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Sustainable Consumption

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1 Introduction

The importance of sustainable consumption has been more and more rising over the last decades – in (international) environmental politics as well as for the consumer. In modern and particular Western societies, the consumers are increasingly discovering their potential in participating policies and influencing economic activity through lots of diverse channels, among them the channel of consumption behaviour. The responsibility for sustainable development therefore has been spread over the different levels in the society, including the broad mass of consumers. When consuming, the consumer now has attributed at least a co-responsibility towards sustainability. Consumption is nowadays not only restricted to meet the private needs, but goes beyond as it also regards social justice and the environmental aspects. Overall in Germany, there lies an existing positive trend on the part of environmental awareness. Nevertheless, often there is still an extraordinary gap between existing environmental attitudes and the actual actions towards an environmentally friendly behaviour.

This paper deals with the inclusion of sustainable consumption in everyday life situations and its limitations in this field. It aims to analyze how consumer can actually influence policies and the economy. Besides, the paper will further investigate the gap between an environmental attitude and its actual behaviour, which will be presented with a case study of the Brasserie at the Brandenburg Technical University Cottbus. What are the influencing factors of the final buying decision and how likely are these being altered?

2 Focus of the Analysis

This paper mainly focuses on sustainable consumption in Germany and its recent state or development. The case study of the BTU Cottbus concentrates on the food consumption and thereby rather neglects other topics within the field of sustainable consumption. Areas such as housing, energy, waste etc. cannot be considered as detailed as these topics would outrange my investigation regarding to the pace of my work.

The methodology comprises out of a thoroughful investigation of theoretical scientific paper and case studies. Looking on the development of sustainable consumption in Germany, the main source of information has been generally the Federal Environmental Agency (Umweltbundesamt). Furthermore, I will present my own elaborations. For the case study

that portrays the current situation at the BTU Cottbus an interview with the president of the Student Parliament (STUPA) was the basement for my analysis.

3 Defining Sustainable Consumption

When dealing with sustainable consumption as an environmental topic of political action, it is crucial to define the concept itself with respecting terms that are connected to it. Hence, in the following I will define the terms Environmental Awareness, Environmental Behaviour, Sustainable Consumption and Political Consumption.

1. **Environmental Awareness** pictures the understanding and knowledge of environmental issues, their causes and solutions. A change of perception can be obtained through education and information.¹
2. **Environmental Behaviour (Consumption)**² links the real actions in one's everyday life towards protecting the environment. This behaviour may be of un-knowing or knowing nature. Former relates to the full environmental awareness and the actions taken by a person aiming to keep the impact on the environment as low as possible. The latter describes the actions that originally did not intended to save the environment from harm. Still, due to a saving-attitude (that initially focused on saving money), custodies or traditional behaviour, the person's acts result upon environmentally friendly behaviour. Examples can be to heat less (less emissions), to refuse using a car for short distances (less emissions, less energy resources) or to rather buy regional products (decrease long-distance transport and hence emissions).

Figure 1 portrays the linkage between areas of action and the readiness to act. The actual behaviour therefore is the outcome of a combination of determinants such as the environmental awareness, the willingness to pay or a given infrastructure (to find demanded products or substitutes). Environmental behaviour induces four dimensions of actions such as the transport medium, the buying of environmentally friendly (socially acceptable³) products, the handling of the product and the disposal.

¹ Envirowiki (2008) http://www.envirowiki.info/Environmental_awareness and the Environmental Practitioner Programme Glossary (2009) <http://www.epaw.co.uk/EPT/glossary.html>

² The definition is true for environmental behaviour in general and is not only restricted to the consumption patterns. For this paper nonetheless, environmental behaviour will be used as a synonym for environmental consumption.

³ Including the social pillar, it actually results in an approach towards sustainability and does not restrict its focus on the environmental aspect.

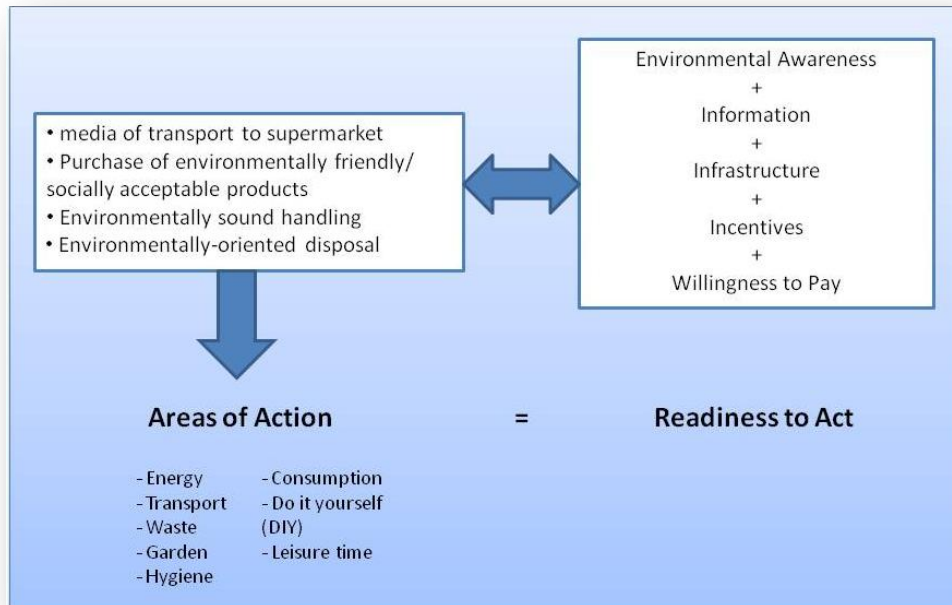


Figure 1: Determinants of Environmental Behaviour (adopted from Neitzel et al., 1994)

3. **Sustainable consumption** is a broad umbrella term (Norwegian Ministry of the Environment, 1994) and many definitions have been made upon.⁴ Selecting one, I have chosen to pick the definition made by Srinivas as the most convenient:

“Sustainable consumption is the consumption of goods and services that have minimal impact upon the environment, are socially equitable and economically viable whilst meeting the basic needs of humans, worldwide. Sustainable consumption targets everyone, across all sectors and all nations, from the individual to governments and multinational conglomerates.”

(Srinivas, 2010)

Sustainable Consumption is the result of a decision-making process of the consumer taking his/her social and environmental responsibility in accordance with personal needs and desires. Being thereby an ethical consumer implies that he/she feels responsible for the social and environmental issues in the world and counteracts these problems with his/her own behaviour patterns. Environmental understanding, environmental attachment (Umweltbetroffenheit) and environmental awareness are factors that influence sustainable consumption. However, the decisions are made in everyday situations, which often lead to the outcome that behavioural patterns are

⁴ The most authoritative definition is the one made by the 1994 Oslo Symposium on Sustainable Production and Consumption: “[...]as the use of services and related products which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimising the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle of the service or product so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations.” (Norwegian Ministry of the Environment, 1994)

not necessarily consistent with the mainly positive attitudes towards sustainability (Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006). Factors such as “convenience, habitat, value for money, personal health concerns, hedonism, and individual responses to social and institutional norms” (Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006) are influencing the decision which product to buy as they function as a kind of barrier, and moreover, are not very likely to be altered.

In order to increase environmental and sustainable consumption, coordinated and cross-linked activities from the government, the economy, NGOs and the consumers are needed. The following figure 2 will give an overview about the spheres of interaction.

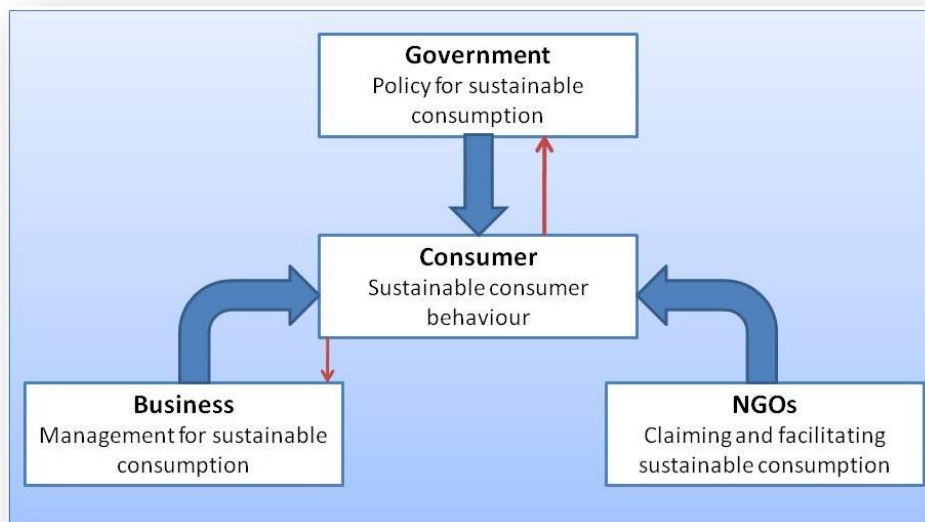


Figure 2: sustainable consumption and its different spheres (adopted from Schrader and Thøgersen, 2011)

The figure shows how the government, the business and the NGOs can influence the consumer’s decision (indicated with the blue arrows). First, the government and the economy have to create conditions that enable the consumer to consume in a sustainable manner (Schmidt, 2000). This implies regulations, laws, provision of substitutes, information and official certification procedures. However, there lies certain co-responsibility in the consumer’s actions, as he/she is able to decide what to buy and to change his /her consumption patterns and everyday routines in line with the given circumstances. Thereby, credibility, acceptability and trust are important determinants (Jensen, 2005). By this, the consumer actually influences the market and may act as a political consumer (which is indicated with the red arrows in

figure 2). Policies and the modern society therefore have to act upon the politization of the market whereby political participation is formed through market mechanisms (Jensen, 2005). NGOs or the media can also play an important role in the entire interacting process, as they are able to influence the consumer's knowledge, the way of thinking and the behaviour intentions (Jensen, 2005).

4. **Political Consumption** is a social phenomenon that has been developing in Western Societies in addition to institutional politics. According to Jensen (2005), "this situation is a consequence of several societal developments, most importantly changes in environmental politics, but also new patterns of political participation in general". Once the motive whether to choose or to reject a good endorses a political aim, it can be called political consumption. Depending on this motivation, it does not necessarily mean that sustainable or ethical consumerism is political consumerism (Jensen, 2005). Generally, the consumer is willing to influence political structures and able to use different channels of political participation (among the channel of consumption). Nevertheless, when making a purchase decision, political and non-political goals need to be balanced which makes it not realistic for people to make "political consumerism a full-time preoccupation" (Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007).

4 Historic Development

Internationally, the definition of sustainable development by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 has come to be seen as the most authoritative one. It was stated in the Brundtland Report "Our Common Future":

"Sustainable development is development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

(Brundtland Report, 1987)

Thereby sustainable development aims to converge the three dimensions economy, society and environment when making decisions globally, nationally, regionally. It refers to the interrelated actions in the globalized world striving for a creation of a future in the sense of sustainability.

Furthermore, in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, in 1992, basic principles were set in order to implement actions among the different

political levels worldwide. Thereby, Chapter 4 “Changing Consumption Patterns” (Agenda 21, 1992), deals with sustainability in the field of consumption. One objective is to promote patterns of consumption that do not only consider the aspect of economics but also include considerations of environmental and social factors.

Since then, basically, the actions to deal with sustainable consumption were particularly in response to politicians, the economy and the industry – the producers of non-sustainable products. However, over the past 20-30 years, there was a shift from the responsibility by (inter)national actors to the consumer, attaching at least a co-responsibility to him/her (Jensen, 2005). Environmental policy now therefore targets the producer who is responsible for the production process and humanity as well as the consumer who decides which product to buy. There lies an interaction between these two actors, which had been widely neglected in environmental discussions before (Zahrnt, 2000). The consumer itself is not only influenced by the advertisement and cannot necessarily be regarded as “helpless” or a passive recipient (Poferl et al., 1997) anymore because he/she is able to receive information by advertisement and other sources (such as the media, NGOs, government, friends/family). A certain kind of decision freedom of the consumer due to the diverse supplies and information sources had been established.

In Germany, there had been an increase in the relevance for environmental issues since the 70s and particularly the 80s. This cognition by the population was observable in the media, in the political agendas and reflected by higher ecological awareness among the society (Poferl et al., 1997). Reasons for the current change in consumption patterns in Germany may be diverse and interacting with each other. In the following, I will give an overview about liable transition factors. The sub-points will identify by which means the transition factors can be influenced.⁵

1. Increase of Environmental Awareness

- a. education
- b. a higher sensibility to a person’s environment
- c. higher attachment by social issues
- d. one’s own moral
- e. ethical considerations

⁵ Transition factors and the sub-points are results of my own elaboration.

2. The Possibility of Choices

- a. substitutes
- b. the choice to reject a product when it is not necessary to fulfil one's basic needs⁶
- c. different locations (supermarkets, markets, farmers)
- d. different products (brands, origins)
- e. globalization and trade (offers a higher diversity in products)
- f. mass production (no one has to fear depletion of an offered product)
- g. infrastructure (easy accessible markets or waste disposal bins for example)

3. Information and Communication

- a. education
- b. media (Internet, TV, newspaper, magazines, etc.)
- c. advertisement
- d. conferences, discussions
- e. social environment (friends, families, colleagues)
- f. certifications (Bio-Label, Fair-Trade, Der Blaue Engel)
- g. NGOs
- h. Government, institutions

4. Change in Social Circumstances

- a. pluralisation of life forms (single-households, shared apartments, single parents)
- b. general rise in income⁷

Empirical studies conducted by the German Federal Environmental Agency⁸ show that 80% of the population of Germany think they are environmentally conscious. Besides, 60% of the population show potential interest to act in an environmentally friendly manner and after all, 20% show readiness to actually change their consumption custodies in a way to highly act towards environmentally sound consumption (Neitzel et al., 1994). Moreover, 84% think to enhance the environmental protection when buying environmentally friendly products (Wipperman et al., 2009). Generally, it is hard to establish a true total picture of the

⁶ This can lead to "negative consumption" when it supports a person's political objective

⁷ (Kuckartz, 1998)

⁸ In the following stated as: FEA (Ger: Umweltbundesamt)

environmental behaviour of people for diverse reasons given the complexity of the topic and the complexity of the social circumstances (including the motives, external influential factors, social conditions etc.). In the following chapter, I will discuss the gap between attitude and awareness.

5 Gap between Attitude and Awareness

In general, consumers need to be considered as heterogeneous, which differ in attitudes and characteristics and underlie different impacts. This makes it difficult for politicians, businesses and the media to affect the consumer when promoting sustainable products and consumption. It is crucial to realize that there exist different consumer types, various influencing factors and mostly a gap between attitude and manners.

5.1 Consumer Types

From the utilitarian economic theories, consumers are generalized by the thought of homo oeconomicus. In this context, a person always behaves as a rational actor, striving to satisfy his/her needs at least cost (Zahrnt, 2000). The buying decision is intended to maximize utility and to rather neglect environmental impacts. As a concept this may be true for some or many persons, however, it neglects the social circumstances, values and external influencing factors.

In social science research over the past years, many models had developed in order to identify consumer types and clarify its segmentation. Besides factors of education, income, sex and age, other aspects are now considered in analyses. Factors such as “values, attitudes and social-cultural patterns” (Schäfer et al., 2011) are now included in the sociological debate. Different tools exist such as the List of Values, the VALS typology or the SINUS-milieus (Schäfer et al., 2001) which had been used by the FEA in Germany for example (Wippermann et al., 2009). In the SINUS-milieus model, people are grouped according to their way of living, different attitudes and other demographic parameters (Sinus Institut, 2011).

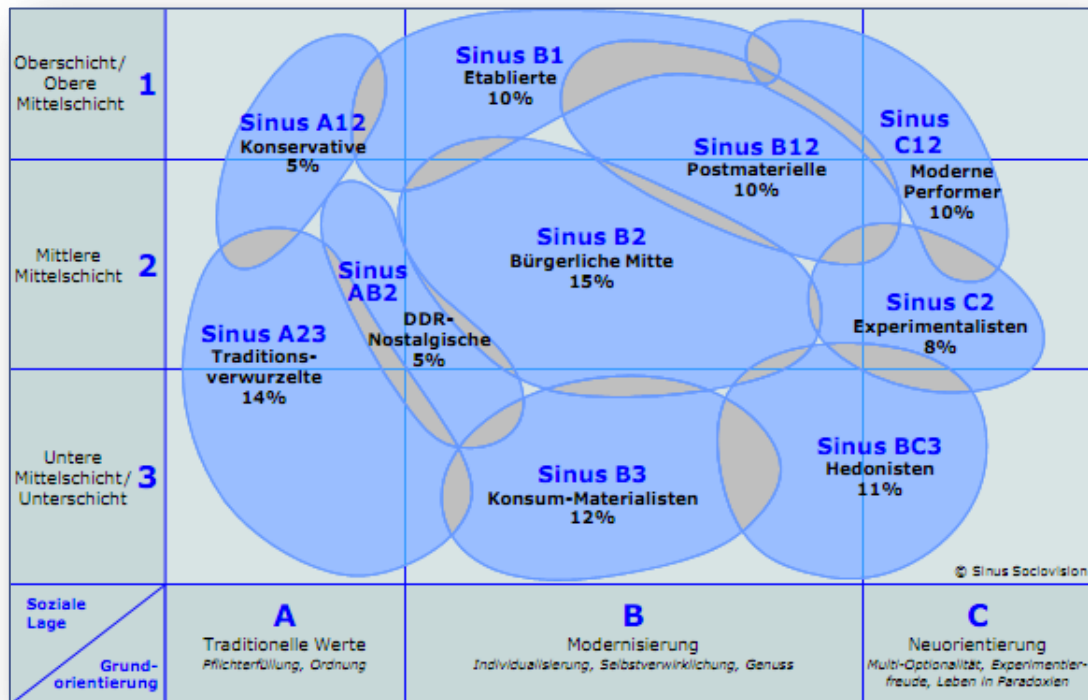


Figure 3: Sinus-Milieus in Germany in 2008 (Wippermann et al., 2009)

Figure 3 portrays the segmentation according to the tool of SINUS-milieus in Germany in 2009. By categorizing the population like this, observations of the consumption patterns can be indicated in a differentiated manner. As the FEA has been analyzing the awareness and behaviour in the different social milieus, it was observed that people are strongly related to the social circumstances. The result showed that, while mainly the “conservatives” or the “post-materialists” have the highest affinity to environmental issues and include these into their responsibilities and values, it is the “traditionalists” or “GDR-nostalgic” who actually have the lowest impact on the environment. The latter can therefore be considered as the “Unknowingly environmentally friendly” group (Wippermann et al., 2009). In general, there lies a gap between the positive attitudes and the actual behaviour towards sustainable consumption. Even though the positive attitude among consumers in general lies by roughly 20% globally, the market share of sustainable products is relatively low (Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006).

5.2 Influencing Factors

Plenty factors and circumstances may influence the consumer’s buying decision to a different degree. Summarized by Vermeir and Verbeke (2006), there are three main potential groups of determinants. These are the

1. values, needs, motivations and personal involvement/importance of the product
2. information, knowledge and uncertainty (information access, understanding, trust and credibility)
3. behavioural control, availability of the product, and Perceived Consumer Effectiveness.

Thereby the following may hold true: “Specific attitudes may suggest a specific behavior when taken in isolation, but this may not be the case when considering the broader purchase decision. Additional attitudes come into play, moderating behavior, diluting the impact of initial attitudes, and resulting in an alternative outcome.” (Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006). These additional attitudes may result in an opposing behaviour in contrast to the initial environmental awareness or intention.

5.3 Gap between Awareness and Attitudes with an Example of the BTU Cottbus

In April 2009, the Brandenburg Technical University of Cottbus (BTU) successfully accomplished to be certified with the official EMAS⁹ recognition. Among the diversified actions to increase the environmental performance of the university was the change of product supply in the Brasserie that served only organic certified meals and drinks from then on. Generally, the customers can choose between a few different meals, either vegetarian or non-vegetarian.

A study conducted by Kunze and Schluchter (2009) showed that the students and personnel have a high environmental awareness in general and are likely willing to spend more money for food as long as it is ecologically certified (“Bio”-Certification) or being traded fairly (“Fair-Trade” Certification). It was also stated that 75% of the students consider themselves as an ecological consumer.

However, the current situation looks slightly different compared to the empirical results of the study. In an Interview with the president of the STUPA (student parliament) of the BTU, I found out that the Brasserie would be closed most probably in one year approximately. The reasons are mainly the reduced profits after the transition of the product range. The

⁹ EMAS stands for Eco-Management and Audit System, which was established in Europe for companies that voluntarily want to enhance their environmental conditions. The perspective is to evaluate, continuously improve and to report the environmental performance (European Commission, 2011).

customers (among them students and employees) find the meals too expensive (Keidel, 2011). The reduced demand of food, and hence the reduced customers eating at the Brasserie lead to “sometimes only 80 meal orders per day” (Keidel, 2011). This makes it unprofitable for the Brasserie to proceed with their current structure as being the only BIO-restaurant at the BTU Cottbus. Furthermore, the head of the Mensa from the Studentenwerk Frankfurt pointed out other factors that are causing the mismanagement of the Brasserie. It was said that there are “unfavourable conditions in the kitchen. It is far too hot” (Keidel, 2011).

Yet, there is no real proof that these conditions hold true. The head of the Mensa is basically the only source of information regarding to that (Keidel, 2011). It is already planned to reconstruct the entire Brasserie and Mensa structure despite informing the students before or conducting research of the desires of their customers. In the future, the Brasserie will conform into a coffee shop and the Mensa will offer one additional meal that obeys the BIO-standards. Nonetheless, it will not necessarily be vegetarian. This will be a giant restriction compared to the current offer and some students (especially the Mensa Board) are taking actions to inhibit this drastic change.

Given these information, it does show a gap between the actual desires of the BTU members and their actual behaviour. Even though there was a general positive attitude towards the Brasserie offering “BIO” meals, the question remains if all the proponents do really eat at the Brasserie or not. How do, particularly the students, as they cover the majority of people and simultaneously are the crucial decision makers as they are limited in budget, spend their money? Do they rather decide to buy the fast accessible Mensa-meals or do they truly behave as an ecological consumer? Concerning the Brasserie, this actually requires further research and other sources of information are essential in order to obtain a more objective picture of the current Brasserie performance and consumption patterns of the BTU members.

Nevertheless, it actually would represent no wonder if they behave contradictory to their attitudes. In the sociological debate, this gap is rather a phenomenon than a surprise given the complex motivation factors of consumers. As the attitude is generally positive at the BTU, it is vital to find barriers of sustainable consumption behaviour and to act against these.

6 Challenges and Needs

In the case of the Brasserie at the BTU, full information about the reasons for the structure change need to be given to the BTU members. Furthermore, the communication between the different levels (for example between the Mensa personnel and students) has to be encouraged. This is partly undertaken by the actions of the Mensa Board by writing emails to the study courses and by using the poster at the BTU campus for another visualization of the issue. Another action could be to enhance the given information about the positive aspects (quality and safety) about the BIO meals explaining also that the purchase will lead to a decrease of environmental degradation. This could be realized with an extra brochure that explains the origin and the ingredients of sustainable products offered for instant. In general, there does not exist one exact measure that will lead to the desired outcome, namely to increase the environmental consumption behaviour. Thereby, different actions need to be taken into account.

On the other hand, the new development may also yield a chance for a better consumption performance. It could be possible that the demand for BIO food will be growing once offered in the Mensa. The Mensa still is the most prioritized place to have lunch for the students who mostly lack time and monetary resources. Having it there could enhance the appearance and the presumed availability of BIO products to this extend that the people, who otherwise would not have gone to the Brasserie to buy BIO labelled food, may actually decide in favour of it there. The limiting factor could be that it is not necessarily vegetarian, which is an important factor for many environmental consumers. Also, the Mensa has fewer opening hours.

Taken as a whole, if it is true that BIO meals at the Brasserie are not economically justifiable, one needs to find other solutions to increase its consumption. This may be possible giving it another location (for example, the Mensa, but also the Cafeteria as the most frequently used place – by students and employees). A different structure could be beneficial if it is in consultation with the people affected and not executed in isolation. As showed in figure 2, different spheres are interacting with each other. Translating this to the small scale, figure 4 can illustrate the same power regimes but with the applied positions at the BTU Cottbus. The university, being registered as an EMAS certified company, and its objectives to further and constantly increase the pro-environmental actions, gives the basement (policy) for

offering sustainable products. The Brasserie itself supplies and manages these products and the Mensa Board as well as other information sources and activity groups promote the products and sustainable consumption.

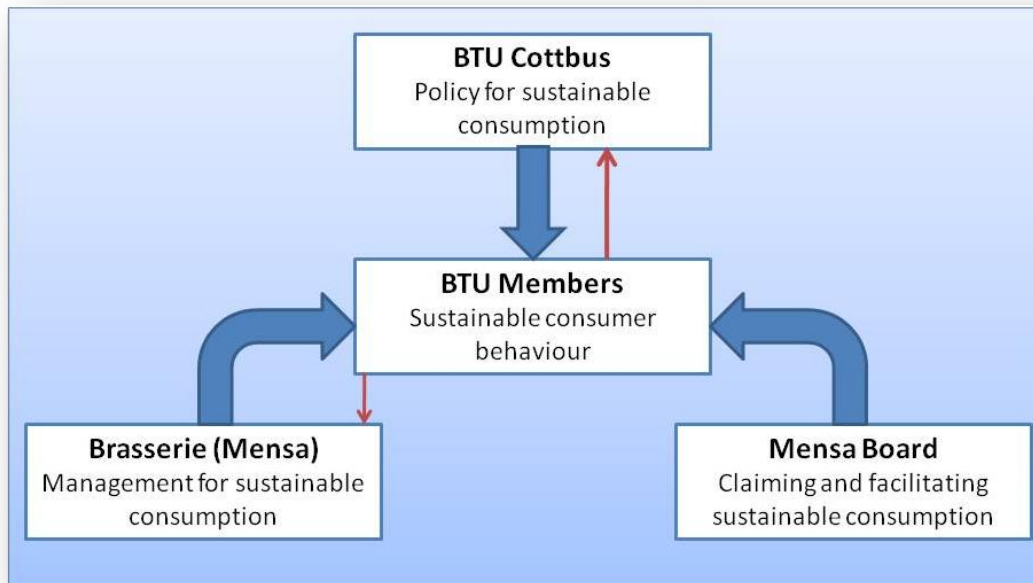


Figure 4: Sustainable Consumption and its different spheres at the BTU Cottbus (Originally adopted from Schrader and Thogersen, 2011)

As the example of the Brasserie shows, the consumer does have an impact on the business and can influence politically – either positively (achieving the implementation of BIO meals) or negatively (refusing to buy these meals).¹⁰ Hence, the different power levels as well as the motivation factors of the consumer need to be regarded when developing a programme and deriving future enhancement of sustainable consumption patterns.

7 Conclusion

High environmental awareness but still a low share of purchased environmentally friendly and socially acceptable products. This is the current state in Germany, and portrays the current circumstances at the BTU Cottbus where the Brasserie, the only place on the university campus supplying BIO meals, is likely being closed due to lacking demand. Acting

¹⁰ This figure simplifies the different interactions to a great extent and limits its focus so that only the interactions with the customer are considered. In reality, interactions between the Mensa Board, the Brasserie and the BTU do take place, too. Especially in this case, the Mensa Board actively tries to claim and facilitate sustainable consumption. However, as the people from the Mensa Board do also belong to the BTU members, the red arrow that goes from the “BTU members” to the “Brasserie” indirectly expresses the influence.

towards sustainability is nowadays on political as well as on “kitchen-table” agendas, however, cannot be fulfilled in everyday circumstances for most of the consumers.

Over the past years, there had been a transition in the influences of the different levels in the power regime, such as the government, the economy and the consumer, giving him/her a co-responsibility. These interactions need to be taken into account when promoting sustainable consumption patterns. Besides, the motivation factors that drive the purchase decision of the consumers need special investigation, as they are complex and sometimes even paradox. Often one can recognize an antithetic behaviour compared to high environmental attitudes of people. How to overcome this gap is one of the major challenges of policies and economics and fields of ongoing research.

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9 Appendix

9.1 Interview mit Ronja Keidel

(Präsidentin des Studierendenparlaments der BTU Cottbus)

07.06.2011, 4pm, BTU Cottbus

Hallo Ronja, momentan schreibe ich ein Essay über „Sustainable Consumption“ und möchte daraufhin das Beispiel mit den augenblicklichen Entwicklungen der Brasserie mit einbeziehen. Hierfür würde ich dich gerne interviewen und auch auf dieses Interview verweisen wollen. Ist das okay für dich?

Ja, sehr gern.

Stimmt es, dass die Brasserie endgültig geschlossen wird?

Es sieht ganz danach aus. Die Chefin der Mensa und Mitarbeiterin des Studentenwerk Frankfurts lässt sich wohl nicht mehr von Ihren Plänen abbringen. Wie du ja vielleicht gesehen hast, hängt jetzt das Plakat auf dem Unigelände, versehen mit Ihrer Email-Adresse, sodass Sie Druck von außen bekommt. Sie hat es ja immerhin abseits der Studenten entschieden.

Was sind denn die genauen Gründe für die Schließung?

Das Essen ist zu teuer, da die Brasserie nun BIO-Produkte verkauft. Daher gibt es zu wenig Kunden. Sie meinte sogar, dass sie an manchen Tagen nur 80 Essensbestellungen pro Tag hat. Das kann ich mir allerdings nur schwer vorstellen. Außerdem meint Sie, dass es in der Küche viel zu heiß ist. Jedoch bezieht Sie sich hierbei auf die Grad-zahl als die Lüftung ausgegangen ist.

Glaubst du man kann das noch verhindern?

Naja, wir versuchen es in unseren Gesprächen, nur wird Sie wohl sehr wahrscheinlich Ihren Kopf durchsetzen. Außerdem gibt es ja immer noch die Möglichkeit für die Studenten, die Evaluierungsbögen in der Mensa auszufüllen. Hoffentlich schreiben Ihr auch viele eine Mail.

Und wie genau soll nun die Brasserie umgestaltet werden?

Alles vom Studentenwerk Frankfurt, einbezogen der Mensa, der Cafeteria und der Brasserie, wird komplett umgestellt. Die Brasserie soll ein Coffeeshop mit Kuchen werden. Die wird täglich bis 21.00Uhr geöffnet sein, nur weiß ich nicht ob das Ihr mehr Umsatz bringt. Wie viele trinken denn noch Kaffee abends um 8? Kuchen von der Theke und der Cafeteria wird es dann nur noch in der Brasserie geben. Die Cafeteria sei damit zu überfordert. Pizza wird dann in der Theke verkauft und in der Mensa soll es ein BIO-Essen geben. Allerdings wird dieses nicht mal vegetarisch sein, was ich nicht sehr gut finde.

Danke Ronja. Das waren soweit meine Fragen.

Bitte. Kein Problem.

9.2 Declaration of Personal Contribution

I, Kristin Goldbach, declare that I wrote the Essay myself and that I listed all my references.

Kristin Goldbach, 11th June 2011