

Sustainable consumption and social change: a social practice approach

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The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12 places an explicit focus on ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns. How to tackle unsustainable consumption remains, however, a black box of complexity for many, leading to solutions that do not always account for social and cultural understandings of consumption, nor for how consumption and change relate to the complexity of everyday life.

Why do people consume the way they do, and how might social change be supported towards more sustainable forms of consumption? This central question has occupied much of my time over the past years, both in my research collaborations and teaching practice. Since the early 2000s, there has been a consensus on what consumption domains have the most impact in environmental terms and for Europe: food, housing and transport, with fashion emerging as a fourth category. Yet changing consumption patterns towards more sustainable pathways remains problematic, not least because of the different ways in which «consumption» and «change» are understood.

The sociology of consumption has much to offer when it comes to understanding *why* people consume the way they do. More than a century ago, the sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen coined the term «conspicuous consumption» to describe forms of consumption that demonstrate pecuniary strength; people driving expensive sports cars or wearing flashy clothing brands might be demarcating their social position. In the first part of the 20th century, other sociological approaches to consumption took a more critical stance: Theodor Adorno saw consumers as victims of a powerful «culture industry», made up of brands and their marketing agencies – an image of the consumer that was aptly captured in cult movies around zombies in the 1960s, where the living dead blindly consume anything in sight. In this approach, the endless advertisements and media buys of car and tourism industries artificially create new desires, which are never satiated. By the latter part of

the 20th century, material culture studies brought a different lens to understanding consumption as a language made up of signs. For the British anthropologist Mary Douglas, dressing in a certain way or eating certain foods – such as the emblematic Swiss fondue – might be a means of communicating with others and sharing in life's rituals. For all of these reasons, reducing the environmental impact of food or fashion remains difficult, as these consumption domains are embedded in social and cultural dynamics that have developed over time.

Understanding consumption as social practices embedded in everyday life

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing awareness of certain forms of inconspicuous consumption that are nonetheless greedy in terms of material and energy resources.¹ Turning on the lights in the morning, preparing tea and toast, taking a hot shower, all of these actions use energy in the home, yet they are not always easy to analyze through the cultural and social theories mentioned above. As such, consumption studies – and particularly sustainable consumption studies – have taken a turn towards a social practice theoretical position. Building on the work of theorists such as Theodor Schatzki or Andreas Reckwitz, social practices such as preparing meals or doing the laundry, are understood as the site of the social and as being made up of recognizable entities. Such an approach moves beyond individualized, cognitive and rationalist theories of

1 Shove/Warde (2002).

human action towards a theory that considers how everyday life can be understood in relation to material arrangements and things, skills and competencies, as well as social norms and other meanings.²

Historically situated practices performed today can tell us something about opportunities for change. Thus, practice theory has increasingly been applied to understanding how changes might be imagined and experimented with in the future. In the European project ENERGISE, a social practice approach was used to design, implement and analyze a change initiative focused on reducing energy usage in the home.³ Over 300 households in eight countries agreed to reduce their indoor temperatures to 18°C over a four-week period, in Fall-Winter 2018. The process was collaborative, with a focus on questioning the normative dimensions of feeling comfortable at home: for example, we explicitly discussed how to heat people rather than spaces, or how to adapt indoor clothing to outdoor seasons – rather than rely on a homogenous indoor microclimate year-round. While 18°C was too cold for many, not least those working from home or experiencing reduced mobility, most households across all eight countries found that colder bedrooms were better for a good sleep and were able to lower indoor temperature by at least 1 degree Celsius on average – which represents a potential saving of 6 percent of energy in Switzerland – and this, without any technological interventions.

Change initiatives can disrupt unsustainable practices

Practice-centered design for change initiatives is a growing field of research, leading to approaches that map the enabling networks of unsustainable practices in order to then initiate change interventions that work to disrupt a practice, or replace it with a new, presumably more sustainable, practice. A practice-based approach to promoting biking in a city as a replacement for car-driving practices would take into account how the city's infrastructure allows safe cycling in dedicated lanes, how workplaces might provide showers for people to feel refreshed after biking in to work, or how new competencies such as biking in city traffic might be promoted. An approach to healthy and sustainable food consumption would consider how vegetarian meals can be provided in demonstration sites such as office canteens, where people learn new ways of eating, or how healthy food provisioning can be linked to other practices, such as transit from work to home.⁴ For energy usage in the home, a practice-based approach considers how people might access a

Zusammenfassung

Wie können wir mit nicht-nachhaltigen Konsummustern umgehen? Die Soziologie bietet verschiedene Erklärungen für Konsumverhalten, von künstlich kreierten, unstillbaren Bedürfnissen (Kritische Theorie) zu einem ostentativen oder gar symbolischen Konsum. In den letzten zwanzig Jahren setzte die soziologische Konsumforschung vermehrt die Brille der «sozialen Praktiken» auf. Diese bezeichnen Bündel von Handlungen, die untereinander in Beziehung stehen und durch Räume, Dinge, Fähigkeiten, Kompetenzen und Normen geformt werden. Soziale Praktiken können die Basis für Änderungsinterventionen bilden, um nicht-nachhaltige Konsummuster zu durchbrechen. Der Ansatz widerspricht zugleich dem Mythos der individuellen Wahlfreiheit, der davon ausgeht, dass Personen Konsumentscheidungen frei und isoliert von sozialer sowie materieller Einbettung treffen, und dass nachhaltiger Konsum deshalb durch individuelle Veränderungen bei einzelnen Handlungen erreicht werden kann.

Nebst dem Umgang mit nicht-nachhaltigen Praktiken ist eine weitere Frage entscheidend: Wie möchten wir leben, welche Bedürfnisse müssen für unser Wohlbefinden erfüllt sein, welche Rolle kann und soll Konsum dabei spielen? Gerade bei Ernährung, Wohnen, Transport und Mode, in Europa die Konsumbereiche mit dem grössten Umwelteinfluss, könnte die Wohlfahrtsperspektive zielführender sein als die Problemorientierung.

If all Swiss households did 1 less wash cycle per week for 1 year, they would save the same amount of electricity used by 90,000 Swiss households annually, 13 million m³ of water, or over 5,000 Olympic-size swimming pools, 10 million liters of washing detergent and 1 hour of domestic work per household per week.

Source:
Video Challenges ENERGISE
Switzerland

2 Sahakian/Wilhite (2014).
3 Sahakian et al. (2021).
4 Godin/Sahakian (2018).



ENERGISE Living labs involved moments of discussion and reflexivity around energy usage as tied to everyday life dynamics.

desirable energy service – such as feeling comfortable indoors, for living, working and sleeping – but with less energy. Rather than focus on single actions, like turning off the lights, a practice approach looks at bundles of actions that are linked together and socially and materially embedded. Such approaches are often based on forms of collaboration and cooperation, assuming that people can work with research teams to understand a given situation through increased reflexivity, and imagine and implement the necessary changes. Such a posture is very different from the more popular «nudging» approaches, based on liberal paternalism and the assumption that non-rational individuals need only be pushed into more sustainable forms of behavior.

Debunking myths of technological optimism and freedom of choice

While social practice approaches are highly popular in sociological studies of ‘sustainable consumption’ in Europe, what dominates in much of current research and policy-oriented work is understanding unsustainable consumption as a problem that can be solved when individuals behave better, or when more efficient technologies are introduced. These are two of the myths we tackle in a recently published book on ‘Consumption Corridors’, a concept based on the idea that both upper and lower limits to consumption are necessary towards achieving ‘sustainable consumption’.⁵ One myth is that technological solutions are just around the corner, and that the increased efficiency of cars or appliances will help reduce energy usage without changing

how and in what way people consume. While such measures have led to more efficient vehicles, the increase in SUVs has outstripped efficiency gains, with SUVs worldwide emitting more carbon emissions than some European countries. Another myth is that consumers are sovereign when it comes to their consumption, and that they exercise their «freedom of choice» based on informed decisions. Oftentimes, the notion of «free choice» is at best the ability to choose between the poorest and worst options, or no choice at all – for those experiencing constraints in access to resources, including both time and money. A consumer’s right to choose can also be a way of shifting responsibility from retailers to consumers, who are faced with the impossible task of making an informed choice in a sea of labels. Such an approach tends to over-individualize understanding how changes can take place, relying on consumers as shoppers in a marketplace of endless «green consumerism» opportunities, rather than seeing people as part of collective efforts towards transformative change. In Switzerland, where the domestic workload remains gendered, this over-individualization of responsibility also means that women bear the brunt of sustainable consumption chores.

5 Fuchs et al. (2021).



ENERGISE Living labs challenged participating households to set a goal to reduce indoor temperatures and laundry cycles.

Linking everyday life to sustainable wellbeing

I have argued here for the relevance of a sociological lens to understand opportunities for more sustainable forms of consumption as a normative goal. That being said, the more I study and work in this field of research, the more I am convinced that the starting point for high environmental impact categories – such as food, transport, housing and fashion – merits further reflection. Rather than focus solely on the problems as a way of framing what solutions might be proposed, another approach would be to consider what society we want to live in, and what role consumption has to play in such a society in relation to which resources. As such, my work is increasingly oriented towards wellbeing studies and theories of human needs as a normative goal which, when combined with notions of social justice and environmental promotion, can lead to the more complex and complete notion of «sustainable wellbeing». A more central question becomes: what does it mean to live the good life, and how can we support societal change towards this desirable future – in a world of limited resources? In a recent project on how people consume green public spaces, we found that social practices are a way of understanding how needs are satisfied and in what way,⁶ and that practices associated with «going to the park» lead to multiple forms of need satisfaction for diverse groups of people. This focus here on the consumption of space and ambiance is also a way to broaden consumption studies beyond market exchanges.

Considering how little importance is given to this question of wellbeing in everyday life – where monetary wealth and, as of late, human health are dominant – the challenge remains to start a societal discourse around how much of what forms of consumption are enough, and how the consumption of one person might hinder the ability of another person to live a good life. These are discussions that we pick up in our open-access book on Consumption Corridors, and which relate to growing debates on degrowth and sufficiency. A recent exhibition on Global Happiness by Helvetas brings forward this idea of individual, collective and global wellbeing quite convincingly, and is an opportunity for a general audience to reflect on what contributes to life satisfaction, happiness, and human needs as different interpretations of wellbeing. Such an approach allows a shift in our understanding of what is sustainable consumption, involving not solely forms of consumption that reduce negative environmental and social impacts, but also forms of consumption that contribute to wellbeing, towards a more salutogenic approach where *less* may be *more*.

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6 Sahakian/Anantharaman (2020).

If all Swiss households reduced their temperature settings by one degree in the winter, they would save 6% of the energy dedicated to heating homes which represents almost double the amount of energy necessary for all machine washing and drying.

Source:
Video Challenges ENERGISE
Switzerland

Résumé

Comment réagir face aux modes de consommation non durables ? La sociologie propose diverses explications pour le comportement des consommatrices et consommateurs, qu'il s'agisse des besoins insatiables créés artificiellement (théorie critique) ou de la consommation ostentatoire ou encore symbolique. Au cours des vingt dernières années, la recherche sociologique sur la consommation a de plus en plus chassé les lunettes des « pratiques sociales ». Celles-ci désignent des ensembles d'actions qui sont liées entre elles et façonnées par des espaces, des choses, des aptitudes, des compétences et des normes. Les pratiques sociales peuvent servir de base à des initiatives visant à changer les modes de consommation non durables. L'approche conteste également le mythe de la liberté de choix individuel, qui suppose que les individus prennent des décisions de consommation librement et indépendamment de leur environnement social et matériel, et que la consommation durable peut donc être atteinte par des changements dans les attitudes individuelles.

Outre la lutte contre les pratiques non durables, une autre question est déterminante : comment voulons-nous vivre, quels sont les besoins à satisfaire pour notre bien-être, quel rôle la consommation peut et doit-elle jouer à cet égard ? En particulier dans le cas de l'alimentation, du logement, des transports et de la mode, qui sont les domaines de consommation ayant le plus grand impact sur l'environnement en Europe, la perspective du bien-être pourrait être plus efficace et constructive que l'orientation vers les problèmes.

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