The role of consumer knowledge towards more sustainable consumption patterns

The thoughts and attitudes of consumer information and knowledge among consumers

Konsumentkunskapens roll för mer hållbara konsumtionsmönster
Tankar och attityder om konsumentinformation och kunskap hos konsumenter

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Bachelor of Science with a major in Environmental Science, 180 ECTS
Bachelor Thesis, 15 ECTS, Malmö University, Department of Urban studies, Aut. 2014
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Abstract

This study focuses on the relations between consumption, consumers and environmental change seen from a holistic perspective. The purpose of the study is to examine the attitudes and knowledge among consumers, about consumption, well-being, and environmental issues. To study these questions, I did personal qualitative semi-structural interviews and literature studies. My research showed that now many of the interviewed persons were familiar with the concept of sustainable development. However, the subjects showed to have good knowledge on climate change and other environmental and social problems related to consumption. To most of the interviewed persons, well-being meant to have “enough”, explained as housing, work, food, and especially good health. None of the consumers were satisfied with the information about different commodities and they all had different ideas of how information about consumption could be improved. The most experienced barrier to the consumer’s possibility to consume more sustainable, was time or rather lack of time in everyday life to plan the purchases, as well as personal economy.

**Keywords:** Consumption patterns · Sustainable development · Well-being · Environmental consequences · Consumer attitudes · Environmental knowledge · Organic labeling · Fair trade

Abstract

Denna kandidatuppsats fokuserar på relationen mellan konsumtion, konsumenter och miljöförändringar från ett holistiskt synsätt. Syftet är att undersöka konsumenters attityd och kunskap om konsumtion, välbefinnande, och miljöproblem. För min studie har jag använt mig av kvalitativa semistrukturella intervjuer och litteraturstudier. Resultatet av min studie visar att många av intervjunpersonerna inte är bekanta med begreppet hållbar utveckling. Detta till trots hade dem kunskap om klimatförändringar samt miljömässiga och sociala problem relaterade till konsumtion. Välbefinnande beskrivs av intervju personerna, främst som ”att ha tillräckligt”, ex. boende, jobb, mat och speciellt att ha god hälsa. Ingen av de tillfrågade konsumenterna var nöjda med den tillgängliga informationen om konsumtion och olika varor, men de hade alla idéer om hur man bättre kan informera om konsumtion. De av konsumenterna mest upplevda barriärerna var tid för att planera inköp, avsaknad av information eller privat ekonomi.

**Nyckelord:** Konsumtionsmönster · Hållbar utveckling · Välbefinnande · Miljökonsekvenser · Konsumentattityder · Miljökännedom · Ekologisk märkning · Fair-trade ·
## Contents

Prologue ........................................................................................................................................... 1

The Sustainability Problem with Consumption .............................................................................. 2

Climate Change and Earths Life Sustaining Systems ...................................................................... 3

Sustainable Development for Consumers .......................................................................................... 6

What makes a Commodity Sustainable? ......................................................................................... 8

Essence ............................................................................................................................................... 10

Sociocultural Perspectives of Consumption ...................................................................................... 11

Influential Factors of Individual Decision Making ........................................................................... 13

Knowledge, Information and its Channels ......................................................................................... 15

Are Consumption Patterns Changing Toward Sustainability? ......................................................... 16

Essence ............................................................................................................................................... 17

What do the Consumers Think? ....................................................................................................... 19

To know more than one knows of Environmental Consequences .................................................. 21

What is Necessary to Experience Well-being? ................................................................................ 24

How can Consumption Patterns be changed into a more Sustainable Direction? ....................... 25

Essence ............................................................................................................................................... 29

Discussion ......................................................................................................................................... 30

Epilogue ........................................................................................................................................... 33

References ......................................................................................................................................... 34
Prologue

As a student in environmental science, I have a great personal interest in environmental issues and the challenge to change human society into a more sustainable direction. One day when eating a couple of peanuts, I became interested in knowing where the peanuts were produced, and how far they had been shipped. Looking at the peanut package I realized that the information I was seeking was nowhere to be found, all it said was “Packed in Holland” and nothing about the country of origin. This incident, and with my knowledge of the environmental problems with consumption, made me think that it might be that consumers are willing to change towards more sustainable consumption patterns. However, if they can’t find environmental information about different commodities, they won’t be able to choose the more sustainable commodity. Further, if they can find information but do not know how to analyze it, they lack the possibility to make sustainably rational decisions.

Environmental studies takes an interest in the environment from a broad perspective of science as well as social sciences, and my goal with this thesis is to give a broad perspective of the ecological and social problems with the consumption and production occurring today. This thesis is focusing on the interrelation between consumption and environmental change, information and the thoughts and attitudes of consumers towards consumption and well-being. My questions for investigation are; if the consumers think they have access to enough information about the environmental consequences of their consumption, or do they wish to know more? What is their view upon well-being, environmental change and sustainable development? At the end of my study, I hope to find that consumers are willing to change their present consumption patterns, if given the access to adequate information to help them make a sustainably rational decision. I wish to highlight some ideas, of how to give better information and knowledge to the consumers, based on the thoughts of the consumers in this study. How would they like to receive information about their consumption and the commodities they buy? Further, what can we expect a consumer to know about the sustainability of a commodity and what makes a commodity sustainable?
The Sustainability Problem with Consumption

This study will discuss aspects of consumption and the participation of consumers towards sustainable consumption patterns. Although I will briefly discuss means of production, transportation, energy use and other aspects to commodities and consumption, the focus of this study is the perception of information and knowledge about sustainable consumption among consumers in Scania, Sweden. It would be hard to write about this subject without including human culture, which I will include and discuss, but the qualitative interviews I’ve done mostly emphasizes on the individuals perspective, their perceptions of sustainability and well-being, their possibilities to engage in some kind of sustainable consumption and the access to information on consumption and the environment. I will start by explaining the importance of discussing consumption and the necessity of changed consumption patterns, in order to be able to achieve the expressed global goal of sustainable development (Sanne, 2002:273).

The definition of consumption is the final use of a commodity and the consumer is defined as the end user of the commodity (NE, 2014). The environment is by definition the natural world, as a whole or a particular geographical area; often affected by human activity (Oxford dictionary, 2014). Nature is in turn defined as the phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth. It also includes the physical force regarded as causing and regulating the phenomena of the world, for instance the weather system (Ibid.).

Historically, before the population growth of the 1900th century, the consumption patterns were not a problem for the global environment. This was due, according to Hamilton (2010), that consumption was driven by the production, commodities were standardized and only the upper classes consumed commodities for leisure and luxury. The poorer classes consumed commodities for housekeeping and there was a greater collective identity among the poorer classes and rural societies. The individual was merely a part of a larger group, which acted together. Today in the western world, we are living in a consumer society, where individuals have a more fluent place in the social structures; the production is steered by differentiation of commodities, responding to the growing individuality in the society and a growing demand due to advertising (Ibid.; Lewis, 2013:59-60; Bellamy Foster, 2002). We’re today consuming more resources than ever, with consequences for the environment, a result from the striving
towards “higher well-being” (Hornborg, 2012:141). Some scientist claim that this purchase behavior is related to the lack of collective identity and the need to express one’s own identity through clothes, eating habits, transportation and so on (Merchant, 1994:20; Hornborg, 2012:140ff; Lewis, 2013:60). The consumer culture is deeply rooted in today’s society, and it encourages consumption. The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (2014) which represents the companies declares that economic growth is good for economic, societal and technological development and that it is the solution to the environmental problems and not the cause. On the contrary, Marx (1995), even if his theoretical focus was not the environment, addressed that a capitalistic system, which bases itself on natural resource extraction and capital accumulation, is not able to expand out of the limits of nature without resource degradation, and he suggested economizing with natural resources. Lewis (2013: 8, 59ff) claims that the consumer culture we are living in are limiting the human imagination of how development and progress could be achieved through other means than consumption. To discuss the topic of consumption and environmental consequences many scientist suggest that one has to take a holistic approach (Hornborg, 2012:46; Moran, 2006:21-22; Steward, 2006:10). I will start with discussing consumption and the environment from a wide perspective, to later on be emphasizing more on the individual consumers and consumer choices and attitudes.

Climate Change and Earth’s Life Sustaining Systems

The most alarming consequence from anthropogenic activities is climate change, also known as global warming, and it is a phenomenon the scientists have been watching for over a century. The effects of Climate change has grown in correlation to the population growth, industrialization and growing consumption and there is little question about whether the cause of climate change is anthropogenic or not in the scientific community (IPCC, 2014; Oreskes & Conway, 2010). Skeptics of climate change often argue that temperature changes have occurred before in the history of earth (Stoehrel, 2013; Oreskes & Conway, 2010), which is also true, due to the Astronomical factors, such as the Milankovic cycle, and geological events (Abbott, 2012; Marshak, 2012). However, the climate changes of today are not of the same kind as the historical ones (Stoehrel, 2013; Brown, 2007). The environmental degradation and the global warming are in relation. When the environment is affected by emitting GHGs and at the same time reducing forests and other vegetation, the earth’s biophysical systems is
put to imbalance. Humanity is expanding its territory at the expense of other species’ habitat and there is an extinction of species occurring today at a much faster pace than normally, compared to the record of geological strata (Marshak, 2012; Wright & Boorse, 2011). The geological society is discussing a new geological age, due to the mass extinction of species and environmental change at present time, the Anthropocene (Crutzen, 2006). The extinction of species is critical; whereas shrinking biodiversity is limiting the resistance of ecosystems and its services (Mori, Furukawa & Sasaki, 2013). The externalization of nature and the environment in today’s market system is proven to be destructive of the planet. There is a need to include the environmental consequences from consumption in today’s market system. The last report from IPCC (2014) which have engaged 60 authors and climate researchers, address the importance of limiting the GHG emissions directly and towards the goal of 40-70% until 2050 and 100% until 2100 to limit the world wide temperature rise to 2 degrees Celsius. They do also express in the presentation that if we don’t take measures to mitigate climate change now, there is no way of limiting the temperature rise to 2 degrees (Ibid.).

A theoretic approach to include nature and environment into culture and society was made by Steward, by the introduction of the concept Cultural Ecology in 1955 (Steward, 2006:5). He sought to go past the common belief at the time that “culture was born out of culture” and wanted to include the environment as a cultural factor in the development of culture (2006:5). He applied a holistic approach to explain what he called “interdependent aspects” of culture but recognized that the degree or what kind of interdependency varied (2006:6). Steward applied a systematical thinking to analyze the interrelationship between technology, economy, “social-derived needs” and behavioral patterns in the context of environment and culture (2006:7-10). He meant that the environment was the very thing allowing society and human culture to develop. Stewards’ theory was later object for criticism but did steer the anthropologic research in a biological direction (Moran, 2006:15-16). There are also theories to explain the “nature of nature” and the biophysical progresses it contains. Geertz, an anthropologist, argued in 1963 for the concept of Ecosystems and the broad framework that it constituted in system-analysis (Moran, 2006:15). This concept has been useful in the context of the environmental and social concerns in the 1960’s and 1990’s, as habitat and species preservation, and it did imply that a common foundation of principles in biology and anthropology was possible (Moran, 2006:16). The Ecosystem concept is also implying that although ecosystems change over a long time perspective, there is a balance within nature. We do also use services, known as ecosystem services, by which we are granted better air quality, water quality, soil quality, pollination of crops etc. (Tilman,
By degrading and disturbing ecosystems we are also degrading the quality of the services supplied by ecosystems by which our human systems rely on.

The balance within nature and its limits is known as nature’s *carrying capacity*, recognized in the ecosystem theory, and well-illustrated in Catton and Dunbars model of the three functions of nature, although from a very anthropocentric perspective (see III. 1. below).

![Diagram](image)

**III.1.** The model shows three functions in nature, the circles, and the carrying capacity is represented by the square. An overload in one of the functions will lead to degradation of nature. The left model shows the functions not overriding the carrying capacity. The right picture is showing a situation where environmental degradation will occur (Hannigan, 2006:18-19 (*The model has been modified, resource extraction has replaced Catton and Dunbars supply depot).)

Catton and Dunbar named one of the spheres below as *supply depot*; however I have renamed this sphere to *resource extraction*, as I find it more suitable for the function shown in the model. The *resource extraction*, are allowing resources to be extracted from nature to make commodities; too large extractions would cause an imbalance in nature and stress the carrying capacity and at the worst-case scenario cause irreversible damage. The overuse in any of the spheres would lead to some environmental change and damage the natural balance of the ecosystems. As an example, the *living space* (habitat, accommodation, every day social systems, consumption) creates a pressure on the *resource extraction* and nature’s capacity to handle waste (*waste repository*) (Hannigan, 2006:18-19). The consequences would be resource scarcity and more harmful substances in the environment. It would also mean that other species loses habitat as human are expanding their use of those spheres. The different ecological theories in some ways points out that the environment is an important part of the
human civilization, and that humanity in different ways are depending on the balance of nature and its resources. The model does not show the social and cultural influences that affects the use of the functions, such as the influence of consumer culture. This part of the chapter is making it clear that present consumption patterns are unsustainable and is affecting our environment negatively. Societies today are dependent on resource extraction and indirectly on that the carrying capacity is not exceeded or ecosystem services not being destroyed.

What is then sustainable consumption? My paper will focus on the sustainability from consumer’s everyday consumption and how able they are to engage in sustainable consumption based on their attitudes and knowledge. Moreover, how can we judge the sustainability of a commodity? I will discuss this in the next parts of this chapter. I’ve chosen to focus on consumption patterns in developed countries because they are the countries with the largest ecological footprint (Mihut, 2011).

Sustainable Development for Consumers

In order to be able to determine what could be seen as sustainable consumption, I will start with discussing the concept of sustainable development. The concept of sustainable development is trying to include both an ecological, economical and social dimension. The concept is often defined as “a development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the possibility of future generation to meet their needs” (WCED, 1987:8). It could also mean that the world will “be passed on to future generation in no worse condition than it was received” (Birnie, Boyle & Redgewell, 2009:119). There are suggestions that the concept includes conflicts in itself, for an example a conflict between material well-being and the environment (McNeill, 2000:11; Bellamy Foster, 2002; Birnie, Boyle & Redgewell, 2009:115-119). There is also a dimension of time, space and implications of ethics to the concept. For whom, where and when is sustainable development to be achieved?

As the concept is generally broad and do not specify what can be seen as sustainable, other than that it needs to be sustainable in all the three dimensions, there seem to be a large variety in the perceptions of the concept. For instance, economists do often apply a different view of sustainability than environmental or climate researchers. To the economist it could be economically sustainable to deplete resources to maintain consumption and capital accumulation, because it stimulates the economy and could lead to social progress and the
development of new technology. According to Bellamy Foster (2002) some economists believes that “if natural resources could be replaced “there is simply no problem” (Ibid.:10) and that economic growth leads to a cleaner environment. There is also the argument of that the new technologies, which could be developed, possibly could handle the environmental problems of the future. There are other weaknesses to their reasoning, it’s excluding the allocation of land use and the environmental affects, and suggest that humanity with economic growth presumably will be consuming less basic commodities, as agricultural products, and instead use services (Hornborg, 2012:43). Moreover, the economist reasoning may be economically sane and rational, but it cannot be seen as part of a sustainable development due to the lack of sustainability in the other two dimensions (Lewis, 2013; Bellamy Foster, 2002). The strive towards economic growth and higher living standards, in today’s terms, is not possible to achieve for the growing global human population without further environmental damage, based on the assumption of the biophysical systems carrying capacity (Brown, 2007: 5-6, 13-14; Wilk, 2002:5). The consumer capitalistic culture, with the “goals” of eternal growth and progress, is an infinite system that bases itself on a finite system (the nature), and it can never be seen as part of a sustainable development as it degrades the environment (Lewis, 2013; Marx, 1995; Bellamy Foster, 2002). There are many suggestions from the scientific community that the present consumption patterns have to change. However, what is then sustainable consumption and can it be achieved?

I will claim, based on the arguments I have presented previously in this chapter, that a sustainable development is a development that requires the conservation of natural resources and the conservation of ecosystems, its services and biodiversity, even though not ruling out the right to some economic and technological development. It would also be necessary not to restrict the political and human rights of the individual. Sustainable consumption would then require the market to take into account the ecological and social aspects behind a commodity; it can however not restrict the individual consumers’ right of choice. I will introduce you to two definitions of sustainable consumption:

Sustainable consumption is an umbrella term that brings together a number of key issues, such as meeting needs, enhancing quality of life, improving efficiency, minimizing waste, taking a lifecycle perspective and taking into account the equity dimension; integrating these component parts in the central question of how to provide the same or better services to meet the basic requirements of life and the aspiration for improvement, for both current and future generations, while continually reducing environmental damage and the risk to human health (UNEP, 2001 referred to in Barkman, 2014:23).
There is also a shorter definition which I find useful to the subject:

Sustainable consumption is consumption that supports the ability of current and future generations to meet their material and other needs, without causing irreversible damage to the environment or loss of function in natural systems (OCSC, 2000 referred to in Barkman, 2014:23).

I will focus my study in the next part of this chapter to investigate what could be seen as a sustainable commodity based on the environmental, social and economic aspects of production, distribution and consumption.

What makes a Commodity Sustainable?

There are many factors of the sustainability of a commodity, for instance the kind and amount and what kind of energy is used in production and the method of production, does it use harmful substances and if, how is the substances being taken care of. How does it affect the ecosystem and biodiversity? How are the working conditions for the workers? Surely, there are many questions that need to be answered in order to be able to assess the sustainability of a commodity. Transportation is another factor. What means of transportation and how far has the commodity been transported? Bellamy Foster (2002:10, 81) argues that the exploitation of natural resources is also the exploitation of other humans somewhere, as humans are part of nature. Consumption patterns in the developed countries sometimes affect people in less developed countries, where the production of imported commodities are occurring (Stoehrel, 2013). Hence, this would mean that the consequences are not directly visible and the consumer not able to notify the causes of its own consumption. I will discuss these issues below, but since my study of focus is on information and possibilities to consume sustainable I will not do any deeper analysis of the matter. However I find it important to discuss it briefly to explain why there is a need to think about the ecological consequences caused by production and distribution of commodities and what methods of production would be preferable for my interpretation of sustainable development and consumption.

There are methods of productions which are known to be especially harmful to the environment in various ways. I will focus my discussion on commodities which could be expected to be bought by consumers in everyday life at the grocery store, mostly because this was the kind of commodities the interviewed individuals reflected about under the performed interviews. As I’ve mentioned previously, the kind of energy used in production would have
an influence on the sustainability of the commodity, however information of what kind of energy used in the production of a commodity would sometimes be hard to know to the consumer, therefore I will leave this out of my discussion. I will instead focus on two industries which are known to have consequences for the environment and I will compare methods of production to investigate the better ecological choice.

Agriculture is one anthropogenic activity which is known to affect the environment. I want to briefly compare the environmental consequences from organic and conventional crop production and meat production. In conventional crop production there are used chemical pesticides and fertilizers which are not used in organic agriculture. Chemical pesticides and fertilizers are affecting the environment through the exposure to the workers, the mining for minerals and production of the fertilizers, leaching of minerals from the soil and in a long term perspective, erodes the soil (Wright & Boorse, 2011; Barkman, 2014:43). The conventional method is often growing large monocultures limiting the biodiversity and making the ecosystems resilience weaker against environmental change (Mori, Furukawa & Sasaki, 2013). Organic agriculture rests on other principles, there are used only organic/biological pesticides and fertilizers and the maintenance of the soil is largely depending on crop rotation (Mäder, Fliessbach, Dubois, Gunst, Fries & Niggli: 2001:1694). Instead of limiting or lessening the biodiversity, organic methods of agriculture rather sustains and possibly even extends biodiversity. However, organic agriculture is likely to give lower crop yield and is known to be more labor intensive than conventional methods (Mäder, et al., 2001:1694).

The production of meat is also known to be affecting the environment. There is the issue of animal treatment and animal welfare; however I would like to put focus on other issues, which is the large input of other resources to make animal products and the use of antibiotics in the process of production (Wright & Boorse, 2011:303). The preventively use of antibiotics in combination with industrial high intensive methods for keeping livestock, can result in mutation of bacteria; the creation of resistant bacteria and also viruses such as the bird and swine flu (Wright & Boorse, 2011:303; Dauvergne, 2008:151-152). The production of meat is also dependent on large water inputs (Barkman, 2014:43). There are even health issues with meat consumption, too large a consumption of meat could lead to health problems such as cancer, heart disease and even type 2 diabetes (National Food Agency Sweden, 2014:31-33) and the containing of antibiotics in the meat can give rise to allergies (IFPRI, 1999:3, 50-51). There is a need to limit the consumption of meat for many reasons, at the same time there is a growing population in the developing world which do crave higher consumption of meat,
however the methods they are using; where the animals are held outside and roaming free and the manure is used in agriculture, are far more sustainable than industrial methods in the way it mimics nature, although the soil would be degraded if overgrazed (Wright and Boorse, 2011:300-303). Having said that the consumption rate of meat is proposing a health problem to the human population in developed countries, I will claim that instead of using crops as input into meat and milk production, much of the crops could serve directly as food to humans, for instance corn and soy beans (Young & Pellet, 1994:1203). To eat less meat and more crops would be preferable out of perspective on resources, ecological sustainability and human health (Baroni, Cenci, Tettamanti & Berati, 2007:282-283). One could also weigh in the length of transportation and lower amounts of food waste by more planned purchases (Swedish Board of Agriculture, 2011). There are of course many other commodities which are leaving large footprints on the environment; however I don’t feel there is a need to present them all.

To clarify what could be seen as more sustainable in the case of the presented commodities, the most ecologically rational decision when purchasing commodities would be to choose an organic and/or locally produced product and limit the consumption of meat (Baroni, et al., 2007:282-283). If it’s not possible to get a commodity produced locally, to choose a commodity which is labeled organic or/and socially fair would be preferable from an ecological and social perspective (Hudson & Hudson, 2003). Moreover, it wouldn’t be possible to discuss sustainable consumption without including the factor that there is a need to consume lesser, or at least mitigate food waste (Swedish Board on Agriculture, 2011).

Essence

It is apparent that humanity is affecting the environment all over the planet. Our economy and culture are dependent on the abundance of recourses in nature to continue the production of commodities, for household consumption. The consumption patterns and striving towards higher material well-being is contributing to climate change, which imposes massive ecological, social and even economic problems to the human population. In my next chapter I will discuss how the individual forms own decisions and by which factors the choices are influenced.
Sociocultural Perspectives of Consumption

Even though scientists are alarmed about the consequences from contemporary unsustainable consumption and production, the consumption patterns does not seem to be changing. This is explained by some researchers with that the capitalistic consumer culture has set very strong roots within us (Lewis, 2013; Bellamy Foster, 2002). How did this consumer culture come to be so deeply rooted within us?

I want to turn the thoughts of Marx to help explain the needs and demand that is behind today’s consumption and materialism. Marx uses the term *commodity fetishism*, which he applies to the human relation to money and commodities (Marx, 1995). The term *fetishism* goes back to when the Portuguese encountered the religions in Africa, where the people worshiped material things (Masuzawa, 2000:243). The Portuguese called the worshiping *feitiço*, which means “charm” or “amulet”, and the word can be tracked to the Latin word *Factitius* meaning “manufactured”, “enchanted” or “magically artful” (Ibid.:243). We in fact give material things both monetary and personal value, but according to Marx, due to fetishism the consequences of a commodity are not visible to the consumers (Marx, 1995).

This brings me to Georg Simmel, even if his view on “the metropolitan individual” was very simplified, predicted that the “money economy” was going to dominate the reasons of the modern individual, and that city-life offered a whole new frame to individuality and anonymity, than the rural communities (Simmel, 1976). Simmel did also note that the personal contact between producer and consumer disappeared through the introduction of middle hands, which would lessen the consumers understanding of the production, allowing commodity fetishism. The thoughts of both Marx and Simmel are helpful to understand that the force behind consumption is cultural and steered by the motive of the individual to express their individuality: by the choice of clothes, technology, living area, food habits and so on.

Compared to the days of both Simmel and Marx, we are now having an extremely differentiated market with multiple brands and products (Hamilton, 2010) and the fetishism of commodities constitutes a problem, not only in our environment but also to the human civilization as the “material consumption has to stop” (Hornborg, 2012:141) to achieve the global goal of sustainable development. The problem however, is to be seen as a cultural one rather than blamed on the individual and to solely emphasize on the individuals without including the cultural factors would be wrong. Moreover, as I have written previously, if
consumers do not have access to enough information around sustainable consumption or the sustainability of a commodity, could one really blame the consumer for acting unsustainable or irrational? I would say no. The fetishism of commodities can only be present if the ecological and social consequences are not shown to the consumers; if they are most consumers would apply a moral dimension to their consumption (Hornborg, 2012:29, 32). I will develop my thought of that the consumers are not to be blamed, if lacking necessary knowledge and information or if getting contradictory messages of environmental consequences by media (Lewis, 2013; Oreskes & Conway, 2010), in the next part of this chapter.

I will now return to the topic of progress and development, I find it useful for my discussion to question the term of well-being. As I mentioned earlier, some scientist today are stating that the way our culture look at progress, well-being and development, is not necessarily progress in means of a better life quality for the global population as a whole (Stoehrel, 2013; Lewis, 2013; Brown, 2007). Progress is measured today foremost in BNP per capita; however this measure is not saying anything about how resources are distributed amongst the inhabitants of a country (Stoehrel, 2013; Brown, 2007). When discussing progress it would be necessary to discuss the question of well-being, which contemporary meaning I will argue to be strongly associated to material value and even sometimes referred to as material well-being. The term could also mean to be happy, comfortable or healthy (Oxford Dictionaries, 2014). Well-being is somewhat interconnected to the term standard, which is also a diffuse term and explained as the ruling norm (NE, 2014). The term standard could refer to something used or accepted as average and normal, or as a certain level of quality (Oxford Dictionaries, 2014), making it subordinate to its subject. This would make the individual perception of well-being dependent of the social structures and norms in the country of living but also individual preferences. I find it interesting for my study to look on how individuals perceive well-being. Do they perceive it merely as a measure of material standard, quality of life or is well-being to them reached at the fulfillment of the human basic needs? Human basic needs can be explained as our biological needs, as food and water, but also social needs as human rights, for example well-being, the right of expression and free speech, safety, religious freedom and even in some cases the right to a good environment (Birnie, Boyle & Redgewell, 2009:115.ff). The term living standard, often referred to as the “individual material standards”, is a mostly economical term, defined as the individual economic possibility to buy certain goods or services (NE, 2014), however it says nothing of the quality of the commodities and services bought and used. The general definitions of these
terms in the west, seems to be highly connected to economical and material perspectives of living.

The question of well-being and economic growth has been researched, and there are economists who are claim there to be a strong relation between extended growth and higher well-being (Sacks, Stevenson & Wolfers, 2012). Their arguments for the relation between economic growth and happiness are the following; richer citizens are happier than poorer citizens, richer countries are happier than poorer countries and they claim that the relation between well-being and income to be a linear function (Sacks, Stevenson & Wolfers, 2012:1181). On the contrary, other scientists have proved that there is little evidence that, in a long term perspective, increased monetary wealth lead to happiness (Lewis, 2013:79ff). One could say that economic growth are increasing the feeling of well-being until a certain point of economic stability, for instance to satisfy our basic needs, as food on the table, roof over our heads and access to healthcare would increase our feeling of well-being (Ibid.). Another interesting view of the social aspects is that there are those scientists who claim that a growing economy and the growing outbid of different brands and products are making out a source for human stress (Lewis, 2013), one would then be able to argue that at some point economic growth would instead lead to less well-being. If looking at the developed countries, there are overall more individuals who suffer from stress and weight related sickness, than in the less developed countries (Brunner, Chandola & Marmot, 2007).

Having discussed the capitalistic cultural view of well-being as material and optional views of well-being, I will continue to discuss the sociocultural factors which constitute the frames of understanding and on what basis consumers make choices.

Influential Factors of Individual Decision Making

There are many influential factors to what makes a consumer buy a certain product or commodity. I will focus my study on the factors of social and societal structures as well as knowledge and information and how it affects the choice of the consumer. In Illustration 2 on the bottom of next page, I have created a simplified model over the factors which I will find useful to discuss in this chapter in relation to consumer choices. The model shows the two head categories of factors, societal structures and knowledge and information. There is some kind of exchange of between the two head categories, they would affect each other based on that gained knowledge can change social and societal structures and the latter can stir the
former in preferred directions (Engdahl & Larsson, 2011:75). Further I would like to recognize that these two head categories contain different sub factors. As social structures I would recognize norms, government and individual lifestyle (Engdahl & Larsson, 2011:68,70; Barkman, 2014). Sub factors to knowledge and information is individual experience, education and information channels, as different media channels (Lewis, 2013:70ff; Engdahl & Larsson, 2011:68ff; Barkman, 2014). I did add ethic as a sub factor to my model and placed it between the two head categories, as ethics could be seen as being formed out of both knowledge and social structures.

**III.2.** A simplified model of the factors that can influence the individuals’ choices. There is an exchange of influence between the Social structures and Knowledge and information. Hence, social structures can influence knowledge and information flows and gained information and knowledge can influence the social structures.

What must be understood is that human beings are likely to fall in to habitual behavior. However, humans are attributed to be able to think rational about its choices (Engdahl & Larsson, 2011:67). There are different ways for people to think rationally, if the choice they are making are rational or not depends on what the person wants to achieve and believe is important and how they reflect on the information accessible before making a choice (Ibid, 2011:67, 69). The model (III. 2) I presented could be seen as showing the spheres which would influence the individual choice. The individual can only act rational and use reason to make decisions based on the frames of its understanding and knowledge (Engdahl & Larsson, 2011:69). For instance, if a person lacks knowledge on the effects of climate change and its
causes, the person wouldn’t be able to include the risks in its consideration of what decision to make. Likely if a person doesn’t know the consequences from a production line behind a commodity and the environmental consequences it wouldn’t be able to include that in the choice of commodities. Having it said that knowledge is an important factor to the choice of the consumer, I will focus more on the knowledge and information base than on the social structures influence over the individual choice of the consumer.

Knowledge, Information and its Channels

What is knowledge? The definition of knowledge is it is “facts, information, and skills acquired through experience or education; the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject” (Oxford dictionaries, 2014). The access to information and knowledge is important as a resource in the matter of action (Engdahl & Larsson, 2011:35, 48, 75). Moreover, new knowledge and experiences can change the interpretation of the world, adding to the frame of understanding and change the choices of an agent (the consumer) (Engdahl & Larsson, 2011:35, 48, 75).

Barkman (2014) writes about barriers against and bridges toward sustainable consumption. He states that there are four different consumer types in the society. He argues that consumers which are capable critics do not need any bridges since they do already consume commodities based on the level of sustainability (Ibid, 2014:131). Resource weak critics could need bridges as a good outbid of sustainable commodities if they feel that it’s effective and that it is not too expensive (Barkman, 2014:131). The conditional consumers seem to engage if there is a good outbid, if others are engaged and if they feel that the economical sacrifice is not too large (Ibid). Barkman states that knowledge and education has a role in if the conditional and skeptic consumers could be engaged in sustainable consumption. The biggest barrier for the skeptics to engage, seem to be that they do not believe others to engage in more sustainable consumption and that it won’t make any difference if they do it themselves (Barkman, 2014:70,131). To all four types of consumers, the engagement could be explained by the simple model, “motivation + resources + possibility = engagement” (Ibid.:130).

Barkman states that there are studies which imply that the consumers are socially bound to the commodities they choose and could be seen as partly responsible for the conditions around the commodity (Barkman, 2014:42) even if the consequences might be unknown to
them. On the other hand, Stoehrel (2013), Lewis (2013) and Oreskes and Conway (2010) suggests that the media has a critical impact on the way citizens’ interpreter the need for changed consumption patterns and also the threat imposed by environmental change. However, there are helpful measures, such as environmental or fair-trade labeling of products, which could make it easier for the consumers to choose the more environmentally sustainable products.

Are Consumption Patterns Changing Toward Sustainability?

This thesis highlights that there is a need to make ecologically rational decisions regarding consumption. Some consumers however are already engaging in different ways of more sustainable consumption patterns. Some studies are pointing towards a more environmentally concerned younger generation and consumer engagement in green or ethical consumerism (WPS, 2013). Hamilton (2010:571) argues that consumers are the “dynamic force” behind production and consumption and have more influence over the market than they might think that they have. Further he argues that consumers don’t know what they want and that takes its expression in fetishism of commodities (Ibid.: 573). On the contrary, Hussein (2012:111,112) mean that consumers has used their voices and has engaged in different ethical consumerism for a long time. He then lists some different categories of active consumer strategies. Ethical consumerism is a broad term, which could be used when the consumers bases its choice on at least some ethical aspects of consumption and production. Clean-hands ethical consumerism is when the consumer does not want to be related to a commodity, but not necessary aiming to change others behavior (Hussein, 2012:113). Unmediated ethical consumerism is, when the consumer is changing its own behavior to affect a direct cause, as using a hybrid car to emit less carbon dioxide. Social change ethical consumerism is when the consumer aims to change economic incentives and the behavior of other individuals (Ibid, 2012:112). Green consumerism is when the consumer bases its choices on at least some environmental or social aspects (Muldoon, 2006:1). The different strategies could be expressed through “buycotts” and “boycotts”. Hussein is pointing out that labeling of commodities, for example Fair Trade and Rainforest Alliance, can help to get consumers aware and get them engaged in some kind of ethical consumption (Hussein, 2012:113,114). However, some environmentalist argues that
green and ethical consumerism is just another market trend and merely a part of the
capitalistic system (Muldoon, 2006:13).

There is quantitative research on the subject of consumer attitudes, willingness, and
knowledge about sustainable consumption, in terms of ethical and green consumption from
developed countries. Two recent poll studies in Sweden, with 2000 and 1148 respondents, on
Fair Trade and green labeling, showed that the female consumers said to be more positive and
trusting towards these kinds of labeling, but in reality, they did not buy more labeled goods
than the men (TNS Sifo, 2013; WSP, 2013). The poll study on the inhabitants of the city of
Malmö, Sweden, with 1148 respondents, showed that the consumers had a general knowledge
of different labeling (WSP, 2013). The age group most positive to consuming Fair Trade or
green commodities were the one of ages between 25 and 34. Parents were the most positive to
use the second hand market (Ibid.). The three biggest reasons to consume the labeled goods
were of consideration for the environment, awareness of what one eats, and for reasons of
justice. Only 1% of the respondents replied that they chose labeled products due to marketing
(Ibid.). This might be a question of how to market or inform about environmentally labeled
goods in a better way, making them visible for more consumers.

Other studies have looked at the attitudes towards Fair-trade labeling. It has been proven
that consumers are willing to pay a little bit more for Fair trade, cause it gives them a good
feeling (Reinstein & Song, 2012:213; Richardson & Stähler, 2014:447,460). The market for
environmentally labeled product has grown in the last decade and since it’s still a growing
market (Reinstein & Song, 2012:213-214); it might be that we are heading towards a more
sustainable direction of consumption.

My two first chapters have discussed the sustainability problem with consumption,
consumer choice, knowledge and information and previous research of consumers’
willingsness and attitudes. I will in the next chapter present the interview study I have made to
answer my questions of research.

Essence

The consumption patterns of today are formed from human culture and the perception of well-
being as linked to material standards. To understand consumers’ choice we must understand
that their choices are based on many factors. These factors can be social structures, such as
norms, trends, economy, choice of lifestyle and the individual perception of well-being. Other
factors could be informational factors, individual experiences, education and information received by mass media.

There are different types of consumer types and strategies, where consumers are more or less likely to engage in sustainable consumption and could do so for different reasons.
What do the Consumers Think?

Having concluded out of the two previous chapters that: (1) the consumption patterns constitute a threat to the environment and society, (2) that the present consumption patterns has to be changed to work towards a global sustainable development and (3) that consumers bases their consumption choices on many influential factors; I searched to find out the attitudes and thoughts among consumers in Scania, Sweden. Since most previous research on consumer willingness and attitudes has been quantitative, I chose to make qualitative semi-structural interviews. I interviewed 10 individuals living in urban, suburban and rural communities. The attitudes did not visibly differ between the individuals living in urban areas and the ones living in suburban and rural areas, implying that there is little or no difference in purchase behavior based on area type of living among the interviewed consumers. The selection of interview persons was to be random and of mixed ages, however when asking people, the most willing age group was the one between the ages of 20-35. This might depend on that this age group has shown in previous research to be most willing toward sustainable consumption patterns (WPS, 2013). I asked random people I met outside of grocery stores and on the streets in different communities in Scania. The questions for my interview study were:

- How is their knowledge of the environment and environmental consequences from consumption?

- How do consumers perceive well-being and good living standards?

- Do the consumers feel they got enough knowledge about their consumption and how do they experience the access to information?

- If the consumers think information could be better, how could it be better and make it easier for them to make sustainable choices in everyday life?

- Do the consumers add ethical concerns or arguments to consumption?
One should be aware that there could be a difference between the attitudes towards sustainable consumption and actual actions of the individual (Barkman, 2014:12). The consumers which participated in this study will remain anonymous. The interviews were performed in Swedish and have been translated into English for this thesis.

To analyze the collected empirical material and categorize different attitudes and knowledge among consumers, I have used clusters of consumers borrowed from Barkman's quantitative poll study (2014), on environmentally and fair trade labeled commodities. He has set up four clusters of consumers and their characteristics, which he argues, is possible to use in qualitative consumer research as well. I will present the four clusters with its characteristics below:

**The Critics** – Contain two subgroups, the *capable critics* and the *resource-weak critics*. The two groups of critics generally have a green attitude and good knowledge about sustainable consumption, but not always the resources to consume sustainable, which then makes them a resource weak critic. Resources could be money, time or access to information or poor outbid of sustainable commodities.

**Conditional Consumers** – Bases purchases on conditions, for ex. price, quality, social or/and environmental factors, access to sustainable products or certain situations ex. political and ethical situations, expressed through “boycotts” and “buycotts”. Political, social or environmental reasons could influence consumers’ choices.

**The Skeptics** - Could engage in sustainable consumption but feels skeptical toward the effects from the own actions. There can also be doubts about whether the environmentally labeled products actually are more sustainable than conventional products. Often the skeptics lack the knowledge of sustainable consumption or they do not think that it is an important issue. Sometimes the skeptics participate in sustainable consumption without having a green attitude or knowledge of sustainable consumption. Barkman (2014) explains this with that the outbid of environmentally or fair-trade labeled products might be particularly good in their area of living.

Further, if there are consumers which engage in some kind of sustainable consumption, I will try to analyze what kind of consumption strategy they apply with the help of the list of different consumer strategies I presented in *Is consumption patterns changing toward sustainability?*. The study aims to take a closer look at how the consumers experience their
own knowledge and the information concerning consumption and the possibility to consume more sustainable.

To know more than one knows of Environmental Consequences

Many of the interviewed persons stated that they did not take any particular interests in the environmental matters of consumption, some of them even claimed to know little about environmental problems. However, I must say I find the knowledge of environmental problems to be generally good amongst the ten individuals, even if they did not think so for themselves.

I started the interviews with asking the interviewed persons about their knowledge of the concept sustainable development. Most of the consumers had never heard of the concept or at least did not remember it. A 29 year old unemployed man, and conditional consumer, stated “[…] I have heard of the concept, but I am not informed”. The man did admit he might have a vague memory of talking about it at school but he didn’t feel like he knew the meaning of the concept. A 53 year old man said he was not sure that he ever heard of the concept, at least he was not sure about the meaning of the concept and asked “development of what?”. There were also a few who knew a little bit more of the concept, but felt unsatisfied of the explanation of the concept and the political discussion occurring around the concept. A woman, 28 years old, and a capable critic, expressed:

Is there any clear example of sustainable development? Feels to me it is merely politician’s talk, like with nuclear power, some politics say it is sustainable and some that it is not. So what is it, sustainable or not?

To a male 27 years old university student in peace and conflict studies and also a capable critic, the concept was known. According to him he did not come in to contact with the concept at school, but became known to him due to his personal interests in society and environment. To him, sustainable development is to change the societal structures which are clear in his answer to my question:

I personally believe that a lot in society has to change into a more collective form of entrepreneurship and those technologies which are better for the environment and information should be available in an open source form for all, to be able to achieve a sustainable development.
A 24 year old woman and a conditional consumer said that she was uncertain of the definition of sustainable development. I asked her what she thought to be sustainable development and got the answer:

That would be a development in society that saves and maintains its natural resources, so that there can be a future. There has to be a longtime perspective and we need to stop thinking out of a short term economical perspective.

Even if she felt unsure of the definition of the concept, her own interpretation are close to the ones I have presented in the section Sustainable development for consumers. She did also show good knowledge on environmental issues:

I know of climate change, and that acid rain was a big problem when I was growing up and I’ve heard a lot about it. There are more problems today as humans alter the environment and even alter the natural behavior of animals; we are disturbing the biological balance in nature.

Although not many of the interviewed individuals felt familiar with the concept of sustainable development, or claimed to know little of the environment, I judge the environmental knowledge to be generally good amongst all the interviewed consumers; since they talked of many environmental issues along the course of the interviews. Everyone talked of climate change as a problem, except for one 53 year old man which had a very clear skepticism against climate change:

Everyone talks about how the climate has changed and how it has become warmer, and it has, but it has always been this way. The weather and climate goes in cycles on this planet and I think that it is a natural thing.

The man uses the one very argument often used by skeptics against climate change, as caused by anthropological activities, that climate changes has occurred before. His answer implicates that there still is skepticism towards climate change as anthropologically caused. Other interviewed persons were clearly aware of climate change as a global problem. A man, 26 years old and a conditional consumer working in the transportation business said:

I know about the global warming, that the glaciers are melting because of emissions from industries. Also the cows are emitting a lot of methane. We’re burning stuff that shouldn’t be burned, totally unnecessary.
However when asked if he think of the environmental consequences when picking out commodities he said:

No, I don’t, or at least I don’t think I do. But I will rather buy Swedish strawberries than for example Polish strawberries. I believe it tastes better and I think it is unnecessary transportation to import commodities, which we can produce ourselves. I also prefer Swedish mushrooms. With some commodities it’s harder to think that way - we can’t really produce coffee in Sweden.

The man makes his statements based on his knowledge gained from the transportation business and he told me about how a commodity is produced in one place, packed at another and then transported back again. He also explained that where he works, they never drive with empty trailers, and even if the man did not think that he thought of environmental issues, he spoke of it out of his own knowledge and experiences from the transportation business. The 29 year old man and conditional consumer said:

It is not all about climate change, it concern everything, like for example our source of energy. Why use nuclear power when we can use power from the sun, the water and the wind? Nuclear power could be very dangerous to both present and future generations. Then there is the air pollution.

Even if all interviewed individuals were aware of climate change there was different levels of understanding climate change. A woman, 23 years old and a resource weak critic, said about environmental changes, “When it comes to the global changes to me it is the greenhouse effect”, knowing that the greenhouse effect is involved, but not familiar with the relation between global warming and the greenhouse effect. However, when asked about what she knows of the environmental consequences from production and consumption, she was clearly aware of social injustices that may occur in other parts of the world.

[…] it is not all right that a whole village should be sprouted with pesticides just so that we can have cheap bananas. It is terrible, but everyone knows it.

Already in this early state of the interview with the woman I felt there was this sense of hopelessness about the subject when after the former statement the woman says “in the best of worlds we wouldn’t have child labor, pesticides and so on – unfortunately we’re not living in that world”. The attitude represented in her statement was something that I took notice of in other interviews as well. The interviewed person seems to doubt their own possibility to
influence the market into a more sustainable direction, a barrier which Barkman (2014:131) also recognizes.

What is Necessary to Experience Well-being?

The second question to the interview persons to describe what well-being is to them. The answers were very similar among the consumers and showed that well-being primarily is interpreted as “to have enough” and all the interviewed individuals brought up the same criteria’s for the experience of well-being. A 21 year old female capable critic answered that to her well-being mean to:

[…] feel good about life and yourself” and to be able to feel that way she said to need “a job and to have good company and friends and I believe that the connection to other people is more important than material stuff.

A 26 year old man, working in transportation and a conditional consumer said that to him well-being is “to have a job, a home, a wife and money”, when asked why he stated that it was required for some stability in life. A 28 year old man and capable critic, answered that he “do not believe there is any model for well-being but one doesn’t have to live in abundance”. The skeptical man, whose opinions and attitude differed most from the others, did however have the same view on well-being as the others:

Well-being to me is to have it good, to have roof over one’s head, food on the table and maybe some kind of hobby or interest. To have enough to live plus a little extra to do something fun with.

There was little variation in the answers, although some of the individuals thought that it was a hard question to answer. The 24- year old woman and conditional consumer thought that:

[…] it’s a rather difficult question, but I would say to be happy, to have enough to survive and be happy, to feel like I belong somewhere and have a purpose and to be good at something. It can also be personal development, more in a spiritual way than material. I also believe one need variation in life.

The 23- year old woman s well-being is “[…] everything, to feel good, to eat well, get exercise, body and soul. You could say good health”. The answers from the interviewed individuals showed that they did not look at well-being in a material sense but rather that its meaning is to be able to satisfy basic needs and not live on the limit. A 34- year old woman
and resource weak critic said that wellbeing is to be happy and to have good company and that “what is the meaning of having great wealth and a big house if you are alone or unhealthy”.

I believe out of the answers given by the individuals that it would be wise to make a distinction between what constitutes well-being and what constitutes material well-being. The individuals do not primarily make connections between well-being and wealth, but rather well-being and good health and fulfilled basic needs. Their answers were more cohesive with the research on well-being that draws the conclusion that well-being has nothing to do with wealth after a certain point, (Lewis, 2013: 79ff).

How can Consumption Patterns be changed into a more Sustainable Direction?

Out of my interviews I concluded that out of ten interviewed there were three which could be classified as conditional consumers and there was only one skeptic among the interviewed consumers. Four individuals could be classified as capable critics as they already engage in sustainable consumption in many ways, applied ethical aspects to their consumption and had good environmental knowledge. There was two interviewed individuals shown to be resource weak critics, showing knowledge and interest in sustainable consumption but for some reason did not feel they always have the possibility to engage in sustainable consumption. Mainly the reason for this was due to personal income, outbid and presentation at the store and limited time to plan purchases. The 23-year old woman, which was a resource weak critic and working in healthcare, that she always buy organic labeled products when shopping groceries to the workplace, “because they have it as a policy and time off-set” but when shopping for her own household she did not feel she had enough time to plan the purchases. I asked the individuals what was important to them, when picking out commodities for the own household and the 23 year old woman answered:

When buying for my own household it is mostly the price that matters. I should probably search to find out if a commodity is locally produced or not, but I do not. It would take too much of my time to look on every commodity I buy in the store.

There was ethical concerns for other humans expressed; being negatively affected elsewhere in the world from consumption in the developed world (Stoehrel, 2013; Brown, 2007). There were also ethical issues expressed by some of the consumers about animal welfare. I asked
the individuals if they feel there are any particular commodities which they find to be better for the environment. A 21 year old woman, a capable critic expressed that she felt that organic meat was better, because:

 [...] normal meat contains additives like growth hormones that they give to the animals, it’s not good for the animals or humans.

Her answer shows concern for both animal welfare as well as the own health. I asked her what was most important to her when picking out groceries and her answer showed that she related good quality to organic commodities:

Sometimes it’s the price that settles it, but it depends on the commodity. I sometimes buy organic label commodities, rather its good quality than low price. There are no additives and I think it tastes better. I believe it’s healthier, for example I always buy organic peanut butter, olive oil and apple cider vinegar.

The woman clearly engages in sustainable consumption, but she did not do it out of concern for the environment directly, but first and foremost from concerns for the own health. The 27 year old man, and capable critic, answered at the question if he thought of some commodities as more sustainable:

I am a vegan out of animal rights motives and also because of environmental reasons. There is no reason to eat meat every day. I also prefer organic and fair trade products. However I feel like as a student, that I don’t always have the financials to choose the commodity I would prefer to buy.

A 24 year old woman and conditional consumer said that as unemployed she had to base her purchases mainly on the price but that some low-price products made her suspicious of the production. With some commodities she did however made choices based on other factors shown in her answer:

I rather buy organic eggs and milk, because I don’t like how the animals are treated in conventional production.

Her answer gave express for clean-hands ethical consumption as she would not like to have any participation in the conventional treatment of animals.

Many did name quality in front on quantity, which shown in a statement from a 29- year old man and conditional consumer:
I prefer quality over quantity, but quality costs. Quantity does not need to cost much. I would like to buy more organically products because I think it is “cleaner” but sometimes it is a big difference in the price.

In likeness to the capable critic 21 year old woman, he does think that organic commodities are preferable; however he does not feel he has the personal economy to always buy organic products.

I asked the consumers if they thought they had enough information on the environmental circumstances about commodities. All of the consumers answered that they did not think they did. The 53 year old man and skeptic answered that he did not look for environmental information but he prefer products produced in Sweden. I asked him why and he answered:

It has been produced in Sweden, and I feel like I know what it is.

Mod. Is it because of shorter transportation you prefer Swedish commodities?

It’s no guarantee that just because a commodity has been produced in Sweden, the transportation is shorter. They transport commodities here and there all over countries. And think about it, for an example, why do we transport Swedish meat when we are importing meat from other countries at the same time.

This man had worked in transportation business, in likeness to the 26 year old man, and they both gave the same picture of how the transportation of commodities works.

I asked the interviewed individuals if they thought they had changed their consumption patterns if they had access to more information on the environmental consequences around production and consumption. The 21 year old girl who turned out to be e capable critic answered:

If it’s possible to help a little bit, I would want to do that. I would certainly make other choices. Of course the price would also be a factor. However, some organic commodities are cheaper than the alternative.

The price of organic commodities was brought up by many of the individuals, some said that they thought it was more expensive, and some that it was not always more expensive than the conventional alternative, but the price was a clear factor in their decisions of commodities and products. Even the skeptic told that he probably would change his habits if he had more information, but at the same time claimed not to look for environmentally labeled products or information. The 26 year old man who works in transportation said that:

I buy commodities because I think it tastes good. But of course, if a specific commodity has been causing great damage, I think it’s unnecessary to sponsor it.
His answer shows a tendency for clean-hands consumerism and that he possibly could engage in boycotts. Most of the consumers said that they thought themselves to change their purchase behavior but once again the price was mentioned as a factor to their decisions. The 23 year old woman answered:

Yes, I think I would have. But the information can’t play on people’s feelings. Make the “bad commodities” more expensive and lower the price on the good ones.

Almost everyone said that they came to think of organic and/or fair-trade products as better for the environment or their own health. Most of the interviewed individuals wanted to know more about the circumstances around which the commodities, especially food, are produced, if not for the ecological or social consequences, but out of worries of the own health. However, there were also expressed doubts of the creditability of the labeling by some of the individuals. The skeptic did not trust in environmental labeling and expressed that:

I don’t trust in labeling, I feel it is very much going on behind the scenes, especially in the food industry. I don’t trust a commodity to be organic or Swedish, just because the label says so.

He did express that he feel confident that governments does not allow commodities possibly dangerous to humans to be sold. This was also expressed by the 29 year old conditional consumer.

The consumers did also have many ideas on how to make it easier for consumers to consume more sustainable. Some of the ideas were to make an environmentally labeled section in the stores with only environmental labeled products and to register information, on the line of production and length and method of transportation for commodities, and collect the information on for instance a website with a search function. Such collected information could be very informative, but would certainly require a lot of administration and would probably be expensive, and the question of how to administrate and finance such an informative website, I will leave uninvestigated. Other suggestions were to have short informal breaks on television instead of commercials and reversed labeling and large informative texts, as example, “This product contains preservatives”. Even the consumers which already did engage in sustainable consumption did express a wish to make it easier for consumers to engage themselves by more accessible information.
Essence

The knowledge on environmental consequences from consumption among the consumers was generally good, even though only a few felt familiar with the concept of sustainable development. It was clear that the consumers mostly thought of well-being as being connected to good health, accommodation, the fulfillment of basic needs and social interaction. None of the individuals mentioned economic wealth as a factor in well-being. All four types of consumers were recognized and the use of different consumer strategies was expressed. Most of the interviewed consumers showed willingness toward more sustainable consumption patterns, both in their attitude on organic, fair-trade, locally produced commodities and their willingness to receive more information on consumption.
Discussion

I found the interviews to be very interesting and in this last chapter I will answer my questions of research and discuss my results based on the answers of the consumers and read literature.

- **How is their knowledge of the environment and environmental consequences from consumption?**

My research showed that most of the interviewed consumers were not familiar with the concept of sustainable development. When asked if they were, only 4 out of 10 interviewed persons felt familiar with the concept. However, when asked what they know of environmental change, all of the interviewed persons showed more knowledge; at some point even more had more knowledge than they thought themselves to have. Climate change was mentioned by all individuals with different levels of environmental knowledge, and with only one exception there were no skeptics of climate change, its causes and its consequences.

Most of the interviewed consumers turned out to be resource weak critics; however it was not the knowledge base that seemed to be restricting them to consume more sustainable. I draw the conclusion from my interviews that the main experienced obstacle to the interviewed consumers for engaging in sustainable consumption is their experienced availability of time to plan and carry out their purchases as well as some of them experience environmentally labeled product to be either badly visible in the store or more expensive in relation to conventional alternatives. This result has its likenesses to Barkman’s conclusions; that there are experienced barriers to the possibility to consume sustainably.

- **How do consumers perceive well-being?**

I spent much of my thesis discussing and questioning the terms well-being, development and progress, and I feel there is a great need to challenge the contemporary meaning of the term. Well-being often being the reason to why we should strive towards continued economic growth even though this economic growth in many ways are shown to rather limit the real possibilities to a sustainable development. The answers I was given by my interview subjects of the meaning of well-being, showed more to be cohesive with the view of well-being as
being at good mental and physical health and have the possibility to fulfill at least the basic human needs, that including democratic and social rights as well as the possibility to some form of leisure activity. None of the subjects drew parallels between great wealth and well-being. I feel the view of well-being as materialistic is more applicable to businesses than among ordinary consumers and citizens.

- **Do the consumers feel they got enough knowledge about their consumption and how do they experience the access to information?**

All of the consumers stated that they did not feel that they have access to enough information, although many of them had good environmental knowledge. However, there were consumers which expressed that they did not look for environmental information when making their purchases.

- **If they think information could be better, how could it be better and make it easier for the consumers to make sustainable choices in everyday life?**

The interviewed individuals had many ideas on how to make it easier for consumers to engage in some kind of sustainable consumption. One of the most recurring idea from the interviews were to make environmentally labeled product easier to find, the consumers had an idea of grocery stores making special environmentally labeled product section of the store and collect all of the products there. This way the consumers also meant that they wouldn’t have a conventional product on the side, to be able to compare the price and wouldn’t be able to make a decision based on the price difference, if there is one. I would suggest more research on how to motivate consumers to make thoughtful choices based on the environmental consequences of production. As Barkman does (2014), I see environmental labeling as the easiest way for the consumers to judge the sustainability of a commodity. Further they would need to be motivated to want to make the choices based on the sustainability of a commodity. However, to some consumers, the liability of labels was questioned and this could constitute a barrier against more sustainable choices of commodities. Most of the consumers viewed organic and fair-trade as more sustainable, but there was also expressed the willingness to consume more locally to mitigate transports.
Do the consumers add ethical concerns or arguments to consumption?

Many of the interviewed individuals do engage in some kind of ethical or sustainable consumption. This might be that the particular age group which most of the individuals belonged to have a tendency to be more likely to engage in sustainable consumption based on their attitude (WSP, 2013). However, there was little expression for that they engaged in such kind of consumption to force social change, even if Fair-trade products are highly connected to such altruistic motive (Reinstein & Song, 2012). The most common type of expressed ethical consumption was clean-hands ethical consumption, where consumers expressed their dislike for participation in maintaining certain production methods or distribution of commodities, as conventional animal treatment or long transportation distances of commodities. Green ethical consumption was also expressed as many of the consumers bases their choices on some environmental reasons. The consumers all seems to apply some ethical aspect to their consumption, if it’s possible for them to get information about the circumstances around production and distribution. This shows that if consumers do have access to all information, they most certainly apply an ethical dimension to their consumption (Hornborg, 2012:29, 32).
Epilogue

After finishing my study and my three years as a student of Environmental Studies, I feel hopeful about the engagement of individuals toward a more sustainable development. However, I believe that it is not that a simple solution to the problem of consumption. There must be a change in culture and questions of what really constitutes well-being as well as “good living standards”. It is going take some time to make the structural changes necessary to achieve a sustainable development and consumption, but I feel hopeful. I feel hopeful because the consumers proved to add both ethical and environmental aspects to their consumption, although sometimes lacking resources to fully commit to sustainable consumption.

Just before finishing this thesis, I ran into one of the persons I interviewed at the grocery store. He came forward and told me about seeing a documentary about the chemical pesticides and herbicides use in agriculture and especially the fruit industry. He told me that he was chocked by the documentary, and that he now understands the difference between conventional and organically grown agricultural products, and he told me “from now on, I will only buy organic fruit and vegetables”. Whether his action will change upon his newly found knowledge is to be unsaid, but things like these are what make me feel hopeful about that the consumption patterns and productions methods could be changed towards a sustainable level. However there are many changes to be done to change consumption patterns and how to make consumers believe in their knowledge in making their decisions. I also believe that economic incentives such as subventions to organically and local production in combination with more accessible information can make these kind of products more attractive to consumers, and breach the barriers which stands in the way of more sustainable consumption patterns.


WPS. (2013). Grön konsumtion. Kännedom och attitydundersökning för Malmö Miljöförvaltning. (received through mail contact with The environmental management department of Malmö city).
