Fashionalising Sustainable Consumption in Lifestyle Media

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The article explores how and why media promotes sustainable consumption as a fashion trend. The reasons include the profit-making logic of media and upholding the ideology of consumer culture. The trend seems to remain short lived, however, and even if sustained, it may be harmful as it promotes unnecessary consumption.

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ABSTRACT

The trendiness or even the status-enhancing qualities of sustainable consumption have been noted in previous studies. To give just a couple of examples of this phenomenon, the concept of "eco-chic" has been popularised to refer to the idea that some products can be both eco-friendly and trendy so that consumers would not have to give up their sense of style to aim for sustainability (Elliott 2013). In the Independent, Fury (2013) also started his article about a new vegan store launch by saying: "Why is a fashion editor writing about veganism? Because it’s fashionable … Vegan is in." In his article Fury refers to celebrity adherents such as Beyoncé and Gwyneth Paltrow, and Hollywood A-listers seem indeed to have become major promoters of sustainability (e.g. Boykoff, Goodman, and Littler 2010; Jil 2012; Gray 2011).

From the extant literature, I have identified three competing explanations for this phenomenon. The first one comes from the proponents of evolutionary psychology (e.g. Griskevicius, Cantú, and van Vugt 2012; Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh 2010; Van Vugt and Hardy 2010). They argue that through conspicuous sustainable consumption a consumer is able to show that they are altruistic and that they can afford to spend money on the welfare of others. The second explanation is provided by Elliott (2013). With the help of Bourdieu (1984), she argues for a more subtle way of signalling status and taste. However, these studies offer a very static explanation for the status of sustainability: they do not account for the rise of sustainability and also seem to imply that interest in it will not wane either. Neither do they account for the active role of the market system or of cultural elites such as celebrities, apart from the notion by Griskevicius et al. (2010) that marketers should make eco-products more expensive to appeal to consumers. This notion is objectionable on many accounts such as making sustainability the purview of only the rich and privileged as well as potentially promoting unnecessary consumption (Elliott 2013; Owen 2012; Soron 2010).

The third explanation, the co-optation theory (Frank 1997; Heath and Potter 2004; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007), does take the market system into account by arguing that market forces will eventually internalise and commodify radical and marginalised consumption phenomena. They are transformed into "a constellation of trendy commodities and depoliticized fashion styles" (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007, 136). However, the theory does not explain in detail how and why certain previously stigmatised forms of consumption become fashionable (Sandicki and Ger 2010). In addition, the co-optation theory concentrates on marketers and thus largely ignores the role of media, apart from media being the site for advertising. But as the battle for and against social change is fought in the public sphere (Castells 2009) and as lifestyle media has become liltered with messages about sustainability (Lewis 2008, 2012), this is a major gap in the literature.

The main contribution of this paper is then to provide a fourth, complementary explanation for the phenomenon by analysing how and why media institutions shape the market to give rise to a fashion trend of sustainable consumption. I have called this the fashionisation of sustainable consumption to highlight the active involvement of a market actor. In relation to the previous studies, I argue against the view taken by the proponents of evolutionary psychology that there is something inherently status-enhancing about green products. Instead, I concur with Elliott (2013) that these meanings are historically emergent. Moreover, I argue that these meanings are shaped by the market system, and, in fact, created due to two interlinked motives: firstly, the profit-making logic of the media business and, secondly, upholding of the status quo and the ideology of ever increasing consumption for economic growth.

The second contribution of this paper is to highlight that the status and the trend of sustainable consumption seems to be short-term in nature due to the need for the lifestyle media to keep churning out new trends. This runs counter to what Elliott (2013) and the evolutionary psychologists seem to imply. But even if sustained over a long period of time, it may not guarantee environmental benefits: instead of limiting consumption, which would be necessary for true sustainability (Alexander & Ussher 2012; Kilbourne & Pickett 2008), this kind of commodified sustainability may lead to excesses and unnecessary consumption (e.g. Boykoff et al. 2010; Owen 2012).

In this study I use frame analysis. It is often associated with Goffman (1974) but I depart from the Goffmanesque frame analysis in that, as Tuchman (1978) argues, Goffman does not adequately explain the ideological functions or institutional mechanism of media (see also Vliegenthart and van Zoonen 2011). In this article, the classic study of Herman and Chomsky (1988; for a critical review see Klaehn 2002), Manufacturing Consent, is used to tie the media content to the context. In their model they argue that there are five filters which affect the media content. These are 1) the ownership and profit orientation of media corporations; 2) advertising as the primary source of funding; 3) the reliance on specialist, elite sources; 4) "flack" as a means of disciplining the media; and 5) "anti-communism" against the threat of enemies, of which the latter was later termed "otherness" by Chomsky (1998). Of these, the filters of profit orientation, advertising, sourcing and otherness are the most relevant for the current study. One may argue that flack from, for instance, governmental agencies is also an important factor in raising the profile of sustainability in the first place but discussing these forces is beyond the scope of this paper. The findings are then analysed with reference to the remaining four filters. Before proceeding with the detailed exploration of the two frames, however, I will briefly outline the methodology of this study.

METHODOLOGY

Women’s magazines were chosen as, for instance, Elliott (2013) shows that being female increases the odds of finding green consumption desirable. As domestic consumers, women are also targeted to buy greener, particularly in their role as caregivers (MacGregor 2006). The aim was also to gain data from a broad spectrum of women’s magazines. Consequently three Finnish women’s magazines with differing target audiences were chosen: Kakskultainen aimed at young mothers (readership 113 000, Otavamedia 2013b), Eeva aimed at mature, wealthier women (45+ years of age, readership 357 000, A-lehdet 2013) and Anna aimed at slightly younger women (35+ years of age, readership 324 000, Otavamedia 2013a) with a more modest budget. All the magazines have a wide circulation giving that Finland has approximately 5.5 million inhabitants. The study has a time span of 5 years (2009–2013) and, in all in all, 360 magazines were analysed (Anna having 48 issues a year whilst Eeva and Kakskultur have 12 issues a year).

The magazines were searched for articles, images, readers’ letters and advertisements related to sustainability and sustainable consumption in its widest definition. This included environmental, social, cultural and economic sustainability but as environmental
sustainability emerged as the most frequently promoted facet, the analysis focused on this. In addition to consumption stories, the data was also scanned for, for instance, political discourses, factual information and messages emanating from the environmental movement. However, these instances were rare. Instead, the majority of the data coded included products or consumption behaviours which were promoted as environmentally sustainable choices or had some reference to sustainability (e.g. the use of the prefix “eco”) and, to a lesser degree, voices arguing against sustainable consumption.

The analysis in this study involved two steps which are in line with the critical frame research tradition: the first exploring the rhetorical strategies employed and the second examining the specific industrial processes that facilitate the production of the emerging frames (Watkins 2001). The rhetorical strategies include problem or issue definition, key words and images, sources and themes which highlight and promote specific facts and interpretations (Entman 1993; Gamson 1992; Tucker 1998; Watkins 2001). The frames can then be thought of as clusters of messages which deploy similar strategies and offer similar explanations and solutions to the problem at hand. Several rounds of iterations between the data and the proposed frames were made until the final two frames emerged. The second step, the contextualization of framing, was done in particular with the help of Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) work which also stems from the critical theory tradition. In this critical view, then, frames are “the outcome of newsgathering routines by which journalists convey information ... from the perspective of values held by political and economic elites” (D’Angelo 2002, 876). Through framing, media as an institution select some information and intentionally omit other points of view to support the status quo (D’Angelo 2002, 876).

FINDINGS

“Eco-chic” frame

The first frame is labelled “Eco-chic” and it was present in all of the magazines. As explained above, eco-chic aims to combine sustainable living with trendiness, and the trendiness of sustainable consumption was indeed often stated in clear terms, such as naming sustainable consumption or organic food as “the trend” of the year. In addition, for instance, in the 11/2009 issue of Anna alone, the fashion section made bold statements in its headlines such as “Choose wisely–the green wave of fashion”, “This week ecological values are in”, “Nature power–eco beauty products for the spring pampering of the body and for maintaining inner peace” and “Only green in the wardrobe”, to name but a few. Often sustainable consumption was promoted through product reviews which list various eco-products the reader should try out. Two of the main product categories promoted by the magazines were organic food and cosmetics but the list is, in fact, endless. Eco-boutiques were featured, new hybrid cars were reviewed and eco-products from eco-hooeers to eco-washing-up liquids and eco-sofas made regular appearances. At the height of the trend in 2011, Eeva even promoted “eco-art” exhibitions and music labelled as “organic”.

Three important points are raised by these examples. Firstly, in all of the three magazines, sustainable consumption—or rather ostensibly sustainable consumption—was ubiquitous (see also Lewis 2008, 2012). Secondly, in line with the eco-chic ideology, ecological values can be combined with beauty, both on the inside and the outside, and that consumers preferring sustainable products are discerning and quality conscious. In fact, it seemed as though the word or prefix “eco” was often used as a short-hand for such qualities in the headline whereas the actual text may not even mention the ecological benefits of the product at all, which begs the question, what is the main motivation for such consumption behaviour. Thirdly, the sustainability promoted by the magazines was generally commodified in the form of various eco-products—although perhaps less so in Eeva which, in comparison, emphasised the taste and cultural values the readers should espouse more (Lewis 2008, 231). Furthermore, anti-consumption stories, factual arguments, political discourses and voices from the environmental movement were also silenced.

This ties in with the profit-making and funding filters (Herman and Chomsky 1988) of media. Firstly, the media content is biased as to protect the interests of the corporation. Lifestyle magazines, such as the current three, often revolve around fashion trends and they have also been dubbed the “dreamworld” of shopping (Stevens and Maclaran 2005). Their existence is therefore reliant on maintaining an urgency around being fashionable and up-to-date and, to keep the readers coming back for more, there is a need to actively create consumption trends. Sustainability, when defined as reducing the amount of consumption (Alexander and Ussher 2012), is therefore a threat to the media as it would make this type of media redundant and would hence destabilise their profit-making logic. Commodified, fashionised sustainability, however, is not a threat so long as it keeps consumers buying more and so long as it can be replaced by other trends once interest wanes. Secondly, magazines rely on advertisers for their funding but in order to attract advertisers they need a sizeable audience of the right kind–thus making the audience the commodity sold instead of the magazine itself. Hence, the content will take any form necessary to attract the audience. More importantly, content which is likely to put the audience off buying—in other words, anti-consumption stories— is marginalising or left out. Essentially, then, magazines are geared towards ever increasing consumption.

This is also where the filter “otherness” (Chomsky 1998) comes into play. The idea that enemies (i.e. the anti-consumption movement) are attacking us is promoted and thus we are encouraged to protect the dominant ideology of free capitalist markets. Here, then, the perpetuation of the sustainability trend can be seen as an offensive against the rising tide of anti-consumption voices. By promoting sustainability through consumption, it is possible to answer the call for sustainability but apply the rules of the dominant ideology to the game thus high jacking, or co-opting, the environmental movement. Taking a critical point of view Luke (2005), for instance, then argues that sustainable development is merely a social movement for greater commodification.

In this quest, images of celebrities are also evoked, which coincides with the overall trend of using celebrities in the media coverage of climate change (Boykoff et al. 2010). In many cultures, celebrities have become a special elite stratum. Many extraordinary qualities are attached to them (e.g. Goodman 2010; Lundahl 2014; McCracken 1989) and that is why they make such powerful cues to accentuate and give credence to the intended message of “sustainable consumption is trendy and fashionable.” In the data, these celebrities included, but were not limited to, models, artists and actors. In issue 11/2010 Anna, for instance, argued that “The charming British actor Colin Firth is involved with the Eco-Age store … You may also spot Colin helping out behind the counter during a rush hour–which is a wonderful reason to nip over to London to be eco!” This quote shows how celebrities are evoked to prompt action. The main rationale here though is to be closer to the celebrity both physically and symbolically while from the ecological point of view the argument is, to say the least, flawed. In fact, one is reminded of the Jevons paradox (Owen 2012; Polimene et al. 2008) where the purported sustainability of the product in fact increases the ecological strain of that consumption activity by seeming efficient and therefore more desirable.
Here, reference to Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) filter “sourcing”, is also prudent. They argue that media forms a symbiotic relationship with its trusted sources out of economic necessity and reciprocity of interest. Good sources, for instance, provide a steady stream of news which are guaranteed to interest the audience. I argue that, especially for lifestyle media, celebrities are such sources. Media rely on celebrities to sell the magazines whilst celebrities rely on lifestyle media to build their brands thus forming a symbiotic relationship. What embeds celebrities even deeper into the institutions upholding the hegemony of consumption culture is that celebrities act as endorsers of brands (Erdogan 1999) and, as Brockett (2008) states, celebrities exist to facilitate ever-increasing consumption. Similarly, Brockett (2009, 10) argues that celebrity culture is the most pervasive in cultures where a greater inequality prevails. Celebrities therefore seem to have a pacifying effect, a new kind of “opium of the people” (Marx 1844). This ties in well with the aim of preserving the status quo.

**“Free to choose” frame**

The second frame, “Free to choose”, was present especially in Kaksplus and, as time went on, in Anna whereas in Eeva sustainability discreetly dropped off the agenda in favour of other trends. This frame highlighted that sustainability will have to come second after more important shopping criteria and the readers do not appreciate being pressured into sustainable consumption. In Kaksplus, for instance, the conflict is created because young parents are torn between the demands of family and work, and the demands for sustainability only add to these pressures. Instead, then, the consumers should be free to choose, without any guilt, how they spend their money. This conflict was often recognised by Kaksplus. The editor (issue 02/2009), for instance, acknowledged this pressure by saying that in 2005–2007 alternative and ecological parenting became “big things” but raising the issue brought about major arguments for and against. She writes: “I was surprised … how absolute [the readers] are at their worst.” And whilst the trendiness of sustainable consumers was acknowledged, they were also often ridiculed and stigmatised for being too easily led by the fashion industry (e.g. issue 02/2010 “Hero mums” and issue 04/2010 “Top 10 parenting”; cf. hipsters e.g. Arsel and Thompson 2011). In fact, sustainability could even be seen to hurt the family:

*[In issue 12/2012, there] was an interview of the mother of a vegetarian family. The whole family were vegetarians. And to top it all, the only creature that got meat was the dog! A vegetarian dog would be animal cruelty according to the mum! But only feeding a small child fodder is not?*  

*Use your common sense, young women … The world will not be any better for your fussing. (Reader’s letter, Kaksplus 03/2013)*

Here, the filter “otherness” (Chomsky 1998) raises its head again. The radical voices of those who “fuss” about the environment are marginalised to protect the dominant ideology of consumption culture, free choice and the rights of the individual. Read in this critical way, what one finds is that, in fact, the so-called dissident voices are aimed at upholding the status quo, in a similar fashion to the media and marketing institutions themselves.

The magazines also soon capitalised on these voices—again arguably because they need new trends to sustain themselves and because, due to the funding filter, antagonising the readers is not in the best interests of light-hearted lifestyle magazines. Anna’s changed attitude is highlighted in issue 19/2012 in a short article titled “Climate change in memoriam”:

*Are you haunted by thoughts about global warming? Do you calculate your carbon footprint? Are you worried about the destruction of the world?*

*Exactly, me neither. Anymore. Finns worry less about climate change, says a new survey. The same can be concluded based on general observations. Media is no longer filled with (quilt-inducing) stories about the ecological problems ... (Anna 19/2012)*

In this cleverly written article, purportedly summarising the feelings of the nation, the writer then goes on to say that she would be more likely to still care about the environment if things which are out of the control of ordinary people had changed (e.g. cheaper electric and hybrid cars and organic food, public transport and recycling made easier). The article thus pushes the responsibility away from the consumers (cf. Lewis 2008; Moisander 2007; Moisander, Markkula, and Eräranta 2010) and hence justifies the on-going consumer culture.

This marked the end for the sustainability trend in Anna and similar downturn can also be detected in the other magazines. Instead the limelight was hijacked by other trends, such as the so-called superfoods (berries, seeds, and legumes etc. which are supposedly full of nutrients) and their use in beauty products. These products were framed in a similar fashion compared to sustainable consumption in that denotations of healthiness, trendiness, quality and discerning taste were emphasised but references to sustainability were dropped. This highlights the fact that sustainable consumption for the lifestyle media institutions is no more than another trend to churn out to keep the never-ending cycle of consumption going.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The main thesis of this article has been that media has shaped the market to give rise to the sustainable consumption trend through the “Eco-chic” frame for profit-making reasons. At the same time, it upholds the hegemony of consumer culture. But the study has also highlighted that the trend of sustainable consumption indeed seems to be short-term in nature. This is due to the fact that magazines, often dedicated to trends and fashion, have keep churning out new issues, and thus, new trends. However, even if sustained over a long period of time, it may not guarantee environmental benefits as commodified, fashionised sustainability may lead to excesses and unnecessary consumption (e.g. Boykoff et al. 2010; Elliott 2013; Owen 2012).

This phenomenon must also be acknowledged by consumer research. Firstly, it is important to be critical about the so-called sustainable consumption consumers engage in and not merely applaud any new consumption trend disguised as such. Csutora’s (2012) analysis in fact shows that the ecological footprint of “green” consumers does not differ significantly from that of the uninterested “brown” consumers.

Secondly, the fact that ecological problems are included in the media agenda nowadays does not necessarily mean that progress is being made. In fact, the underlying ideology perpetuated by lifestyle media seems to imply that true sustainability is unlikely to be achieved under these conditions as has been argued here and by commentators such as Lewis (2013). The hegemony of progress through consumption seems to be so ingrained that even the readers, as shown by the “Free to choose” frame, seem unable to question it.
As Hall (1979, 1995) argues, the power of media lies in its ability to make certain representations of the world seem natural and as common sense.

On the other hand, even Herman and Chomsky (1988) do not subscribe to the view that media are monolithic or entirely void of dissent. It is therefore necessary to analyse the current understanding on an issue and the internal logic of the media to be able to contest the meanings and to transform the conceptions of the masses (Hall 1986, 20). This provides hope but also direction for future research. Media is at the heart of social change (Castells 2009), and change is possible. It will, however, require uncovering the hidden mechanisms of media institutions and is not a matter of couple of targeted media communications campaigns as is implied by, for instance, Koldanai-Matchett (2009). This article has aimed to be one step in that direction.

The current study is not without its limitations, however. The first one is that it was not possible to discuss the role of the government in this development. This is an important factor as, for instance, Alexander and Ussher (2012) argue that even governments are yet to accept the necessity to consume less and, instead, promote “sustainable development”, in other words, continuing to pursue economic growth whilst aiming for efficiency. As argued above, this seems to be a flawed way of thinking (e.g. Owen 2012; Polimeni et al. 2008). Therefore, I concur with commentators such as Moisander (2007) in that sustainable consumption research should direct their gaze away from individual consumers and, instead, problematise the hegemony of “sustainable development” and of consumption culture, and investigate the forces which uphold this ideology.

Secondly, only women’s magazines were analysed and further research is required in a wider range of publications. There is also a real danger of perpetuating the gendered view on sustainable consumption (Bourdieu 1984, 382; Elliott 2013). In addition, the context here was Finland which is arguably a small market. However, the basic principles of media business are the same in modern, capitalistic countries. Cross-cultural comparisons would, however, be a fruitful avenue for future research. Other recommendations for future research include a more detailed analysis of the role of the celebrities in this process. The research could also include investigating the role of what Castells (2009) calls mass self-communication, in other words blogs and social media such as Twitter, whereby the celebrities can communicate with their followers directly and thus bypass mainstream media institutions.

REFERENCES


