

# Experience and Sustainable Consumption

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**Abstract:** *On the basis of sociologist Colin Campbell's notion of the romantic ethics and emotional sentimentality in modern hedonism, I claim that sustainable consumption may re-enchant ordinary consumption. New layers of meaning are at stake and even 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 of goods does not live up to the demands of doing good in the value-based consumption chain, and the individual might end up with a bad conscience, which again is a possible trigger for lingering in a sentimental mode of guilt. Emotions and bad conscience may convince the individual that she really does care for the environment and thereby provide a positive experience of feeling good even if it only takes place in the universe of consumption fantasies. Accordingly the paper argues that this 'work of the conscience' may be the modern hedonistic consumer's way of handling the often reported discrepancy between attitude and actual behaviour in sustainable consumption.*

**Key words:** *Experience, sustainable consumption, modern hedonism, Consumer Culture Theory*

## 1. Introduction

As is the case with consumer research in general, research in sustainable consumption has been divided in different traditions and camps. The dominant tradition of decision-oriented research is based upon a cognitive approach and the idea of a 'Homo Economicus' (Berthouët 2013), while social science studies make a differentiated alternative as they focus on, for example, the consumer's role as a responsible social actor, political versus consumer responsibility and/or the everyday complexities of consumption (Halkier 2010). A classical problem discussed both by the social science and the decision-oriented research is the discrepancy between awareness/knowledge,

attitude, intention and actual behaviour/action in sustainable consumption. A number of studies report that people's (dis)engagement in sustainable consumption imply a highly complex and even ambivalent everyday practice (Halkier 2010, Boström and Klintman 2009, Connolly and Prothero 2009).

In this article, I will propose an alternative or partly supplementary understanding of sustainable consumption by discussing consumer theory about modern hedonism and experience-orientation in ordinary consumption (Campbell 2005); the point being that modern hedonistic dream-like

and fantasy-based experiences can be at stake also in sustainable consumption: In a direct 'positive' emotional sense in that e.g. organic food products can be enriched with romantic and nostalgic feelings about old times, while in a more complex negative sense having a bad conscience about not behaving in the 'proper' sustainable way may be controlled and manipulated into alternative symbolic meaning structures by means of meta-/self-reflection and especially in social interaction by means of (self)-irony. People may even generate the feeling that they actually 'do' something by having a bad conscience.

Thus the article claims that, seen from the point of view of the experiencing individual, the schism between attitude, intention and action can be resolved in ways that produce some sort of gratification. It is important to notice that modern hedonism and experience-orientation cannot be generalized into consumption as such. Modern hedonism is a result of advanced modernity, an abundance of goods and the relative affluence of a majority of consumers (Jantzen and Østergaard 2007). Consumption in this regard does not primarily satisfy physical, social or communicative needs but a variety of feelings and emotions, such as nostalgia, sentimentality, happiness, fear, disgust and well-being (Jantzen and Østergaard 2007, p. 87) which are inner states of being that can be manipulated by the individual, who thereby constructs her own pleasurable environment (Campbell 2005, p. 203). The inner-orientated and emotional experience-orientation in the theory about modern hedonism implies that the focus is upon the individual as he or she is actually doing the dream-work on the basis of 1) her own capabilities in acknowledging, estimating and unfolding potentials of experiences 2) a symbolic and aesthetic marketplace, where cultural meanings can be ascribed to the world of goods. While the first is individual of character, the second is of a social kind.

The experience-orientation of modern consumerism includes a diversity of consumption forms and we must expect that some of the same hedonistic

mechanisms of dream and fantasy are at stake in sustainable consumption. It was in connection with the study of young urban people's relation to food from smaller manufacturers – including different organic products and manufacturers – that the connection between sustainable and experience-based consumption originally became clear to me. In focus groups, the participants expressed, among other things, a number of nostalgic values and emotions, which undoubtedly generated positive dream-like experiences in connection with sustainable consumption. E.g. Kathrine explains why she likes to go to small health food shops.

Kathrine: *Do you know "Solspejlet" on Blågårdsp-lads? (Solspejlet is an ecological shop in the center of Copenhagen)*

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 modern 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, Bagger, Fuglsang and Nikolaisen 2007, p. 373).*

The nostalgia, life style and identity aspects of these experiences point to emotional gratification and symbols, providing the participant with meaningfulness in a more extensive way than politically correct actions or social distinction mechanisms which are, of course, also very relevant in relation to sustainable

consumption. The emotional gratification of experiencing the *nice and cosy* grocery store is underlined by contrasting it to the white light and muzak in the supermarket. Giddens (1999, p.101) claims that lifestyle and identity are closely connected in the post-traditional era as we construct and reconstruct our identity by means of multiple, yet limited, life style choices. The old days, the aesthetic and the purity in the old grocery store are incarnations of the romantic life style; Kathrine even says that she *is* a romantic, which underlines the identity aspect. The emotional experience of the grocery store becomes culturally meaningful both individually and socially when talked about (Lund et al. 2005); in this instance in the focus group interview.

The outline of the article is as follows: In section two the background of study is introduced. In the third section I will discuss analytical examples of experience-orientation, nostalgia and ambivalences in sustainable consumption on the basis of theories by G. Schulze and G. Ritzer. In the fourth section, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is introduced as an overall interpretative framework for experience-oriented studies of sustainable consumption; also the background of experience-oriented studies of consumption is introduced. The fifth section will go further into Campbell's notion of modern hedonism, which is discussed in relation to both Max Weber's theory about rationalized capitalism and analytic examples of sustainable consumption.

## 2. Background

The present article makes a primarily theoretical proposition about modern hedonistic experience-orientation in sustainable consumption. I will present and make use of re-readings of existing empirical work and use it analytically in a new way, focussing on aspects of experience and emotion. Two studies will be re-examined – one about climate and energy consumption in the town of Frederikshavn, and one about young urban consumers' conception of food from small, partly organic manufactures. They are based upon empirical material from two mas-

ter theses (Bagger, Fuglsang and Nicolajsen 2003, Wael and Nielsen 2008), which I have supervised and subsequently published as an article and a paper together with the students (Rasmussen et al. 2007, Rasmussen et al. 2010). When I make direct references to the master theses, the article and the paper I wrote together with the students, I will use the collaborative term "we". I will also analyse and comment on empirical work about climate and flying by Berthouët (2013), published in the present Journal of Transdisciplinary Environmental Studies.

The study of the young urban people was based upon three focus groups, 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 age, educational and professional backgrounds. A common denominator was (as said on 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 actively and one more passively observing the interaction.

The theoretical background was primarily based on the works of Giddens (1999), Ritzer (1999, 1998) and Campbell (2005). Even though the study is rather old, both theory and empirical data are relevant and prove rich for re-reading today. The most relevant and interesting discussions in relation to the subject of the present article are that both experience-orientation and ambivalence in sustainable consumption are expressed very concretely in the form of especially nostalgia, childhood memories and illusionary fantasies about e.g. ecological production, while, at the same time, meta-communication in the form of meta-/self-reflection and irony are used repeatedly by all three focus groups.

G. Ritzer's (1999) reading of Weber, and Weber's points about how the rationalization of all sectors of society has led to a disenchantment of modern

life, frames the analysis of how participants crave for the *old times*, when people were not so isolated from nature, trade and farming, as most of us are today. Through nostalgia and dreamlike fantasies about e.g. personalized animals in organic farming, we see that participants are able to “re-enchant” consumption in Ritzer’s terms. Ritzer saw the following relation between Weber and Campbell’s work: “Although Weber saw the spirit of modern capitalism leading to rationalized, disenchanting capitalism, for Campbell the spirit of modern consumerism leads to romantic, enchanted capitalism. Weber’s capitalism is a coldly efficient world virtually devoid of magic, and Campbell’s ‘romantic capitalism’ is a world of dreams and fantasies”. (Ritzer 1999, p. 69). By some other sociologists Campbell is seen as representing voluntaristic or relativistic tendencies because he exaggerates the activity of consumers who choose freely between goods and symbolic meanings (Halkier 2010, p. 23). Perhaps this critical conception of Campbell is a reason why his otherwise rather obviously relevant theories about the ethical aspects of modern consumption have not been taken up in relation to sustainable consumption.

In my view, Campbell’s work is an important and necessary supplement to Weber’s theory, and the modern hedonism of consumption is as much a structural societal condition as the ‘iron-cage’ of Weber’s capitalism; Campbell’s point being that the one cannot exist without the other in a modern capitalist society (Campbell 1987, p. 227).

The Frederikshavn case, which is the second study that is re-read in the present article, is based empirically on focus groups and workshops with citizens. Only the focus groups will be described and used in the present context. There were three of them, consisting of 7 - 8 persons in each group; the groups were homogeneous in relation to age but heterogeneous in respect of gender and housing conditions. This segmentation was found most relevant in relation to investigating consumers’/citizen’s possible involvement in making Frederikshavn an energy

neutral city. Halkier’s (2005, p. 31) points about ‘maximum variation’ in composition of groups were followed, just as were Schröder et al.’s (2003, pp. 160-161) arguments about having a minimum of two participants of each segment in each group. G. Schulze’s theory of subjective and situational thinking (Schulze 1997) was part of the theoretical framework, together with M. Douglas (1996) and K. Gergen (2006).

Schulze’s thesis is that when human conditions are poor, people tend to think situationally and externally-oriented, whereas thinking is typically subjective and inner-orientated when conditions are characterized by wealth and many options. According to Schulze, there is much to indicate that, today in the rich 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. Schulze talks about ‘a rationality of experience’ which “... attempts to optimise ‘outside’ means in relation to ‘inner’ ends”. (Schulze 1997, p. 48). This resembles, to a large degree, Campbell’s insights, but in contrast to Campbell, Schulze addresses some problems of modern consumption which are related directly to sustainability. His point is that ‘renunciation’ is needed to sustain human life in the future, and it must be of another kind than the actual hedonistic self-centred renunciation, where e.g. by dieting you stimulate your sensitivities by bodily control and at the same time consume a lot of by-products, such as diet cook books.

The problem is, however, that the necessary renunciation today calls for externally-oriented, situation-centred and collective action. This new claim, however, cannot be understood within the dominant subject-centred thinking. “*It sounds reasonable (to renounce – my addition) but people do not put it into action... it is a latent antagonism of different frames of reference*”, Schulze explains (Schulze 1997, p. 55). This schism is considered to be of a serious kind: “*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, p. 56). On this basis he calls for institutional efforts in order to construct a new collective framework for solidarity in consumption – a position which to some extent resembles the critical positions of Jacobsen and Dalsrud, who call for a new ideological debate on private versus public responsibilities in sustainability (Jacobsen and Dalsrud 2007, p. 479).

Our investigation in Frederikshavn revealed that most of the participants were ambivalent and sometimes even self-contradictory in their statements about climate change and sustainability. As a result of the different and often opposing discourses conveyed by media and politicians, they were insecure about the climate threat, as Jacob expressed 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, p. 7). We found that Schulze's term 'moral schizophrenia' made a lot of sense in relation to this kind of ambivalence, but at the same time we found a strong pragmatic attitude to concrete solutions and actions in everyday life.

### 3. Ambivalences in Sustainable Consumption - Analytical Examples

The modern hedonistic experience-oriented 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, organic and ethical consumption. This is true both for the dominant decision-oriented research (e.g. Young et al. 2009, Fraj and Martinez 2006 (a, b), Freestone et al. 2008, Thøgersen 2006) and for the sociologically oriented research in the area (e.g. Caruana 2007, Connolly and Prothero 2008, Halkier 2010) as well as for Consumer Culture Theory (Ozcaglar-Toulouse 2007)<sup>1</sup>. This is a problem - both theoretically and practically - with regard to working with strategy, communication and policy because neither group of researchers recognize the importance of the emotional inner-

driven aspects of consumption, where ambivalences can be 'resolved' by dream-like fantasies where no action needs to take place. On the one hand, most consumers want to do good and consume as sustainably as possible, but on the other hand, we want to live the "good life" for ourselves and closest family, and the good life for people today is above all rich in experiences.

The schism between attitude, intention and action is very well described and analysed by Berthou (2013) in relation to e.g. flying. The following quote is from a reported conversation between a mother and her adult daughter who were among the most considerate and sustainable consumers in Berthou's ethnographic case-study (which is theoretically and methodically based upon practice theory).

M: *And it is not like we are self-righteous or anything. Because, well – we do fly, too.*

D: *Wow, yea – we have flown 18 times this year!*

M: *That is really nothing to brag about.*

D: *Well, it is because we went on a round trip for five weeks. But we counted that we had made 18 flights in all. And then I thought about how much we will have to turn off the light for the rest of our lives... This thing about flying, I easily get a bad conscience about it, because it creates so much contamination.*

M: *I feel the same way!*

D: *But then I think, somebody just has to find a solution and not that we stop flying, but that we fly in another way or with different fuel. Because it just is here to stay. This thing with flying.*

M: *Yes it is.*

D: *It is not something you just change, right. And I love to travel. And I – well I hope that I can fly really far away numerous times to come, and that will mean a lot on my carbon emission account so to speak. But I do love the actual flying – I find it fantastic. So I hope they will find something, I know it takes extreme amounts of fuel, which makes it almost impossible to find an alternative...but I hope they will someday, because I do not think it is something I can stop doing. But on the other hand – we are so conscious of what*

*we do otherwise, and I do not eat any meat at all*". (Berthou 2013, p. 60)

Another conversation among a couple who fly to New York six times a year also exemplifies the pursuit of the good life and their way of 'negotiating' their bad conscience: "*In relation to flying, I don't know. We cannot change that, it has to do with a need we have. We just have to go. Or, we don't **have** to; there is nothing in life you **have** to do. But we feel there is a need. But most often we fly to New York, so it is not that far. Then that's alright I think, it is the first place the airplane stops. That is good. Now I feel better (laughs)*". (Berthou 2013, p. 61). Berthou states that for the participants the meanings concerning the individual good life and cosmopolitan life style carried more weight than the meanings related to the climate and energy consumption (ibid, p. 61). At the same time, I must add, it is important to notice the strong emotional choice of words concerning flying – it is a *need* we have, say the couple and the daughter explains that she simply *loves* flying. None of them think that they will ever be able to stop. The very experience of flying and travelling long distance seems to be so emotionally satisfactory that *we cannot change that*.

It is also worth mentioning that the participants unfold some irony in the way they 'work' with their bad conscience in relation to flying: New York is very close to the couple – as it is the first stop so *that's alright...now I feel better*. By making an implicit reference between flying and a bus' or train's *first stop*, irony is used to make a little fun of the participant herself. The daughter is *so* conscious that she thinks about how much they will have to turn off the light *for the rest of their lives*, and she does not eat *any meat at all*. By stressing the contrast between the lack of responsibility in flying and the 'over-conscious' behaviour in every other respect, the daughter is underlining her general sustainable behaviour and diminishing the importance of flying. There is also some self-irony at play in this contrast because of the exaggeration *for the rest of our lives*.

Ambivalent feelings in sustainable consumption were also expressed by the younger urban people in the focus groups about food from small manufacturers. The focus group is discussing a theme which they call *buying with the heart or buying with the brain*. Sometimes in the dialogue *heart* means ecology, and in this extract Christina, Anne Kirstine, Marylin and Else are talking about how difficult it is to be a *conscious* consumer, as they call it:

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 supports 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 ambivalence in being a good person and doing the right thing as a *considerate* consumer is expressed by Christina and echoed by Anne Kirstine and partly by Else. It is noteworthy that Anne Kirstine and Marylin both meta-communicate in a slightly ironical way about Christina's difficulties in handling the complex demands of *considerate* consumption, while at the same time indirectly supporting her. When Christina says that

consideration becomes a bit “gefühl” like, it is striking that she uses a German term and not the Danish term “fornemmelse” or “følelse” (“feeling” or “sense” in English). In the context the term may mean that she has a lack of knowledge about what is the best considerate choice; at the same time it refers to the symbolic phrase *buying with the heart*. It is important to notice that the social interaction in both of the above examples probably has some importance for the production of meta-communication, irony and self-irony. It is a way of creating a ‘good social mood’ in the group by taking some of the seriousness out of the difficult and ambivalent topic of how to act sustainably in everyday life.

We see that sustainable consumption, among other things, implies ambivalence and insecurity for consumers. This is supported by a number of other studies, such as Connolly and Prothero (2008), Halkier (2010), Markkula and Moisander (2012), Boström and Klintman (2009), Berthou (2013). All these studies focus on sustainability as only one factor in a very complex everyday consumption which is intertwined with different practices and discourses. These studies are critical towards the decision-oriented research and the more rationalistic conceptions of the attitude/action gap, and they imply that ambivalence and feelings of guilt are frustrating and may even be harmful for the consumers<sup>2</sup>. My point, however, is to discuss the nuances and potential emotionally gratifying aspects of the complex and ambivalent conscience in an interpretative and experience-oriented perspective.

#### 4. The Extension of Consumer Theory

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 (Peatie and Collins 2009). The complexity of sustainable consumption, combined

with my focus on the experiential inner-oriented and dreamlike aspects of this kind of consumption calls for an interpretative approach; the meaning of which will be explained during the present chapter. 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 (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 2007). CCT’s development of views on consumption can be compared to the development in the interpretation-based studies in general. In the 1970s, the ‘extended text concept’ came to challenge ‘highbrow culture’ in interpretation-based teaching practice and research; advertisements and television programmes were gradually put on the agenda. Initially, this happened from a critical perspective in the 1970s and, subsequently, reception research in the 1980s methodically and theoretically brought the audience of texts into focus as active creators of meaning in relation to their own life worlds and projects.

Over the past 25 years, a similar change has occurred in consumer theory; one might say that CCT addresses an extended concept of consumption. 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. Morris B. Holbrook describes the relation between consumer research and marketing research as follows: “My position holds that *consumer research* involves the study of consumption as the central focus pursued for *its own sake*, whereas *marketing research*, among other things, involves the study of consumers in a manner intended to be managerially relevant” (Holbrook 1995, p. 100, italics in original text).

Thus, CCT has programmatically extended the field of research, the subject of research as well as the context of consumer theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 2007):

1. The product is viewed in all stages of consumption, from cradle to grave.
2. The consumer is considered an actor in the creation of her own identity and meaning.
3. Consumption is viewed in a historical and social context – including gender, ethnicity and class.
4. The market is not a mere site for economic exchange; it is also a site for symbolic exchange.
5. Products do not merely include traditional consumer goods, but all types of artefacts and services that are consumed – including e.g. culture and sports.

In other words, 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, constitutes the things that make life worth living for most people today as we see that experiences (for the rich part of the world's population) enhance and enrich our everyday lives in the hotbeds of the experience economies (Pine and Gilmore 1999). CCT is critical of the mediated ideologies of media and consumption; however, inspired by reception studies 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 where Holbrook on the basis of Hirschmann and Holbrook (1992) take the view of the interpretative method in consumer theory in the form of the text concept: "... *all consumer behaviour might be regarded as a text in search of interpretation*" (Holbrook 1995, p. 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 understanding the experiential aspects of sustainable consumption.

The experience orientation of consumption was previously described by Hirschmann and Holbrook 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 the research paradigm of the decision-oriented research. In the words of Holbrook himself: "... *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, p. 81).

Today, however, we have seen that research in sustainable consumption is still dominated by the decision models (Berthou 2013, Halkier 2010). When the social sciences and critical approaches formulate their critique of the decision-oriented research 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 everyday overall consumption practices, often subject to other more pressing social and emotional demands and needs (Halkier 2010, Boström and Klintman 2009, Jacobsen and Dulsrud 2007, Berthou 2013). These critical studies include more aspects than the decision-oriented approaches, as they point out the complexity of everyday practices and the ingrained ambivalent nature of sustainable consumption, but the hedonistic experience-oriented aspects are downplayed. The perspective on sustainable consumption as diverse, complex and even ambivalent is unfolded in Halkier's book on *Consumption Challenged* (2010); however, Halkier bases her work on practice theory, where focus is upon material and embodied social interaction in everyday life contexts, which highly relevant, but

not in relation to the inner-orientated and dreamlike aspects of consumption. I find that CCT with its textual and linguistic interpretative approach may encompass both consumer experiences and symbolic issues in a dialectical and critical way with regard to the complexity of the investigation of experience-based sustainable consumption<sup>3</sup>.

## 5. 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 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 16<sup>th</sup> century. 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, Christian Jantzen and Per Østergaard (2007, p. 98) explain that 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 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Romantic replaces the Ascetic: The Romantic is 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" (Camp-

bell 2005, p. 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 behaviour*" (Campbell 2005, pp. 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' as the basis for understanding the historical development of capitalism.

We assume that the religious pattern of behaviour may lose 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 1999) of life via e.g. sustainable consumption. Thus, this form of consumption may be seen as rooted in the emotions and based on the romantic ethics.

In our investigation of the urban young people, we found that they had hedonistic and nostalgic dreams and fantasies about non-industrialized small farms. For example Christina stated: "*I was convinced that it ("Årstiderne" – a big organic box scheme 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, p. 364). It is noticeable that the participants express both nostalgia, meta-communication (and

*we have these wonderful ideas*) - and irony at the same time ... *and it is actually Gudrun standing there*, says Else, exaggerating how the cow is personalized in their fantasies.

Campbell describes the sentimental and romantic ethics of consumption as follows: "... *self-illusory hedonism can link up with a self-centred, 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, p. 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 combination of the rational 'puritanical' sacrifice – in that people in late modern consumer society generally are unable to make sacrifices by renouncing to consume due to the very structural composition of this society itself – and an eternal 'guilt' towards the other/others: a guilt which may be atoned for via emotionally gratifying sustainable consumption.

In the next quotation, the urban young people were asked to discuss their own attraction to sustainable consumption, and they are highly self-reflexive about their role as consumers in the rich 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 laughs) 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 organic basis...but anyway we like to buy organic because we have a surplus of everything. We are able to do 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.*" (Bagger et al. 2003, appendix p. 45).

The participants are reflecting about their own economic options and the abundance of rich societies as such. In their view, the consumption of organic products becomes an option for doing the right thing, and thereby they may 'earn' a good conscience. The sustainable consumption in itself may even be considered as a sort of double standard because of the relation between option and abundance. Again, we see that irony is used by Line to distance herself from the problematic of plane transport...which makes everybody laugh.

An even more complex and ambivalent understanding, I might add, is that 'guilt' may potentially be extended into an emphasised bad conscience – à la the type of everyday linguistic ritualization expressed by some people who often mention their bad conscience with regard to their weight. 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 repeated reference to his weight becomes a cliché that functions as a sign of self-reflexion, and it may even work as a kind of ritual down-grader with reference not to his weight itself but to the 'work' of the guilty conscience, which may be a subtle way to indicate carrying out some emotional control of the self no matter one's 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 as follows: "*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, p. 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 as she uses the passive formulation *has to be done*; Lars does not talk about solutions or actors either. Aspects of guilt come into play in their reference to coming generations, which are both a rational concern and a collective, ritualized emotional work of conscience. The rational aspect is the concern for future people as was expressed in, for example, the Brundtland Report (United Nations 1987), whereas the ritualized aspect is the expression *for the sake of our children and grandchildren*, which has become a linguistic and cultural cliché. The emotional work of conscience lies in the passive sense *something needs to be done* combined with a postponement of the problems to another time – the children’s time or even the *grandchildren and their children*, as Lars puts it. By means of this ritual expression and the implied bad conscience you may demonstrate to yourself and others that you *do* feel and care; yet without taking any responsible action here and now.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

There is no doubt that the complexity of consumption has increased, and that sustainable forms of consumption have, at the same time, become more diverse and even partly contradictory. Sustainable consumption is part of a consumer society where dreams, fantasies and experience-oriented hedonism as such play an important part. I have suggested that sustainable consumption may re-enchant (Ritzer 1999) ordinary consumption – socially, symbolically and emotionally; nostalgic feelings and sentimental dreams about *the old times* constitute a meaningful symbolism of organic farming, which becomes part of the social life by lifestyle choices (Giddens 1999). From the Consumer Culture Theory perspective, we see that advertising, media and the consumers all play a part in the construction of the culturally meaningful ‘text’ about authenticity and purity of the old times. Even feelings like ambivalence and bad conscience may become experience-based and massage the

type of sentimentality and self-righteousness which 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, p. 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 bad conscience as it ‘works’ with linguistic clichés which postpone time and place and depersonalise responsibility. Campbell’s point is precisely that the emotional feeling of pleasure is based on the control of the individual. In the case of sustainable consumption, this means that the individual is able to control and dose her feelings – namely that she does in fact deal with the problems because she has a bad conscience. This conscience can be used for both inner emotional satisfaction and for external social purpose in the form of ritualized 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 that this understanding of ambivalence and bad conscience as a form of experience captures well some of the very fluid sustainable patterns of consumption. Maybe we might even come to a fuller understanding of the mismatch between attitude and action which is reported so frequently in relation to sustainable consumption. By the dream-like work of conscience, the individual is able to ‘handle’ or control the ambivalences and discrepancies in sustainable consumption in a subtle way. The negative consequences of ‘moral schizophrenia’ (Schulze 1997) can be prevented by the emotional control of having and expressing a bad conscience in the form of the cliché. 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 media, marketing and the experience economy where consumers may be left to linger in a dreamlike sentimentalist mixture

of guilt and relief, thereby creating a plus value of emotional satisfaction and some sort of meaningful experience: Contradictions may be resolved in quite extraordinary ways, as we saw in Berteau's study where the daughter indicates that too much flying may be counterbalanced with not eating meat or turning off the light.

For consumer policy and environmental planning it is important to realize that for most people sustainable consumption takes place within the overall context of the consumer society. This means that the inner-oriented and experiential aspects of ordinary modern consumption are not set aside in sustainable consumption. The emotional gratifications of the bad conscience which I have discussed, will not, however, form the basis for more coherent sustainable consumption practices as they take place in consumer fantasies only; this kind of concerned emotional control and sentimental conscience is a kind of 'negative modern hedonism', which in the long run mainly contributes to maintain consumer society as such. Following Schulze (1997), the implications of the present study for both media and policy might be that they ought to stress institutional and collective responsibilities in order to 'break' the individualistic subject-orientation which does not lead to concrete action.

The present article has presented a theoretical proposition about the potential significance of ambivalence and bad conscience in sustainable consumption. Re-readings of present empirical work have been presented as illustrative examples of consumers' considerations about the issue. In order to sustain the arguments further research is needed - especially important I think would be to understand the meaning of irony and reflexivity in people's talk about sustainable consumption.

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## Endnotes

- 1 There is some research on other aspects of experience in sustainable consumption. In the writings of e.g. K. Soper (2008) and G. Thompson (2011) we find considerations about the sensual and enhanced aspects of sustainable consumption. Soper argues 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. In some literature, sustainable consumption is considered a dimension of experience research, as in e.g. Jantzen, Bouchet and Vetner (2011, p. 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.
- 2 When Jacobsen and Dalsrud (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.
- 3 From a different perspective, Løkkegaard and Pedersen (2012) investigate the relation between experience and value-based consumption in a recent dissertation 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 sustainable 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 the present article deals with the emotional aspects of guilt and bad conscience in the personalities who want to control the situation and their emotions accordingly.

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Making sustainable consumption and production a reality. A guide for business and policy makers to Life Cycle Thinking and Assessment. Europe Direct is a service to help you find answers to your questions about the European Union Freephone number (\*): 00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11.Â y Integrated Product Policy, the Sustainable Consumption and Production and Sustainable Industrial Policy Action Plan, Green Public Procurement, EU Ecolabel, EU Eco-Management and Audit Scheme, Ecodesign, Retail Forum).Â It is best, therefore, to use streamlined approaches only where solid experience from using ISO LCAs has already been gained. therefore, where to focus. Such full LCAs are often pre-requisites for other Life Cycle Thinking support tools and instruments.