putting herself in the active position when she uses a passive formulation "has to be done". Lars does not talk about solutions or actors as such. Aspects of guilt come into play in their reference to coming generations, which is both a rational concern and an emotional human discourse of ritualized character.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the diversity of consumption practices has increased and that sustainable forms of consumption have, at the same time, become more complex and even partly contradictory. For most consumers sustainable consumption is part of an overall consumption practice which is individualized and experience oriented. I have suggested that sustainable consumption may re-enchant ordinary consumption – socially, symbolically and emotionally so that even feelings like the ambivalent guilty conscience in itself can be experience-based and massage the type of sentimentality and self-righteousness that Campbell refers to in connection with modern hedonistic consumption.

Campbell thus explains that there is no emotion that cannot form a basis for pleasure. Furthermore, he claims that negative emotions often generate stronger feelings than positive emotions (Campbell 2005: 70). In my interpretation, this is a matter of strong feelings of guilt about the ‘condition of the planet’ and ‘the future of our children’ which can be controlled and processed via the guilty conscience. Campbell’s point is precisely that the emotional feeling of ‘pleasure’ is based on the control by the individual. In the case of value-based consumption, this means that the individual is able to control and dose her feelings – namely that she does in fact deal with the problems – as she has a guilty conscience. This conscience can be used for both inner sentimental gratification and for external social purposes; often in the form of ritual communication.

With this article, I have presented a somewhat different interpretation of sustainable consumption than those presented by e.g. practice theory and the decision models. Nevertheless, I believe this understanding of complex guilt and the ambivalent guilty conscience as forms of experience capture well some of the very fluid patterns of sustainable consumption. Maybe we might even come to a fuller understanding of the mismatch between attitude/knowledge and action which is reported so frequently in relation to sustainable consumption.

In this sense, sustainable consumption puts emotions such as guilt not only on the political agenda of e.g. sustainability but also on the agenda of the marketing and experience economy where consumers may linger in the dreamlike sentimental mixture of guilt and relief and thereby create a plus value of emotional satisfaction and meaningful experience.

It is important to understand this, as practically no consumer is or can be sustainable 'throughout'; and a social and lifestyle-based segmentation of individuals as different types of sustainable consumers is therefore difficult to make – perhaps almost impossible. If anything, we can talk about a variation of consumer actions in which the opportunities present in the given situation, in the everyday context and, not least, in the emotional condition of the consumer all take part in determining which kind of consumption and interpretation will take place.

For consumer policy and NGO's it is important to realize that for most people sustainable consumption takes place within the overall context of consumer society and even if frugality is a trend among some consumers today it is still marginal in relation to consumption as such. The potential emotional gratifications of guilt which I have discussed will not form the basis for neither more consumer action nor more consistent sustainable consumption in everyday practices: This kind of concerned emotional control is a kind of 'negative hedonism' which mainly contributes to maintain consumer society as such.

Acknowledgements

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ⁱ The investigation was empirically based upon focus group interviews. There were three groups of young city dwellers with five participants in each group. They were 'self selected' as they responded positively to notices in supermarkets, libraries, day care institutions and big companies in the Copenhagen area. Participants were then selected on the basis of a small survey in order to secure a mix of educational and professional backgrounds. A common denominator was (as said in the notice) that they should be interested in food and qualities of food. Interviews lasted 1,5 hours each and there were two moderators – one active and one more passively observing the interaction.

ⁱⁱ When Jacobsen and Dulsrud (2007) discuss the framing of political consumption, they claim that: "Consumers often lack necessary, reliable information and they do not have the autonomy

to make unbiased choices and ethically relevant alternatives to choose from” (ibid p. 478). Accordingly Jacobsen and Dalsrud argue that politicians should live up to their overall ethical responsibilities and leave the everyday moral issues to the citizens. This is a prominent and important discussion raised also by other researchers; yet it falls outside the scope of this article as I want to pursue other aspects of consumer experience and sustainable consumption.

ⁱⁱⁱ From a different perspective, Løkkegaard and Pedersen (2012) investigate the relation between experience and sustainable consumption in a recent thesis and they claim that you can perform successful experience design of sustainable services by means of involving the consumer in emergent, sensing experiences where guilt and bad conscience is momentarily forgotten. The experience will provide a positive emotion of innocence and the consumer will seek for these kinds of value-based experiences in the future. Løkkegaard and Pedersen have chosen to appeal to and design for the extrovert personality type who seeks sensory stimulation in order to obtain wellbeing, whereas this article deals with the emotional aspects of guilt and bad conscience in the more introvert personalities who seek security and want to control the situation and their emotions accordingly (Jantzen and Vetner 2008, p. 15).