

# **Bachelor ERM**

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## **Introduction**

The term “sustainability” is becoming increasingly popular in society. Introduced on the “Rio” Conference for Environment and Development in 1992, it turned out to be one of the most significant mission statements of our time. Since 2000, the awareness among the German population of the idea of sustainability has increased from 13% to 43% (Borgstedt et al., 2010).

In 1998, the idea of “LOHAS” emerged from a study carried out by the US American sociologist Paul Ray. He claimed that there was a population group of about 50 million people that he described as the “Cultural Creatives”. Apparently they have a high influence on society by contributing creative and innovative thoughts, spreading social awareness and supporting cultural change. The acronym stands for a “lifestyle of health and sustainability” and is simultaneously used for people following that lifestyle. It describes a new generation of people that are open to the future and possess an optimistic and positive attitude towards life. Several market researchers promise an increasing share of people behaving and consuming according to LOHAS. Apparently, every fifth adult in Germany can be considered a LOHAS (Schulz, 2008).

The task is now to find out what exactly lies behind the conviction of such a high number of people who commit themselves to a more sustainable consumption. There are many open questions, for example whether LOHAS is really an efficient way to combat climate change for the individual and on the local level. Could it serve as a role model for others? Should everyone act according to LOHAS, or might there be better, more effective alternatives?

In order to answer these questions, it will be helpful to analyze the phenomenon from sociological and psychological perspectives. Even though LOHAS is quite a new phenomenon, the results of earlier studies about people’s relationship to products and their role as consumers can give plausible insights. First of all, a comparison with Karl Marx and his notion of a so-called “Fetish of Products” will reveal the hidden system of consumption that we are all part of. It will be necessary to find out whether LOHAS are more independent from our economic system than other members of society. Erich Fromm’s “To Have or to Be” might prove whether the claim of LOHAS to be more introspective and authentic is actually true or not. Finally, a look at Pierre Bourdieu’s “La Distinction” will clarify the psychological background of such behavior. In the end, it is to hope that LOHAS can be clearly determined

and located in our society according to their impact on sustainability, their social distinction, their independence and self-awareness.

There are a few theses that can be assumed already: First of all, the idea of LOHAS most likely constitutes a way of representing personal relations and identification within society through the means of consumption. It is a promising idea that aims at combining attitudes of life that, until now, seemed to be contradictive. Finally, LOHAS helps people to identify themselves as environmentally conscious, modern and morally correct citizens.

## **1. Definition and Characterization: What is LOHAS?**

The following description of LOHAS will help to understand the recently developed segment of society. It can be seen as an answer to the pressing environmental issues many people have become aware of. The notion LOHAS can be understood as a certain lifestyle that takes environmental protection, health and fitness, social responsibility and personal development as its highest aims. The lifestyle of health and sustainability therefore covers various aspects of life, above all consumer behavior, but also social action, mobility, leisure and tourism. The term was originally coined by several companies in the USA during their market research. They identified it as a new target group that follows the principles of ethical and social values, personal realization and authenticity. LOHAS promises an elevated quality of life through harmony with nature and society.

How can the so-called LOHAS be characterized? In order to approach this question from the perspective of sociology, it is helpful to place LOHAS into the Sinus-Milieu<sup>1</sup>. Several studies investigated their social and financial situation in combination with their general orientation and found that LOHAS can generally be found in the upper and middle class and tend to take comparatively modern viewpoints. Characteristics of intensive LOHAS, more or less surprisingly, coincide with those of the so-called post materialistic. Therefore, one can conclude the following features: Both post materialistic and the newly found LOHAS usually think globally and criticize technological advance and globalization. They have a high environmental consciousness and strive for personal balance of mind, body and spirit. The emphasis is laid on intellect and creativity rather than on possessions and consumption.

For their everyday life, this means that LOHAS are willing to spend more money on high quality, especially food. Organic and fair-trade products are in the center of their attention and therefore organic supermarkets are highly frequented by them. They focus on personal well-

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<sup>1</sup> Sinus-Milieus were created by the SINUS institute, a market research company and specialist for social change. See <http://www.sinus-institut.de/>.

being, health and fitness and have a high awareness of their environment and society. Quality time with friends and family also has a high value. Usually they enjoy outdoor activities and sports and disapprove mainstream behavior of the affluent society such as bargain shopping and consumerism (Glöckner et al. 2010, Lohas Lifestyle 2011).

This new generation of consumers is not to be compared with the ecological activists of the 70ies and 80ie since LOHAS claim to live with pleasure and enjoyment instead of abstention and restriction. They combine needs that seem to be contradictory on the first sight. Unlike the early environmental movement, LOHAS includes a distinct interest in high technology, innovation and modernity. LOHAS followers orient by trends stemming from environmental sciences which explains why the movement has its roots in academic milieus. Furthermore, the comparatively elevated level of consumption and the quality of the consumed products make clear that following LOHAS requires a minimum level of financial means.

Obviously, education is an important prerequisite when it comes to understanding current political and economic processes that can affect the environment. Also, it makes it more likely for people to develop environmental awareness and interest in related topics. Concerning income, it is also clear that social groups with little financial means are less concerned with environmental problems since their possibility to become active in favor of sustainable development appears out of scope to them. This makes environmental activism a privilege to communities with high income (Guber, 2003; Hentschel 2007).

It is now obvious that LOHAS constitute a target group of increasing significance which is in the focus of almost any kind of industry, e.g. food, automobiles, banking, insurance or cosmetics. Many market researches view LOHAS as one of the most significant trends, perhaps even a megatrend of sustainability.

## **2. Analysis – LOHAS as a Social Phenomenon**

It will be interesting to later find parallels between the psychology behind LOHAS and the findings of the sociologists Pierre Bourdieu, Karl Marx and Erich Fromm. However, before searching for deeper explanations with the help of their studies, it is suitable to elucidate reasons for the occurrence of LOHAS that are more obvious by taking a look at the recent social, political and economic backgrounds.

Fact is that with the emergence of LOHAS, consumer behavior has changed drastically. Today people do not only look for low prices and quality, but also take into consideration the ecological footprint of a product. This means that with every purchase they make, they try to

find answers to the questions: Is the product made from organic ingredients? Is it fair-trade? How is the producer's environmental performance and social responsibility? To conclude, consumers increasingly look out for moral values. Now, the question of what causes such a large number of people to increasingly change the way they consume, arises. Several answers are possible at this point. Firstly, people have become more and more aware of the pressing issue of climate change and political debates about sustainable development. Through media such as newspapers, TV and even movies, everybody seems to be well informed about the current problems of today, that go beyond environmental protection and have also reached both the spheres of economy and society. A lot of people have developed a stronger environmental consciousness and view themselves as powerful customers that are capable of making an impact through sustainable consumption.

However, there are also more practical reasons for a change in consumption: Concerning the food sector, many people like to buy organic food simply because it tastes better or because they can afford it. Buying "green" in many cases makes people feel less guilty of harming the environment or at least creates a feeling of superiority and classiness. Here, psychological aspects play an important role (Voigt, 2008).

## **2.1 The Psychology behind LOHAS**

What drives people to the new lifestyle? LOHAS follow the idea of *moral consumption*. When boycotting conventional ways and places of consumption, moral consumers strengthen their feeling of acting ethically correct and helping to protect nature and environment. So-called green consumerism is a new lifestyle that opposes the reduction of consumption in general but makes the purchase of green products a political weapon. At least this is what most people following this idea trust in. LOHAS can also be seen as consumer-friendly resistance against the "system" or a subtle demonstration of market power. New quality standards such as represented by the European label for organic food or the established German "Bio-Siegel" allow customers to easily satisfy their need to buy ecologically correct products and to soothe their conscience. Important for LOHAS is also the need to establish a new social community that follows a certain collection of values and mission statements. The aim is not to individually protest against traditional consumerism but to group people with the same attitudes together and share knowledge, experience and opinions.

However, the strategy of leading a sustainable life does in no way exclude factors such as fun and the propensity to buy. Pleasure, passion for technology and design are just as important as environmental consciousness, closeness to nature and a good conscience.

LOHAS is about living sustainably and *experiencing* sustainability in a delightful way. Modesty and asceticism are notions that would not be successful in changing consumer behavior but instead lead to exclusion and suspicion towards those individuals who seem to completely ignore their needs and wishes. LOHAS is only possible because it keeps people's need to consume alive which makes it both attractive for society itself and, not to forget, the industry (Jäckel, 2010; Rink, 2002).

When followers of LOHAS go shopping, they do not simply buy products for their utility value but above all because almost every product makes a statement about the person who purchases it. This, of course, applies to any consumer, not only LOHAS. The statement that a product brings about is more like a promise or an ideal attached to it. In the case of LOHAS, most products carry the characteristics of being beneficial for health, energy efficient, organic, fair trade, or simply sustainable, an adjective that covers positive effects on the environment, the economy and society. There are many brands carrying a "green" image, which makes it easy for consumers to choose, sometimes maybe too easy, since a product or a brand that carries a certain image already does no longer challenge a person's critical thinking. Increasing and repeated satisfaction leads to trust in a brand and creates brand awareness.

It is interesting to see that the purchase of fair trade and ecological products started as a countermovement to consumerism and the demonstration of status symbols. Before LOHAS came into existence, the traditional ecological movement was meant to be a protest against the abuse of brand products to show wealth and luxury. Today, tendencies of brand awareness among LOHAS followers become increasingly visible. For example, quality labels such as the German "Bio" label for organic food carry an image that perfectly matches the expectation of LOHAS already. This image can be described as "healthy, tasty, organic and high quality". Still, there is no brand (yet) that can clearly be attributed to LOHAS. Now, is it possible that LOHAS becomes another trend that focuses on proving one's status in society simply by the consumption of goods with predefined quality criteria and a minimum of price in order to reveal one's claim to luxury and wellbeing? Why does the controlled consumption of specific goods in general play such a significant role for LOHAS?

## **2.2 The Fetish of Products – Karl Marx**

First of all, the idea of having control over consumption in general is worth putting into question. Following Karl Marx's notion of the "Warenfetisch", one might be able to understand why the exchange of goods in our society is such fundamental, but inscrutable principle. Not only for those capitalist consumers who have no interest in sustainable living

but also for people following LOHAS, the objectification of human relations through conditions of productions applies according to Marx's theory. People's relationships to each other are covered up, or manifest themselves by the relationships of the goods they produce and buy. According to Marx, this replacement of movement in society by the movement of objects forces the consumer into a form of unconscious dependency.

Marx concludes that everybody in society is under control of the material value of goods and therefore acts according to the economic laws that follow from the exchange of products. Our personal relationships become material relationships because we let ourselves control by factual constraints and act materialistically. This, of course, is not part of our everyday consciousness, but instead underlies everything we do in a capitalist society. Marx successfully reveals this fetishism and makes clear that no part of our society can evade this self-made dependency, except in a society without goods and money (Marx 1867, Wolf 2002, 2007).

The idea of a fetish of products surely appears to be quite radical and extreme when applied today. A fetish for certain brands, for example, could also be understood as an exaggerated form of brand awareness. However, what Marx calls a fetish in his work, is our subconscious inferiority to our market system, but not an abnormal adoration of goods.

Now, LOHAS is often associated with *strategic consumption*, a form of consumption that is intelligent, well thought out and above all, conscious. Considering the findings of Marx, it is now difficult to claim any way of conscious or strategic consumer behavior in a world ruled by money and the exchange of products. LOHAS certainly involves the conscious choice of products and the knowledge of its economic impacts, but still it does not reach beyond our dependency on the fundamental relationship between work and its value. When LOHAS purchase products that have been fair trade, organically produced or in some other way are believed to contribute to sustainable living, e.g. a hybrid car, they do so because these goods have, first of all, attracted them. Through the consumption of such goods, LOHAS do not only gain status as being "green" but most of all satisfy their desire to consume in a sustainable way. Nevertheless, this "symbolic" consumption is still a luxury because not everyone can afford it, and the attractiveness of such goods strongly depends on their affordability and availability on the market. A much more intense and aggressive way of combating economic and social inequalities could maybe only be put through by a radical change of the economic system. The complete reduction of consumption or the creation of a system that involves giving instead of trading is imaginable at this point, but surely utopian.

### **2.3 “I am what I have and what I consume” – Erich Fromm**

As mentioned in the beginning when the phenomenon of LOHAS was characterized, their attention as consumers is increasingly focused on quality rather than quantity. They claim to look out for authenticity and individuality instead of allowing advertising and marketing to mislead them to spend their money on mass products and becoming victims of deception. As a consequence, such a lifestyle asks for more self-responsibility and participation instead of representation. One can also observe a movement towards a value-oriented rather than possession-oriented life. Since the increase of consumption in their belief will not lead to an increase of happiness, the satisfaction with oneself as a modest and undemanding being is considered a solution. However, their high expectations and demand do not contradict their search for a self-sufficient mission statement. In other words: LOHAS aim at “being” instead of “having” (Kreeb et al., 2008).

This idea should remind of Erich Fromm’s work “To Have or to Be” from 1976 and his vision of leading a happy life by enjoying *being* instead of *doing, having or using*. In his study he distinguishes two opposing ways of thinking, acting and living. On the one hand, *having* is linked to the greed and desire for material goods such as money and luxury but also for immaterial possessions like power and knowledge. On the other hand, *being* means the conscious and active experience of life which is much more difficult to grasp and describe. LOHAS, like Fromm, have realized the problem of the limitation of our resources and therefore the issue of the continuity of human civilization. According to him, people’s attachment to things and their dependence on consumption will eventually lead to the irreversible overuse and overconsumption of our resources.

He therefore proposes the development towards a new society and a new idea of man. His suggestions can clearly be linked with the objectives of LOHAS followers: Firstly, there is a strong need for more cooperation between humans and nature instead of its exploitation and overuse. Secondly, egoism and competition should be replaced by solidarity and each member of society should be motivated to actively participate in social life. Lastly, reasonable consumption is to be preferred over maximum consumption. The new human being proposed by Fromm follows values that appear similar to those claimed by LOHAS: Closeness to nature, community, compassion and affection, oneness and other immaterial values (Klug, 2008).

Fromm makes an important insight about people’s behavior in the affluent society of today: When people talk about leisure activities, they should rather say leisure “passivity” because in his view, leisure increasingly constitutes the consumption and use of goods and

services. Consuming, and this also applies to LOHAS, means the uptake of things in order to possess or incorporate them. It reduces the fear of losing the consumed object but at the same time forces the consumer to ask for more. Satisfaction is therefore limited and the most adequate description of the modern consumer could be “I am what I have and what I consume” (Fromm, 1976).

Now, is it possible to distinguish in any way between LOHAS and other ways of living in terms of their dependence to the unlimited need for consumption that seems to be part of human nature? As mentioned above, LOHAS claim to focus their attention much more on interior values and self-awareness. “New values, new consciousness, the needs of people look inwards, a change of lifestyle towards self-knowledge” are catchphrases that LOHAS commonly use to describe themselves and which can be linked with the notion of “being”. However, they admit at the same time that this new orientation leads to the demand of healthy, ecologically and economically reasonable products and services, or, in other words, “having” (Lohas Lifestyle, 2011).

#### **2.4 LOHAS as Aesthetic Disposition – Pierre Bourdieu**

The phenomenon of LOHAS is certainly not as new as it might appear to many analysts of society. It can be easily demystified by looking at researches done by sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu. In his work “La distinction” of 1979 he figures already that people often define themselves through how, what, and where they consume. Their differences in tastes and consumer behavior reveal their individual placement within society. He claims that in the simplest forms of consumption, above all food, one can recognize a person’s social class. Trends in consumption clearly indicate how people keep orienting by a group of people following a certain lifestyle. This approach can be used to explain why environmentally-conscious people change their usual way of life to a distinct one that is based on health and sustainability.

However, a few restrictions have to be done today: LOHAS is not simply the type of aesthetic disposition that Bourdieu describes to be inherited from a person’s social origin. Surely what he calls the cultural capital can depend on the family background or the social class and influence a person’s environmental consciousness and behavior. Again, it becomes obvious here, why a large share of the total number of people following LOHAS stem from an academic background or at least one with an intellect above average. However, LOHAS is a development too modern, flexible and instable to be passed on over generations. It is often

an adoption of behavioral patterns based on experience, information and the faculty to think critically which can be independent of one's social origin.

Another objection to his theory could be the fact that nowadays, especially the choice of food and diet in general is not a question of social class or income anymore. With the emergence of fast food or "convenience" food, eating behavior has evened out among many classes of income. A more decisive factor here is the (illusion of?) time constraint that many people experience nowadays. For example, even managers with high income are customers of fast food restaurants just like people of lower classes. This is because new trends created by the food industry make easy and quick meals attractive to everybody, regardless of how wealthy or educated a person is.

Still, there is a high potential of consumption to be a decisive factor when it comes to people's wish for identification with a social group. Of course they would never like to be seen as a distinct target group determined by market researchers, however, the things they buy, where they buy and how much money they spend on sustainably produced goods, certainly characterizes them to an extent that cannot be ignored (Bourdieu 1998, Geden 2009).

### **3. Criticism and Evaluation - The Danger of Dichotomy**

Some statements made in the description and characterization of LOHAS should not simply be accepted and taken for granted, but viewed from a critical perspective. The task is to assess the effectiveness and the overall impact on society and the environment. Since the danger of polarization of "green" or "non-green" when referring to lifestyles is predestined, it is important not to take a biased viewpoint. With no doubt, the objectives set out by LOHAS are desirable since they are part of a movement towards more sustainability and should not be rejected in general. However, the following are critical considerations that are important to keep in mind.

First of all, it was mentioned that LOHAS are located in a social milieu that is characterized by a high financial income and a certain level of education. At this point, one should ask the question whether a sustainable lifestyle can be socially appropriate and successful in the long run if it is restricted to the wealthy part of society only. If LOHAS is considered a sustainable lifestyle, it implies that most other forms of living and consumption are not able to serve this purpose, which is true in many cases. It is, however, risky to state that it is the "good" way of living and serves as the complete opposite of those energy-wasting, inefficient and lavish lifestyles presented by most others. For example, driving a hybrid car is undoubtedly less harmful to the environment than driving a conventional car.

However, people who cannot even afford a car certainly are responsible for a much smaller impact on the environment than people driving hybrid cars. This case shows that sustainable living is or should not be limited to those with sufficient financial means. As far as education is concerned, however, it is not surprising that it helps people to grasp the consequences of their (consumerist) lifestyle. Of course, in exceptional cases, environmentally friendly behavior can also exist without its consciousness or knowledge about it, due to for example simply habit or traditional behavioral patterns.

LOHAS expect themselves to make use of their market power in a strategic and conscious way. By only consuming “green” products, they are convinced of making an impact on the market and therefore forcing the industry to adapt to the changing demand for sustainable goods. This might be true to the extent that they create a new market section that is based on sustainability and that they attract attention by market researchers who see them as a new target group. In this way, LOHAS provide an additional incentive to the industry to increase the production of goods especially adapted to their desires and designed for their individual needs. In the worst case, LOHAS could be made responsible for driving production beyond a necessary level and therefore undermine the effect of making markets more sustainable. However, since they are privileged in the satisfaction of their demand for quality and value, they constitute a minority which will hardly be capable of influencing the whole market system. Here, it is necessary to remember that, against the belief of a few optimistic enthusiasts, LOHAS was never meant to revolutionize any economic system but it is often falsely assumed to be an effective way of “greening” the economy (Geden, 2009).

As the similarities between the idea of LOHAS and the studies of Marx and Fromm reveal, a lifestyle of health and sustainability does not liberate from the underlying, mostly subconscious relationship between consumer, product and labor. According to Marx, the basic principles of our economy are completely unknown to most people. Against this background, the claim of being able to have control over one’s consumption or to possess a strategy to consume that distances from any other form of consumption, seems doubtful. All in all, even LOHAS are “trapped” in the fetish of products and simply constitute a change of the content of consumption, not its form. With reference to Erich Fromm, as long as there is no reduction of consumption visible, regardless of what type of products is consumed, it would be inappropriate to speak of “Being” instead of “Having”. When applied to LOHAS, their lacking of willingness to reduce consumption seems to contradict their claim to focus on interior values and a new consciousness of oneself. The fact that there is an emerging market for sustainable products, and correspondingly increasing research about LOHAS as a target

group, proves their dependence on consumption which is in no way different from other social groups.

Finally, it is important to remember that LOHAS cannot simply be seen as the ideal way of life looking at sustainability as the highest good. LOHAS followers care about technology, fashion and visual satisfaction too much to be willing to reduce consumption in general or consider alternative lifestyles with even less environmental impact. To sum up, LOHAS is an attitude whose level of sustainability is rather weak in comparison to the original environmental activists as we know them from earlier times (Schwender et al 2008).

## **5. Conclusions**

It should have become clearer how the lifestyle of LOHAS can be explained from different sociological points of view. As a result, the findings of the works of Marx, Fromm and Bourdieu can, to a certain extent, just as well be applied to LOHAS as to any other social group. When talking about “strategic consumption”, one needs to keep in mind that consumption in itself is an expression of people’s addiction to possession and their dependant relationship to products in general. Also, the claim for more self-awareness and “being” is overrated and contradicts with the lack of willingness to reduce consumption and the inability to experience satisfaction and happiness through modesty and restraint. Supporting the theses of Bourdieu, it can be said that LOHAS subconsciously utilize their lifestyle to distinguish themselves from other social groups and to find identification with people following the same principles. Nevertheless, a behavior according to LOHAS is often acquired through education, recommendation, information and personal experience rather than from a social or family background.

The criticism presented in this essay is mainly based on a problem of perception: In itself, LOHAS as a lifestyle should neither be idealized as every individual’s solution to environmental problems, nor be condemned as a false environmental consciousness that makes no difference in the future. Current market research promises an increasing significance of LOHAS both on the industrial and the societal level. A great number of people can be considered as leading a life according to LOHAS even though they might not be aware of it (Hentschel 2007).

As a general conclusion, LOHAS is a trend reflecting the ongoing change in society towards a healthier, more sustainable life. Followers of this idea are more aware of the impacts of their lifestyle than the average citizen. The future of our planet and the life of the

next generations are an important issue to LOHAS which gives people the incentive to reconsider their behavior as consumers. As a consequence, they attempt to consume in a way that damages the environment less but still allows them to enjoy life.

Experts who have been asked for a definition of an ideal sustainable lifestyle have set up a catalogue that describes the most important elements of sustainable living. Among these e.g. are a positive attitude towards the protection of resources, the knowledge about ecological alternatives, creativity, or the use of regenerative energies. All criteria concerning values, attitudes, knowledge and behavior can clearly be identified with the ideas proposed by LOHAS. Therefore, the overall criteria of sustainability can be met according to the ideal definition of a sustainable lifestyle (Kleinhüchelkotten, 2002).

The last criticism that can be brought up at this point is only the exclusion of the aspect of *sufficiency* when discussing the need for future-proof lifestyles. The confidence of many followers of LOHAS might be inappropriately high in terms of their certainty to offer a solution for the problematic overuse of our resources, given their ignorance towards avoidance or reduction of consumption. The idea of sufficiency is inevitably part of a concept of life that can ensure the availability of our resources in the future. In other words, our planet earth simply will not offer enough resources for the demand for hybrid cars, wellness-hotels and organic fashion. In contrast to LOHAS, the ideal sufficient lifestyle includes every individual's conviction that modesty and less consumption lead to more quality of life. A possibly better alternative to LOHAS is sometimes seen in *LOVOS*, a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity that includes the aspect of a stronger renunciation of consumption. "Less is more" is a statement that LOHAS would certainly not agree with (Krafft, 2011).

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