

I consume, therefore I am

Why sustainable consumer behaviour
is so difficult to realise

By Birgit Blättel-Mink



Our modern industrialised society is based on consumerism: people's degree of consumption defines their position in society. From a sociological stance, changing this behaviour towards sustainability will require a major effort on the part of society.

Consumption is a multi-phase process. It begins with the genesis of needs and information retrieval, continues with the decision in favour of a specific product, its use and/or consumption, and terminates with its disposal. According to the United Nations and its Sustainable Development Goal No. 12, the consumption (and production) of goods is sustainable if it satisfies basic needs and improves the quality of life of people while at the same time minimising the use of natural resources and toxic materials, as well as waste, and also preventing contaminants from being released into the ground, air or water across the life cycle of a product. Such consumption would lead to safeguarding satisfying the needs of future generations in a global context as this would decelerate the advance of man-made climate change with its fatal consequences for mankind and fauna.

What does this mean for our daily consumption? We should all eat less meat, renounce disposable plates and cutlery, throw away less food, save electricity, walk and cycle more, take fewer flights, and we should ensure that the products we buy are produced fairly – our consumption should be accompanied by greater awareness, therefore. These proposals for the »Sustainable Shopping Cart« (RENN.süd, 2020) all sound very reasonable. Those who stick to such resolutions probably lead healthier lives and have a cleaner conscience. This is also documented by the most recent environmental awareness study in Germany, in which only 19 per cent of the respondents were of the opinion that the German population is doing enough or about enough for environmental and climate protection; 78 per cent did advocate, however, that for the benefit of the environment »everybody should be prepared to cut back on our current standard of living« (BMU, 2019).

Consumption creates identity

Why can consumption as a whole not be more sustainable, however? The amount of packaging waste is constantly increasing, more and more microplastics are contaminating the oceans, over-fertilised fields are impairing the quality of drinking water. From a sociological stance consumption is more than just buying a loaf of bread and eating it, for instance. Rather consumption is understood to be a set of practices which allow people to express their self-identity, indicate their affiliation to social groups, accumulate resources, demonstrate social distinction and ensure participation in social activities (Heiler et al., 2009: 37). While consumption serves to satisfy the needs of the individual, it also serves to acquire and secure identity, and ensure distinction from others. Accordingly, consumption is a form of social agency with comprehensive individual, yet also societal functions. Consumption secures jobs and ensures growth. Consumption is one of the pillars that support modern society. Transforming consumption, and consequently also reducing it, so as to assume responsibility for current and future generations is thus a most unlikely undertaking – unless sustainable consumption opens up the opportunity for in-demand social and cultural resources, for example social recognition.

If one looks to the past, the close links between consumption and recognition can be substantiated: in preindustrial societies »demonstrative consumption«, showing what one had and what one could afford, therefore, was the preserve of the nobility. In civic society the upper social classes adopted such mechanisms of demonstration and distinction, the demarcation from other social strata or classes through consumption. In order for the owner of a company, for example, to be able to maintain

»Cathedral of consumption«: Social status and consumer conduct often go hand in hand in modern society. Shopping malls such as Frankfurt's »My Zeil« take this into account with a diversity of shopping offerings.

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distinctive consumption, people are required who demand the growing offering of produced goods. This is how the mass consumption of wage-earners developed. Industrialised society is also a consumer society, and consumerism is its cultural substrate, a socially standardised life-style therefore, which is geared to always satisfying the need for consumer goods. As long ago as 1949 the sociologist Theodor Geiger argued that in such a society it is no longer the social position which determines the »appropriate consumption«, but rather the »affordable consumption« determines the social standing of the individual.

Questioning the barriers in one's own mind

The consumption-intensive western lifestyle still plays a very large part in climate researchers assuming there will be global warming of 2.5 to 5.5 °C and warning that a policy of »business as usual« will be fatal. The introduction to an anthology published by scientists in Frankfurt states that in order to bring about the societal and economic transformations that are indispensable to limiting climate change and maintaining the basis for our own existence, we have to dare to imagine a different world and question the barriers in our minds. (Blätzel-Mink and Hickler, 2021)

Such a different world and a different form of consumption is offered by so-called zero waste shops; these allow consumers to fill their own containers with foods and everyday commodities, and thus forego secondary packaging of consumer goods to a large extent. In the framework of her master's thesis in my specialist area Sina Jäger carried out a focus group discussion with persons who avail of such offerings. Even though all the respondents are highly motivated and want to practice this form of sustainable and sufficient consumption, the focus group revealed that there are still various barriers. (In this respect sufficient consumption constitutes a form of sustainable behaviour which, in contrast to the orientation to efficiency for instance, does not accept »business as usual«, but demands a fundamental change in consumption (and also in production). »Less is more!«)

The following barriers were identified with regard to achieving sufficiency: firstly there is the overcoming of regular, entrenched routines, which is perceived as a difficult process: One participant in the focus group talked about the constant habit of always having bags and containers with her. She repeatedly tried to get used to this, kept putting these things in her rucksack to make sure she had them, then she would go shopping, the bags and containers were filled and she would put them in the kitchen some-

where and so she no longer had any in her rucksack... and then she saw that she had to plan a lot more and consider in advance when she are going to go shopping and what she are going to buy, what she needs with her, and this means one needs to give a lot more consideration to one's shopping. (Jäger, 2019: 65).

Sustainable consumption as a daily challenge

Alongside routines, other barriers to sufficient consumption were identified. There is no social recognition on the part of the majority in society, which insist on their »natural right to abundance« (Baudrillard, 1998) and accordingly afford very little appreciation for »lack of consumption«; this is why people often have to justify such a form of sustainable consumption – for example if compliance with hygiene standards is called into doubt in zero waste shops. In addition, the respondents stated that in view of the diverse offering it is by no means easy to practise abstinence, e. g. to forego vegetables from other countries which are only available in the respondents' region in a particular season. In the focus group discussion it also



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became clear that consistently practicing sustainability is a major daily challenge. Thus the respondents stated that they had to start planning their day on a morning, i.e. what they would take with them to eat or where they could make purchases without plastic packaging. The logistics of sufficiency are anything but simple.

That these results are also applicable in other areas is shown by Bianka Zurek (2020) in her bachelor's thesis on day-to-day mobility. She surveyed, likewise in the framework of a focus group, highly mobile persons on the topic of car-sharing. One not particularly surprising result is that the idea of foregoing having a car at the front door represents a major challenge for the respondents. A multitude of reasons are stated as to why people would not like to shift over to car-sharing: availability, inadequate maintenance, the assumption that other users would be less responsible, and the comparatively high costs. In this respect it is noticeable that the listed barriers do not always match up with the facts. Thus, for example, the network of car-sharing offerings, at least in the urban context, is now very dense.

Having your own car is the standard in Germany

Motorised private transport still plays a very major role in Germany. Thus, in the environmental awareness study 70 per cent of the respondents stated that they use their own car on a daily basis or several times a week, whereas a mere 22 per cent use local public transport daily or several times a week (BMU 2019). We are a long way away from a transformation of transportation towards it becoming sustainable – and this despite the high level of environmental awareness on the part of the population. Of course, there are groups of people who forego owning their own car, but these are still an

exception: older women in rural areas who cannot afford a car, young people in cities who do not need a car thanks to greater bicycle friendliness and attractive local public transport offerings. Yet these two groups do not primarily have an eye on the environment, but adopt these measures due to their low income or – in the case of young people – thanks to their media use, which allows them to gather information quickly.

On the whole it is not just the consumers who have to change their behaviour; there has to be the will on the part of the society in total to stop climate change. Industry and business have to offer more climate-friendly goods; consistently more sustainable, more sufficient consumption has to be appreciated by society, and the world of politics should be a reliable partner on this path. At present very little trust is placed in the worlds of business and politics being able to counter the challenges of climate change: in 2018 a mere 14 per cent of the respondents believed that the German government was doing enough or about enough for nature conservation and climate protection. The figure for the business world is even lower, at 7 per cent (BMU 2019). There is still quite a bit to be done, and in a post-coronavirus age it will require concerted action on the part of all the protagonists to ensure that there is the nature conservation and climate protection that will undoubtedly be necessary when faced with the dictum of economic growth. ●

No waste thanks to reusable containers: Frankfurt's first zero waste shop goes by the name »gramm.genau« and is located in the Bockenheim district. Its advertising woos consumers with the claim it makes shopping without packaging as practical and as stress-free as possible.