



**LUNDS**  
UNIVERSITET

**School of Economics and Management**

Department of Business Administration

*M.Sc. International Marketing and Brand Management*

## **BUS 808: Master Thesis**

### **Dreaming of a Red Lamborghini and Blue Sky: Towards Understanding Sustainability and Sustainable Consumption in Developing Countries**

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Date: May, 24 2010

**Abstract:**

- Title:** Dreaming of a Red Lamborghini and Blue Sky: Towards Understanding Sustainability and Sustainable Consumption in Developing Countries.
- Date of the Seminar:** 1<sup>st</sup> June, 2010
- Course:** BUS 808 -Master thesis in International Marketing and Brand Management.
- Authors:** Bishaara Hameed, Igor Ackerberg, Sundus Ahad Khan
- Advisors:** Sofia Ulver-Sneistrup
- Keywords:** Sustainability Discourses, Sustainable Consumption, Consumers, Developing Countries
- Thesis purpose:** To explore how consumers in developing countries living in a complex globalized world make sense of the various discourses of sustainable consumption, habitats of meaning and cultural flows to which they are exposed to; and investigate how these negotiations may indicate their future consumption choices.
- Methodology:** A qualitative research methodology was used which focused on identifying meanings and values that individuals associate with different experiences they undergo in transition between different social contexts. This methodology allowed us to gather rich and thick data, which was used to analyze how informants negotiate and make sense of ‘sustainability’ and that allowed to penetrate their dreams and aspirations which may indicate their future consumption choices.
- Theoretical perspective:** Sustainability discourses and ideological roots of consumerism, global trickle -down theory, emulation, global cultural flows and habitats of meaning.
- Empirical data:** The empirical data used for this particular study was gathered through in-depth, phenomenological long interviews with Chinese students, temporarily in Sweden, pursuing graduate education
- Conclusion:** We demonstrate that our informants do not associate sustainability with their personal consumption. This may be rooted in the strong forces of their original habitat of meaning which encourages consumerism in consistency with the ideology of growth. Secondly, we show that habitats of meaning are not country bound. Nevertheless, in our study when individuals in transition are exposed to different habitats of meaning, we demonstrate that the intersection of flows may not result in a scenario of de-territorialisation as to what Appadurai (1990) might have predicted. In line with Heyman & Campbell (2009), we demonstrate that de-territorialisation of cultural flows may only be one of many possible consequences by clearly disclosing the contradictions that the individuals are caught up in and we stress the importance of understanding the transition process. Hence, thirdly, we demonstrate ways through which sustainable consumption choices in developing countries may be explained through other ways than merely anticipating whether emulation or imitation occurs.

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank our advisor, Sofia Ulver-Sneistrup, for the guidance provided during the work on the thesis. We also would like to express our gratitude to all the students who participated in the interviews.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK .....</b>	<b>4</b>
Sustainability, Consumption and Social Paradigms.....	4
<i>Concepts of Sustainability and Sustainable Consumption.....</i>	4
<i>Ideology of Growth .....</i>	5
<i>A Sustainability Discourse rooted in the Ideology of Growth .....</i>	7
<i>Alternative Sustainability Discourses .....</i>	8
Scrutinizing the Empirical Treatment of Sustainable Consumption in Consumer Studies .....	8
<i>Social Dynamics behind Sustainable Consumption.....</i>	9
<i>Is Global Trickle-Down Theory too simplistic? .....</i>	10
Global Cultural Flows and Habitats of Meaning.....	13
<i>Global Cultural Flows .....</i>	13
<i>Habitats of Meaning .....</i>	14
<b>CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<i>China: The Original Habitat of Meaning.....</i>	17
<i>Sweden: The Foreign Habitat of Meaning. ....</i>	19
<i>Method:.....</i>	21
<b>FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>25</b>
Sustainability as Constructed by our Informants .....	25
<i>Population: .....</i>	25
<i>Technology: .....</i>	26
<i>Government's Role: .....</i>	26
<i>The relation between economic growth and sustainability:.....</i>	28

<i>The relation between economic growth and human wellbeing:</i> .....	28
Material Aspirations .....	29
<i>Career:</i> .....	29
<i>Future Consumption:</i> .....	30
<i>Home:</i> .....	31
<i>Cars</i> .....	33
Non-Material Aspirations.....	34
Negotiations between the Chinese and the Swedish Contexts .....	37
<b>DISCUSSION</b> .....	<b>39</b>
Sustainability and Consumption .....	39
Material Aspirations versus Non-material Aspirations .....	40
Flows, Sense-making and Contradictions.....	41
Macro Forces behind the Micro Contradictions .....	43
<b>CONCLUSIONS</b> .....	<b>46</b>
<b>LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH</b> .....	<b>49</b>
<b>REFERENCES:</b> .....	<b>51</b>

## INTRODUCTION

It is well contended in the literature that the mass consumption practices adopted by the West in the post-industrial era of the 20<sup>th</sup> century resulted in severe deterioration of the environment as well depletion of natural resources ( e.g. Tan & Lau, 2009; Hobson, 2002; Stein, 2009). Given the severity of the situation, there has been considerable emphasis on ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’ over the last two decades. Academics and policy makers have only concentrated on the production and technological aspects of sustainability, while the consumption side of the problem was largely ignored. However the recent emergence of the term “sustainable consumption” can probably be regarded as a sign of changing attitude, as the term refers to the consumption side. In fact, over-consumption is believed to be one of the main reasons behind growing environmental problems (Connolly & Prothero, 2003; Hobson, 2002; Tan & Lau, 2009).

The issue of sustainable development and consumption becomes even more significant taking into consideration the high population and growing economies of the developing countries. The rising purchasing power of the middle-class, estimated at over 1.2 billion people, in emerging markets such as China, India, Brazil and Russia (Myers & Kent, 2004 as cited by Holt and Ustner, 2010) is associated with a parallel increase in the consumption levels (Peattie & Peattie, 2009). There has been increasing pressure from US and EU on the developing countries especially China and India to reduce their carbon emissions and to adopt the sustainable consumption practices (Schaefer and Crane, 2005); the danger being that if the consumption level of these countries mirrors the mass consumption practices as those followed by the Western world in the 20th century, the repercussions on the global environment and natural resources will be catastrophic.

Yet, if the issue of how sustainable consumption practices may operate in the developing countries need to be understood, it is important to examine what meaning sustainable consumption has for these consumers. To begin with, the phenomenon of ‘sustainability’ or ‘sustainable consumption’ has highly negotiable meanings (Gladwin et al. 1995; Schaefer and Crane, 2005). For some, sustainable consumption is a smart way of consuming, for instance, consuming goods which are produced using the most ecological technology, or which can be recycled after use; while for others sustainable consumption is about consuming less (Bond, 2005).

Even yet, one might consider that the world today may still be divided into countries with their specific political systems and ideologies, various socio-historical contexts which create conditions for emergence of specific consumer cultures and discourses (Foucault, 1982), including those on sustainable consumption. Furthermore, considering that contemporary world is highly globalized and characterized by high human mobility and information exchange (Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1996) it is logical to assume that modern consumers have to live in a complex environment which can be characterized by abundance of contradictory discourses combined with the market forces which ensure the promotion of consumerism and its cyclical continuity (Kolandai –Matchett, 2009, Michaelis, 2001).

The situation is even more multifaceted for the “new consumers’ of the developing countries who are being propelled to consume by the huge multinational corporations at one end while simultaneously being exposed to the western generated conceptions of sustainable consumption.

Given the paradoxical situation our objective is to explore how consumers living in such a complex globalized world make sense of the various discourses on sustainability and sustainable consumption which are produced in different social contexts and surround them in their daily life, flowing in an unpredictable direction? Moreover how do these negotiations indicate the future consumption choices of these consumers?

We have chosen Chinese youth as the focus of our study as they originate from the world’s fastest growing economy as well the biggest carbon emitting country (Stein, 2009). This study is important because as the world eyes China very critically, there is much focus on government regulations and industrial policy’s to restrain environmental impact of the rapid economic growth but there is not considerable focus on the Chinese consumers themselves.

Nevertheless, it shall be noted that, firstly, there is limited research that connects the evolving subject of sustainability to consumption itself. Secondly, also given the inadequate attention in the literature to understand consumption in developing countries (Holt & Ustuner, 2010), we argue that there is even a greater danger to be addressed in the literature, that consumption theories of emulation, based on much of the empirical work conducted in the West, are presumed to be able to predict sustainable consumption patterns in the developing countries, where the exact dynamics of what might really take place in their specific contexts is rarely empirically documented. Taking into account the various conflicting discourses and ideologies in the global environment that revolve around the notion of sustainability and sustainable consumption itself, we consider that how individuals make sense of these processes in their minds could be complicated as well.

Thus we eye critically on simple emulation, imitation based models which we argue has strong limitations to fully explain sustainable consumption behaviour in developing countries. Further, by combining insights gained from the research on global cultural flows that bring to focus people in mobility and the nature of chaotic cultural flows (Appadurai, 1990), we then demonstrate how Chinese individuals in transition between different social contexts make sense of notions of sustainability and their future consumption choices . Hence we proceed to explain how such mechanisms may take shape in developing countries in current global environments, in other ways than how such less dynamic models may predict.



## THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Sustainability, Consumption and Social Paradigms

#### *Concepts of Sustainability and Sustainable Consumption*

The 20th century saw an unprecedented increase in the mass consumption and production by the industrialized west. Consumption has become one of the central ideas of contemporary life and the ideology of economic growth accompanied by the mass consumption has become the ideology of contemporary society (Baudrillard, 1998). The level GDP has factually become the main indicator of human development and wellbeing (Baudrillard, 1998), and economic growth, which implies constant growth of consumption, is recognized as one of the main priorities of all nations around the globe. It is not surprising that the increasing pressure on the environment and its deterioration has attracted public attention, making such concepts as “sustainability”, “sustainable development”, “sustainable growth” and “sustainable consumption” widely used terms of the modern vocabulary.

The term “sustainable consumption” has its origins in the term “sustainable development” (Rachagan & Kanniah, 2001). According to the Brandtland Report Sustainable development is defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43). The literature lacks a precise definition of sustainable consumption and it has been labeled as a fuzzy concept (Connolly & Prothero, 2003). According to the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (1995, as cited in Rachagan & Kanniah, 2001) the term “sustainable consumption” can be defined as “the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimizing the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations”.

As mentioned earlier, the term sustainable consumption is closely related to the concept of sustainable development. Sustainable consumption can be regarded as the necessary condition for sustainable development, which, according to its definition, aims at securing the ability of future generations to fulfill their needs. But what is development? According to Oxford Dictionary development is “gradual advancement through progressive stages, growth from within”. According to Collins dictionary development is “the act or process of growing, progressing, or developing”. So development can be understood as advancement, progress or

growth. It seems that development on a personal level of individual consumer is primarily understood as growth, and this understanding has its ideological roots.

### ***Ideology of Growth***

Growth has become an unquestionable priority in our time. Getting a larger salary and career promotion is regarded as benefit by the vast majority of people. Increase of sales and continuous expansion into foreign markets is the primary aim for the companies (Kilbourne, McDonagh & Prothero, 1997) and the growing GDP is regarded as a major indicator of nation's success (Ng, 2007). Therefore, the ideology of growth seems to dominate on all levels: national, corporate and individual.

Looking at the ideology of growth from the point of view of national policies, it is obvious that economic growth has become one of the main indicators of social progress all over the world. It has been assumed for a long time that growing GDP is a way towards achieving higher wellbeing and happiness of citizens (Bliese, 1999). Even though the available research provides enough evidence indicating that economic growth does not increase wellbeing and happiness (Bliese, 1999), GDP is still regarded as the main indicator of national progress. The GDP, nevertheless, does not take in account anything that happens outside the sphere of monetary exchange (Cobb, 1995). GDP also overlooks many important spheres of everyday life like private child and elder care; it treats increase of crime, divorce and natural disasters resulting in growing expenses on security, legal services and repair as economic gain; it ignores the deterioration of living environment caused by economic growth, while at the same time, the financial resources spent on cleaning up the wastes produced by expanding industries is again accounted as economic growth (Cobb, 1995).

On the corporate level the things are not much different. In the business circles the necessity of growth is also unquestionable. Corporations need to grow, businesses need to be expanded and internationalized, new markets should be explored and penetrated, sales and stock price should rise. Kilbourne et al. (1997), for example, note that in mainstream marketing, the rule of the game is to sell more and more.

The ideology of growth can also be traced on the micro level represented by the individual consumers living in today's societies. Every single individual aspiring for higher income, career advancement, higher social status, larger accommodation or a "cooler" car is part of this ideology and participates in its reproduction. For example, Baudrillard (1998, p.47) states that "consumption at the highest level [i.e. at the level of "economic-political system"] is part of the consumer society, of the same order as the convulsive craving for objects at the level of private individual". The logic according to which the growing GDP is the condition of citizens'

wellbeing and happiness which works at the level of national economy, therefore, can be transferred to the micro level where the same logic, consciously or unconsciously, is followed by individual consumers. Baudrillard (1998) compared modern consumers to isolated tribes building imitations of cargo planes in the hope that the copy of the plane can attract other planes to land. Analogically to such isolated tribes, according to Baudrillard, modern consumers consume not products, but the signs of well being and happiness, in the unconscious hope that consumption can bring wellbeing and happiness.

It is obvious that the ideology of growth should be sustained at all levels, since economic growth is only possible if growth in the production is accompanied by the growth in consumption. Baudrillard (1998) states that the order of production and the order of consumption are entangled with each other. The state pursuing growing GDP, which is the condition of citizens' wellbeing, needs these citizens to consume, and therefore needs to convince its citizens that consumption of goods is the way to wellbeing. The growing economy and modern consumerism are therefore two sides of one ideology.

The economy of growth based on mass consumption is based on the ideology according to which growing affluence is regarded as means of eliminating social inequalities and achieving a more democratic society (Baudrillard, 1998). According to this ideology everybody is theoretically given the same possibility of access to the consumption of material goods which is aimed at erasing social differences and building a better society. Cohen (2006, p. 45) states that today there exists an ideological consensus that "economy and society built around mass consumption would deliver not only great prosperity but also more democracy and equality" referring to this consensus as 'consumers' republic'. The consumers' republic has its origins in the post World War II United States when American post-war economy was build through the promotion of mass consumption, which was positioned not as self-indulgent activity, but rather as a civic duty of every American (Cohen, 2006). Even though mass consumption did not prove to be a way towards more equal society in the United States, this American model of consumers' republic was consequently transferred to other countries resulting in its existence in various variations around the globe (Cohen, 2006).

Getting back to the problem of sustainability and sustainable consumption, it is logical to ask how sustainability and sustainable consumption relate to the current ideological conditions. This can be better understood by regarding sustainability as not something fixed and static, but rather as something collectively constructed, floating and transforming and having different meanings, which is reflected in the existence of various discourses on the issue which do not exist as something detached from the current ideological environment.

### ***A Sustainability Discourse rooted in the Ideology of Growth***

As was discussed previously, the global economy is shaped by the ideology of growth and mass consumption. Even though it has been recognized that a transition to more sustainable ways of living is required due to the severe environmental consequences of the current consumption patterns (Peattie & Peattie, 2009), it seems that the societies around the globe are still following the old way of reasoning. It is not surprising that the prevailing view upon sustainability is that which best complies with the existing dominating social, political and economic paradigm. This discourse can be called a rationalization discourse, as it is based on the idea of modernization of production and consumption practices by making them more efficient (Hobson, 2002). According to this sustainability discourse, sustainability can be reached through technological innovation without any need in the reduction of consumption and production rates, therefore minimizing the disturbance of the existing political, economic and social order.

The traditional marketing theory has developed during the domination of consumerist social paradigm, which is still continuing. It is not surprising that academics, politicians and especially businessmen are not willing to embrace the new ideology which contradicts the established values of modern capitalism and interests of the majority of world population grown up in consumerist societies. In order to reconcile the consumerist interests with the resolution of emerging environmental problems industrialized societies generated the ideology of “green consumerism”, which argues that resolving environmental problems is possible without any reduction of current consumption levels through innovative production, waste disposal, recycling and other techniques (e.g. Hobson, 2002; Krantz, 2010).

Certain groups of more radical academics in the area of sustainability argue that “green consumerism” will not be able to ensure sustainable development for the mankind and that more radical change is needed. For example, Li (2009) argues that the environmental impact of human economic activities cannot be reduced to zero, stating that if the global economy continues to develop around the principles of capitalism the environmental catastrophe is inevitable. The idea of sustainable consumption, primarily understood as voluntary reduction of consumption, is a more radical view upon the resolution of emerging environmental and social problems (Connolly & Prothero, 2003). Such discourses on sustainable consumption based on consumption reduction are only starting to penetrate the western societies and obviously will have to face enormous social, political and economic resistance. Such alternative discourses are based on ideologies which are more contradictive to the dominant paradigm and only starting to emerge. Bourke & Meppem (2000), for example, differentiate between privileged and marginalized meanings, stating that the meanings and discourses which are more convenient for a current social, economic and political system become privileged, while those which contradict it inevitably

become marginalized. Some of such alternative discourses, which themselves vary in terms of radicalism, will be briefly discussed in the next section.

### *Alternative Sustainability Discourses*

Unlike the dominant sustainability discourse discussed in the previous section the alternative discourses on sustainability and sustainable consumption are more radical and to a greater or lesser extent contradict the dominating neoliberal ideology of growth. For example, the sustainable consumption discourse which calls for voluntary simplicity may be regarded as partial rejection of consumption as it calls for conscious self-restraint and reduction of consumption levels (Librova, 1999). This discourse on sustainable consumption resonates and at the same time differs from another new discourse on sustainable consumption, “enoughism”, the term which was included in the Independent’s 2009 Buzzword Glossary. The main idea of “enoughism” is that increased consumption can lead to dissatisfaction and even mental illness (Independent, 2009). While the discourse of voluntary simplicity calls for restraint, “enoughism” emphasizes rational motivation behind consumption reduction stating that less consumption is associated with less dissatisfaction.

Among other discourses on sustainable consumption is the so-called discourse of “environmental citizenship” (Hobson, 2002). The discourse of environmental citizenship emphasizes consumer information claiming that through informing consumers about environmental problems can create a sense of duty which will positively influence their consumption behaviour (Hobson, 2002). Numerous other views upon the ways of reaching sustainability exist and their detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. One thing that unites these views, nevertheless, is that to a larger or lesser extent they stand in the opposition to the dominant ideology of growth.

## Scrutinizing the Empirical Treatment of Sustainable Consumption in Consumer Studies

Given the various concepts and discourses that surround the notion of sustainability itself, it is important to see how the subject is empirically treated in consumer studies. Treating the subject of sustainable consumption, from an economic analysis perspective alone, has the danger of neglecting consumer preferences and the tendency of presuming it as something that stays constant over time (Stern, Dietz, Rultan, Socolow, & Sweeney, 1997). As Stern et al. (1997) further note, preferences may change due to several reasons in different cultural contexts, in the sense, for instance, individuals from an environment of affluence may have different values,

personal and policy preferences, when compared to individuals from a background where there is scarcity. In line with how Cordes & Buenstorf (2008) pinpoint it is additionally worth mentioning that since the ultimate goal of any economic activity is to satisfy the wants of consumers, examining what satisfies consumers and hence how these consumers reason out their consumption preferences, would serve an essential role in understanding any transition towards a more sustainable consumption economy. Thus, for studies of sustainable consumption, it is important to understand the process of meaning and preference construction for individuals (Stern et al., 1997).

### ***Social Dynamics behind Sustainable Consumption***

We take note that the literature identifies the social dynamics behind sustainable consumption just like any other consumption activity could be looked at. As Connolly & Prothero (2003, p.288) examine, the Western society and many industrializing countries have long presented, the philosophy to “consume, consume, consume” as the dream, the ultimate ‘good life’ that was associated with personified happiness that has no negative consequences, while also presenting meanings of non-consumption as those missing out on ‘real life’, which is consistent with the mass consumption needs, that was reviewed earlier.

However, the literature also identifies hopeful reasons, as far as sustainability is concerned, as to why consumers may not always want to engage in more consumption. Connolly & Prothero (2003), identify the power that non-consumption practices themselves may have, noting the fact that when consumers boycott a particular product, that they are still communicating a message, thereby highlighting the fact that essentially consumption and non-consumption are the same, when evaluated from their sign-value. Connolly & Prothero (2003), connect this logic to Baudrillard’s (1970) notion of sign-value, ‘differentiation’ and ‘personalisation’, according to which, how individuals differentiate themselves, may not be through consumption of objects, but in fact through rejection of objects as well.

The need for self-expression and creating image are ways that allow consumers to differentiate themselves in the post-modern social paradigm (Chaudhuri & Majumdar, 2006). As outlined above, ethical consumption and specifically even non-consumption itself may involve the same social dynamics of constructing identity and self that possibly provides new ways for differentiating in comparison to the mass consumption practices. For example, consumers may see it as an ‘enchanted’ experience, that makes them feel good about themselves for knowing how to make better choices, which they characterize as a distinction to the, standardized, ‘McDonaldized’ mass consumption practices, as such in the research by Thompson & Coskuner-

Balli (2007), conducted on a case of ethical, community supported agriculture program, where consumers maintain good relationships with farmers.

As noted above, the literature may have observed signs of transformations for individuals from a stage of mass consumerist behaviour to that of reduced mass consumption that may allow them the same social benefits. However it needs to be mentioned, as also argued by Ustuner & Holt (2010), that much of the empirical research in the area has concentrated on people living in rich, developed, industrialized countries. Additionally, as to what was outlined earlier, for instance, qualitative research conducted on sustainable consumption across product sectors of active green consumers in UK (McDonald, Oates, Thynes, Alevizou & McMorland, 2009), or the involvement of green consumers with environmental issues in their everyday life in urban Ireland (Connolly & Prothero, 2008) or netnographic research conducted on the online dialogues and sense making amongst green travellers (Moisander & Rokka, 2009) examine how the green consumers in the West, seek information, make sense of it and then negotiate their consumption decisions for specific product and services. Nevertheless, how such mechanisms take place in developing countries is often neglected. Subsequently, there is the hazard of presuming the same social dynamics and that the developing world may simply follow the consumption choices adopted by the West

Among the very limited empirical studies conducted on developing countries, Chaudhuri & Majumdar (2006) documented how Indian consumers increasingly engaged in consumerism pursuing Western goods, with the liberalization of the Indian Economy and the rise of mass media, which is another illustration of how the developing world may engage in the same consumerist patterns, favouring Western goods with the rise of their purchasing power. This may imply the relevance of emulation models such as the global trickle-down theory, which we examine below.

### ***Is Global Trickle-Down Theory too simplistic?***

In fact, while anticipating for a future that engages in sustainable consumption, it remains a great interest to be able to precisely examine how consumers in the developing world would spend their increased purchasing power. Wilk (1998) examines if the following three possible scenarios might take place. The first scenario is 'modernization', where it is assumed that the developing world would go through the same consumption stages, in the same order as of the developed world (Wilk, 1998). For sustainable consumption, this might be about presuming that the developing countries would engage in the environment threatening, heavy consumption activities before engaging in new ways of finding satisfaction through sustainable consumption practices.

The second scenario that Wilk (1998) pinpoints is a short-cut version of the ‘Modernisation’ where, it is considered that the developing world may not necessarily follow the same emulation stages in the same order, that they may even possibly skip some stages. Based on this assumption, the developing world may be assumed to be ready to engage in some forms of sustainable consumption without undergoing all the stages that the West had followed that contributed to environmental degradation. The third possibility, that Wilk (1998) highlights is somewhat an opposition to emulation, termed as ‘divergence’ where each country may take on different aspirations to the West and specify its own definitions of living standards. Furthermore, Wilk (1998) suggests that an emulation model might be a weak model for prediction of consumption patterns in the developing world.

Together with Wilk (1998), Ustuner & Holt (2010) are one of our key sources in the literature that highly stimulated our study, who interestingly note the blunt and over-simplistic ideas behind the Global Trickle-Down model that has foundations from the class emulation theories from Simmel and Veblen, which may not be applicable for understanding consumption in developing countries. According to the emulation theory, styles start at the top of the social hierarchy, and the classes below seek out to emulate the consumption patterns of those social classes above them in the social hierarchy ladder. In this regard, this could be an assumption where the lower class is at a continuous struggle in trying to follow the upper class, where the South follows the North, the East follows the West, where the poor tries to keep up with the rich (McCracken, 1988 as cited in Corrigan, 1997; Wilk, 1998).

However, as noted by Ustuner & Holt (2010), instead of placing class structures to be bounded within single countries, the global trickle-down theory expands the same notions into a global scale, which may lead into assumptions that when consumers from developing countries gain enough purchasing power, they would emulate consumers from the West, who they view as the most relevant group above them in the social hierarchy. Also, as assumed in this model, Western goods are assumed to be powerful central objects that consumers from the developing world deeply desire (Ustuner & Holt, 2010).

The authors then point out that these assumptions as such from the global trickle-down theory may disregard one of the most important dimensions behind Bourdieu’s claims, according to which different class groups use different consumption strategies (Bourdieu’s 1984, as cited in Ustuner & Holt, 2010), hence alerting us of the fact that it may not always be a case of following a single strategy that is used to engage in consumerism that demonstrates the limitation of such an emulation model.



Yet, the study by Ustuner & Holt (2010), conducted on 36 married women in Turkey that explored how they sought to emulate Western lifestyles, demonstrated that while consumers with low cultural capital pursued expensive goods that centred around Turkish status symbols, consumers with high cultural capital still followed Western lifestyles, as if it were a recipe, that allowed the authors to revise Bourdieu's notion of habitus-based cultural capital, demonstrating that cultural capital may also be claimed via distant text-book like learning. This appears contradictory to their earlier claim, as it implies that such emulation may in fact take place, ironically through even less differentiated, copy-paste strategies.

Hence, among of the most important implications in their research that this study takes a critical eye upon is the notion that it still reverts back to the same concern that the new-class consumers from the developing world may seek to emulate the Western consumption patterns that has contributed to environmental degradation. Their findings imply consequences that such emulation may even take place via even less complicated text-book like learning. "New consumers also pose a crucial challenge in the global struggle to manage climate change. To the extent that the new consumers identify with and seek to emulate the carbon-intensive Western lifestyle, the challenge of addressing global warming becomes that much harder" (Ustuner & Holt, 2010, p. n.a.).

Similarly, ideas of emulation and imitation are depended upon to ultimately solve the problem. For instance it has been stated that Social Learning Theory may be used to teach individuals sustainable means on the basis that they would learn from other people. As noted by McGregor (2009, p. 260), "[s]ocial learning theory holds that people can observe and learn the actions of others to develop patterns of consumer behaviour they wish to emulate and perform. Sustainable development can be the product of the performance of observational learning of norms, values and behaviours associated with responsible consumer activities."

Furthermore, the reasoning above invokes our study to further re-think the idea, whether such emulation assumptions may still be too simplified. It may merely be not enough to assume that the new- consumer class of the developing countries would emulate as such. In fact, it shall also be noted that, in addition to the notion of cultural capital which may be seen to be de-territorialized as to how Ustuner & Holt (2010) had pointed out, it is important to recognize that social contexts today may also be considered to be de-territorialized as well, in the sense that at present times, as compared to the past, a considerable amount of people are in a state of mobility, moving temporarily within and between different cultures for various reasons.

Taking in to account that there are so many conflicting sustainability discourses and ideologies in the global environment today as was seen earlier between different social contexts, these people

are also in a situation where they experience various cultural flows while they are in a transition processes. Given such dynamic contexts, how consumers from the developing countries may emulate the Western consumption patterns may be even more complicated, in the sense that it could be more than a static emulation or imitation path that is taking place. There might be more to finding whether the developing countries may take the path in the opposite direction, such as through divergence as was discussed earlier. Considering the conflicting paradigms in the course towards sustainability, while individuals increasingly move through different social contexts, the various conflicting forces penetrating their minds could be fluid and more dynamic.

Hence this may pose a complicated challenge to individuals with regard to the consumption choices they would make, taking into account these unpredictable forces. This is where we take charge from previous studies that hardly looked at this in this direction. It has been treated as if, social contexts are rather static and localised , where one anticipates ,which direction would a particular country ultimately move ,often overlooking the idea that individuals are increasingly flooded with various forces acting simultaneously around them. We borrowed insights from such notions of fluidity of social contexts by Appadurai's (1990) research on global cultural flows as outlined below that helped us to address the limitation and sensitized us to demonstrate that what might be taking place in developing countries might be more than emulation or imitation etc.

## Global Cultural Flows and Habitats of Meaning

### *Global Cultural Flows*

A recent focus on “flows”, “mobility” and “movement” in anthropological research has been seen as a reaction to limited presumptions in the past where cultures are seen to reside in unitary, fixed places (Heyman & Campbell, 2009; Appadurai, 1990). Appadurai is among the most influential scholars to examine the concept of “global flows”, which according to him, the new global cultural world may not be understood in terms of existing periphery models, or straightforward, simple models of push and pull, but rather it is important to recognize that it is in a complex, over lapping, disjunctive order and hence it is crucial to address the dynamic forces in play (Appadurai, 1990). He points out the fact that interactions in the past were slowed by limited technologies of transportation and communication, insisting that the present is drastically different from the past, the present being placeless and having flows and the past being placed and localistic (Appadurai, 1996, 2003, as cited in Heyman & Campbell, 2009). The idea behind ‘global cultural flows’ that Appadurai demonstrates is based on “unmoored signs, shifting meanings and complex cultural pastiches”, arguing that cultural flows are “disjunctive and chaotic in character” (Heyman & Campbell, 2009, p. 131, 132).

One of the most important concepts of Appadurai's global cultural flows is that of "de-territorialisation" which is seen as a conceptual break away from seeing social groups as having definite, consistent, bounded characteristics, where instead, money, commodities, people and ideas float in unpredictable ways around the world and when various forces are brought together as such, they tend to become indigenized in one way or the other (Heyman & Campbell, 2009; Appadurai, 1990). In this regard, it "emphasizes the tearing down of differences, not in the direction of global homogenization but toward a kaleidoscopic blending that cuts across geographic units or erases any specific geographic referent" (Heyman & Campbell, 2009, p.137).

Appadurai insists on the chaotic nature of these forces and rejects the idea of exploring these forces as pre-given-cases, but rather preferring case-by-case, context dependent ordering (Heyman & Campbell, 2009), thereby again dismissing the idea that these forces may not be fully understood by uni-directional models and assumptions.

### *Habitats of Meaning*

Analogically to Appadurai (1990), Hannerz (1996) pays attention to the process of globalization and the consequences of the rapid growth of human mobility and development of technologies in the sphere of telecommunication which can be regarded as the two important factors of globalization.

According to Hannerz (1996, p. 19) these technological developments and increasing human mobility result in intensified "mobility of meanings and meaningful forms", and it becomes more problematic to look on societies as autonomous. At the same time, even though today we live in the world where meanings can easily travel it is probably not yet possible to say that we are living in a single homogeneous cultural space, since the boundaries between countries still exist. Countries around the globe are still characterized by different political systems, social structures, historic contexts, languages, ideologies and other specificities. Hannerz (1996), for example, applies a term "habitats of meaning" referring to information environments which are shaped by institutional and corporate actors.

Even though the globalization processes are resulting, according to Appadurai (1990), in chaotic flows the localized "habitats of meaning", as termed by Hannerz (1996) seem to persist. Nevertheless, in line with Appadurai's views it may be important to point out that due to the increased human mobility and development of information technology these habitats of meaning are increasingly interacting, overlapping and probably transforming.

Analogically to other meanings the ideas of environmentalism, sustainable development and sustainable consumption can be a part of the habitats of meaning and specific discourses might

exist in relation to such ideas in certain habitats. It may be said that due to various factors some habitats of meaning can be more suitable for the presence of such ideas and that in some habitats of meaning certain discourses might prevail. At the same time, due to the processes of globalization, the discourses can leave their natural environment and penetrate other habitats, as what was emphasized by Appadurai (1990).

To sum up, it must be mentioned that was important to have a thorough examination of the various sustainability concepts as was discussed in preceding sections of the paper. Firstly, it is important to recall the various ideological conditions and conflicting discourses on sustainability and sustainable consumption produced in differing habitats of meaning. This arouses us to consider the fact that, given these many, conflicting notions of sustainability in the global environment, how individuals make sense of these aspects in order to make their consumption choices could as well be complicated.

Secondly we examined how the subject is treated empirically in consumer studies where we argue that simplistic emulation or imitation based models may not be enough to explain sustainable consumption in developing countries. The world anticipates what consumption choices the developing countries will make with the rising purchasing power, in order to address issues of sustainability. The literature identifies the social dynamics behind sustainable consumption and may assume that the developing countries may emulate the carbon-intensive consumption patterns that the West had adopted.

Thirdly, the theories on Appadurai's (1990), global cultural flows , alarms us of the various cultural flows which may be chaotic in nature , thus possibly affecting consumer choices in incoherent ways. We then combine this idea, together with the insights gained from our conceptual framework with regard to the multiple, conflicting notions of sustainability and sustainable consumption in differing habitats of meaning flowing in the global environment. Subsequently it stimulates us to understand the possibly dynamic sense-making process of individuals in developing countries and better understand how their consumption choices may be shaped.

## CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of undertaking this research within the domain of consumer culture theory is to understand and explore how the young consumers from developing countries, specifically China, make sense of the conflicting discourses on sustainability, growth and what shapes their consumption habits, and whether they take into consideration the environmental impact of their growing consumption. Additionally, special attention will be given to the consumer's personal aspirations and dreams as indications of their personal goals and possible future consumer behaviour. The analysis of sustainable consumption discourses and personal aspirations will allow seeing how personal goals are combined with the growing concerns about sustainability issues and how various discourses on sustainability are adjusted to present-day Chinese realities.

We have selected China as the focus of our study as it provides a critical case due to the magnitude of the potential environmental impact of the world's most populated country's increasing consumption patterns; such a scenario is not favorable neither for China nor for the global environment, which is already experiencing severe environmental deterioration caused by the mass consumption patterns of US and Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Kanniah & Rachagan 2001, Stein, 2009). The country with over 1.3 billion citizen has been one of the fastest growing economies in the world since the last three decades creating an affluent urban middle class (Stein 2009). The consumer profile in China has rapidly changed since the increased purchasing power has created a young urban population which is eager to consume (Li, 2005; Stein, 2009). The future consumer culture of China will be shaped by the consumption patterns of youth and therefore it is essential to understand what structures their demand, and also what they aspire and dream to achieve. In the globalised world, the prevalent discourses on sustainability and western lifestyle penetrate the Chinese socio-economic context and intersect with national discourses leading to the emergence of distinct consumer culture (Holt & Ustuner, 2010).

Our aim is to capture the sense making process at a point where the young Chinese consumers are being directly exposed to sustainability discourses rather than mere exposure through mass media and globalization. In order to conduct this research in a dynamic setting, we have selected Sweden as an arena, where the national discourses of Chinese consumers who are temporarily in Sweden to pursue higher education, interact with various discourses on sustainable consumption. These Chinese citizens are in a transition in two distinct ways, firstly in light of Bourdieu's classification of lifestyle, the subjects are undergoing social mobility in order to attain high cultural capital through education (Trigg, 2001). Secondly, these individuals are in a transition as they are temporarily away from their original social context and are directly being exposed to the

Swedish consumer ideology. This is problematic due to the contrasting consumer ideologies of these countries; Sweden as it is one of those countries in Europe which is highly environmental friendly with strong emphasizes on sustainable development while cultural ideology of consumerism adopted by the Chinese government which places consumer spending and consumption central to the capitalist development and neo-liberal globalization (Sklair, 2002; Stein, 2009).

It is important to point out that any study within consumer research would be incomplete without taking into account the social, cultural, and political forces as they play a key role in shaping the national or regional consumption patterns (Mortsensen, 2005). Therefore before we present the research design and method, an over view of consumer ideologies in China and Sweden, the two different ‘habitats of meaning’ (Hannerz’s, 1996) will be provided.

***China: The Original Habitat of Meaning.*** Stein (2009) provides an explanation of evolution of contemporary consumption regimes which emerged at different historical moments in US, Europe and China. As per the author, the ideological developments of China and US have many similarities even though both countries evolved from different historical circumstances of deprivation and scarcity. The current consumer culture in China is being shaped along the same ideology as that of US which promoted and encouraged high consumer spending and acquisition. Consumption was linked with patriotism and socially minded behavior in the post- depression era in the US, whereby consumerism was used as a strategy to boost economic growth and spending was perceived as helping the nation (Garon & Maclachlan, 2006). Such framing of consumerism, whereby consumer choice and consumer rights was constructed as a mean of attaining citizen rights, was essentially an ideology promoted by progressive reformers during the 1930s which continued to be encouraged even in the post world war II era (Stein, 2009).

While China, in the earlier part of 20th century adopted an anti-imperialist ideology, the State still promoted the consumption of national products to strengthen the domestic economy; this nationalistic consumerism sowed the seeds of modern Chinese nationalism (Trentmann, 2006). Stein (2009) uses a comparatively recent historical context of scarcity and strictly controlled production and consumption in order to analyze the current consumption patterns in China. During the Cultural Revolution in the 1960’s and 70’s, the socialist distribution system in China ‘massified’ consumer habits (Lu, 2000), under such a system in order to meet the basics needs, consumer goods were allocated directly by the municipal governments or the employers. While there was high scarcity but in parallel commodity ownership was more egalitarian (Davis, 2006).

From 1980’s onwards, the Chinese government began promoting notion of economic growth and development through consumption which is similar to that of the ‘consumer citizen’ ideology of

post World War II US ; spending was encouraged exuberantly and success was evaluated in terms of consumer gains (Stein, 2009; Garon & Maclachon, 2006). Similar to US, the political elite in China have adopted the neoliberal model, which emphasizes on personal consumption as a driver of economic development and consumer choice is foreseen to stimulate innovation consumers hence framing the consumers as integral to improving the overall economic development (Davis, 2005).

As per Wang (2001) China's 'progressive' movement from socialist state-planned economy to capitalist market economy brings with the ideals of consumer democracy in the absence of a true political democracy; whereby consumption becomes a tool of self expression for the citizens. While China is following a path similar to that of US, Wang (2001) asserts that it is doing so in an extreme manner. The author suggests that consumer spending in China is distinctively split between those who have the purchasing power and those who don't possess any financial resources; such stark division was not prevalent in the US and Europe.

According to Hanser (2004) as cited in Stein (2009), while the average income in China quadrupled between 1978 and 2000, the country's ranking in terms of economic egalitarianism has changed from most egalitarian to one of the least in Asia. McEwan, Xiaoguang, Zhang and Burkholder (2006) point out that the consumer economy has organized around a cosmopolitan, urban lifestyle intentionally by the Chinese State. This has created a rural – urban rift whereby consumer spending and accumulation is concentrated in the urban centers as the urbanites own up to three times higher than the rural populace, and much of the wealth is concentrated in the major cities Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou (McEwan et al., 2006).

The consumer culture emerging from such a growth model reflects that as the affluence of an average Chinese has increased so is spending on primary categories like housing, cars, consumer durables and meat ; all of which have substantial environmental impact (Stein, 2009). McEwan et al. (2006) point out that given increased purchasing power, the aspirations of the Chinese consumers are growing and 'that desire is outstripping ability'. China has become the world's third largest consumer of luxury consumer good as the demand for high technology items and designer brands has risen dramatically, moreover amongst the most popular commodities are expensive consumer goods, education and leisure services (Pun, 2003; Pocha, 2006).

This rapid economic growth, industrial development and high consumerism inevitably create perilous condition for the natural environment. The sustainability of the rising consumerism amongst the affluent Chinese middle class as well as the environmental impact of industrialization has become a widely debated issue in the global arena. The Chinese government asserts that it is striving to achieve economic development and improve sustainable

environmental practices (Chua, 2007; Watts, 2010). There is much emphasis on the production end, regulations and policy's but what about the average Chinese consumer who is caught amidst this debate at one end and while simultaneously being propelled to participate in the consumerist society he dwells in?

*Sweden: The Foreign Habitat of Meaning.* As per Garon & Maclachan (2006) European ideology differs from that of US in the sense that in post-world war era enduring rationing and scarcity lead to the consumer economy structured around saving and moderation. Over consumption was perceived as wasteful rather than beneficial for the economy and consumers were encouraged to save their money. Stein (2009) also suggests that contrary to the U.S, the adverse effects of consumer culture were stressed upon in Europe and buying came to be seen as a self-indulgent activity; this ideology constructed personal consumption as being in opposition to the national priorities of reducing inflation and fighting wars.

Akaishi & Steinmo (2006) stress that within Europe, Sweden is even more unique as it is based upon world's most generous and expensive welfare state. Promoting a pro-worker, pro-consumer and an anti-capitalistic society had been the motto of the Swedish government, which was dominated by a social democratic party since the last six decades. The authors point out that increasing consumption and GDP may be an integral objective for most countries but in different national historic contexts like that of Sweden, it may fall secondary to other social, political and economic issues. The Swedish welfare state which is funded by heavy taxation, on the richer citizens, workers and consumers aims to provide the all citizens with a higher and equitable living standards i.e. free education, universal health care, various other social welfare agendas (Akaishi & Steinmo, 2006).

It should be noted that this doesn't mean that the Swedish society is less consumerist, and that government uses consumption taxes for discouraging consumption and encouraging savings, instead these taxes are used to redistribute consumption hence providing higher consumption opportunities for even the poorest of the society (Akaishi & Steinmo, 2006). Additionally, despite the ideology of the Swedish Social Democratic party, the consumption taxes in Sweden are based on creating a welfare state without actually interfering in the capitalist economy anymore than necessary hence clarifying the misconception that the Swedish system discourages consumption in any way (Akaishi & Steinmo, 2006).

However, in order to understand what makes the Swedish consumer ideology so unique it is important to introduce the concept of 'Jante law' or 'Jantenloven' in the Scandinavian society. As per Avantand & Knutsen (1993), this term was coined by the author Aksel Sandemose, born in Denmark in 1899 and currently the Norwegian Language Council's dictionary defines the



Jante Law can be described as 'a set of laws which expresses the small society's tyrannical attitude toward the individual who stands out in the crowd'. Unlike the British civilization which was based on class division and conspicuous consumption, Jante Law endorsed a classless society; although there is a darker side of the Jante Law, they are beyond the scope of discussion within this paper. Essentially, it would not be incorrect to say that such an ideology discouraged conspicuous consumption as one of its motives was to introduce homogeneity in the society i.e. no obvious poverty and no exhibition of blatant opulence.

Einar Eggen (1981) as cited in Avantand & Knutsen (1993) further reinforces that these laws were embedded in the attitudes and body language of the citizens of Jante. Over a period of time this law became central to the widely shared values of the social democratic society. Perhaps another inherent value promoted by this ideology is that of civic virtues; at a societal level it is notable that there is little trash on the streets, recycling has become a part of the Scandinavian and citizens keep their neighborhoods clean (Avantand & Knutsen, 1993). These civic virtues are also integrated in the national social-democratic political party's agenda where a good environment central to a high quality of life.

On a broader level, Scandinavian countries are ranked amongst the most environmental friendly and green countries in the world; Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland have always been at the forefront in environment conservation, energy efficiency and sustainability (Environmental Protection Index, 2010). Sweden in particular has been ranked fourth in the Environmental Protection Index out of the 163 surveyed countries. The Swedish Ministry of Environment has been proactively engaged in reducing carbon emissions and achieving its environmental quality objectives by 2020. The central aim of the Swedish environmental policy is to pass on a sustainable society in which all the major environmental problems have to be solved to the future generation (Sweden: Ministry of Environment, 2010).

To sum up the inherent societal norms and values, like refraining from sticking out or showing off through conspicuous consumption and environmental consciousness whereby focus on recycling, going green and sustainability has become a part of the lifestyle, makes the case of Sweden very unique when compared to other highly industrialized countries like USA or UK as well as a developing country like China. Perhaps the distinct nature of the society and with a strong emphasis on sustainability discourses is a characteristic which is highly noticeable when individuals from different habitat of meanings are exposed to it. Hence we aim to explore how individuals from a developing country make sense of the different discourses when they are exposed to them in a foreign environment.

**Method:** Having outlined the socio-cultural context of the consumer ideology's which the subjects of these research are exposed to we hereafter devise an appropriate research design which can enable us to explore how individuals make sense and negotiate between the different discourses and in turn how do they construct their dreams and aspirations based on these negotiations. Such questions, which are highly consumer centric, can be addressed in a way which enables the researcher to identify meanings and values which consumers associate with different experiences they undergo within a particular social and situational context; the meanings and values can be identified when individuals share their thoughts, opinions, and feelings with reference to their experiences.

Such an exploratory and investigative study should be conducted through a qualitative research methodology. In consumer research, qualitative technique of data collection allows researchers to capture deep and rich data, with more emphasis on words than on numbers (Byrman & Bell, 2003). Since the aim of this is to study capture what is in the minds of our informants through spoken words therefore this choice is best suited to address our research questions.

Some key characteristics of the qualitative research mentioned by Byrman & Bell (2003:280) which support the choice of this approach are firstly that qualitative research is inductive in nature, which essentially means that theory emerges as data is collected and analyzed. Secondly the epistemological position of qualitative research is categorized as interpretivist as it is based on understanding the social world by analyzing the interpretations made by the informants. Lastly, the ontological positioning of qualitative research falls under the constructionist approach; this positioning is suitable for this study as it is flexible in nature, the data collection is less artificial and more importantly it emphasizes on comprehending meanings and processes (Esterby et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 1994). The intention of this research is not to observe behavior but to understand how aspirations and dreams evolve out of the sense making processes in our informants mind hence it is practical to use a qualitative methodological approach.

The relevant empirical material required for this study was spoken words which reflect the meanings associated with exposure to different discourses. The method utilized for gathering the textual data was semi-structured long interviews which were phenomenological in nature (McCracken, 1988a; Thompson et al., 1989). The long interview is considered to be one of the most powerful methods in qualitative research as it allows the researchers to enter the mental world of individuals hence providing them with an understanding of how individuals construct the meaning of the world (McCracken, 1988a). This goes in line with the objective of our particular study. The choice of this method also enabled us to minimize the two basic limitations of qualitative research in the modern life i.e. scarcity of time and privacy concerns (McCracken,

1988a); it allowed to capture glimpses of how our informants make sense of their experiences within their social context without invading their privacy or demanding too much of their time.

Moreover we used the long interview method with the Existential- phenomenological approach as it considered being highly useful and practical for studies which focus on ‘meanings of phenomenon’ and understanding experiences and associated feelings (see for e.g. Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, Thompson et al., 1989). Our intention of understanding the negotiation process in our informants’ minds while they are actually experiencing the Swedish socio-cultural context makes existential-phenomenology even more relevant for our research design; Thompson et al. (1989) reinforce that such an approach seeks to describe experience as it emerges or as it is lived in a particular context.

A total of 6 informants who were selected for this study were international Chinese students who were currently enrolled in graduate studies at Lund University in Sweden. The informants were students from different cities in China, studying in Sweden for the past ten months. The informants of this study were approached through both direct and indirect social ties (Holt and Ustuner, 2010). The individuals were intentionally selected from different academic backgrounds so that data rich in both breadth and depth could be gathered. This number is considered to be sufficient when conducting a study within consumer research as thick data can be derived by relatively a small number of participants who are interviewed in depth (McCracken, 1988a; Thompson et al., 1990). The table below provides an overview of the informants and their demographic background.

Name	Age	City	Master's Program in Sweden	Parents Occupation Father/Mother	Parents Education Father/Mother
Clara	24	Shanghai	People, Knowledge and Change	University Librarian	High School
				Retired Civil Servant	High School
Arnold	26	Tianjin	Wireless Communication	Home due to industrial accident	High School
				Retired Civil Servant	High School
Maria	24	Wuhan	Geography	Teacher	College Education
				Teacher	College Education
Sky	26	Ningbo	Sustainable Business Leadership	Parents run a small business	High School
					High School
Jacky	24	Hong Kong	Global Studies	Insurance Sales Rep	High School
				Civil Servant	High School
Max	25	Tianjin	System on Chip	Stocks	High School
				Housewife	High School

The interviews were conducted in a casual environment, informant's corridor room, university café's and sitting areas, so that the informants felt at ease and were comfortable. In order to minimize the limitation of language barriers and communication, each interview was conducted by two interviewers, this proved to be beneficial as it created a more causal conversation like environment rather than a one-to-one formal interview. This also proved beneficial, as it reduced the chances of missing out the opportunity to probe further in case the informant spoke about something important.

While long interview was open ended and conversation-like, there was a general set of questions along with the flexibility to probe further and to divert the discussion in order to bring up experiences of our informants in Sweden and China, get insights into their future plans, dreams and aspirations and to comprehend what sustainable consumption meant to them. Direct question on sustainability were avoided until the very end of the interviews in order to avoid socially

desirable answers, nonetheless discussions regarding sustainability were initiated by the informants themselves which allowed us to probe to get further insights. Our choice of semi-structured interview seemed appropriate given the focus on meanings; Esterby et al. (2008) also suggest that semi-structured interviews are useful when research aims to gain insight into the informants' world and the constructs they use as a basis of their opinions, beliefs and behavior. These experience and meaning focused interviews provided an ideal opportunity to capture the spoken words, stories, narrations along with body language, feelings and emotions (Östberg, 2010). It is important to point out that we asked about both aspirations as well as dreams so that we could tap deeper into their world and their desires; this enabled us to derive both material short term aspirations as well as take the informants to their imagined dream world and idealized lifestyle.

The length of each interview ranged from 40 to 120 minutes; since the informants were engaged in in-depth conversations, it was necessary that the interviews were audio taped and then transcribed. All interviews were audio taped with the consent of the informants. Audio recording of interviews becomes mandatory when a qualitative research is being conducted as this specific form of method places much emphasis and focus on the language and the spoken words of the informant (Bryman & Bell, 2003). Heritage (1984) as cited by Bryman and Bell (2003) has provided various advantages of audio-recording interviews; the author suggests that this technique allows repeated examinations of interviews which enable the researchers to analyze the informant's answers thoroughly and facilitates overcoming the natural limitations of memory. Moreover, this method is beneficial as it makes the informant talk without being distracted by what the researcher is writing while at the same time permitting the researcher to listen to each informant carefully and to give them undivided attention (Östberg, 2010).

The analysis of transcribed interviews was conducted in 2 stages. The first stage involved the analysis of individual interviews when individual categories were extracted. The categories were extracted separately by the three persons and then discussed in group to ensure that the same interpretations were made by all group members. The second stage involved analysis of the results of the first stage with the goal of identifying common themes among all interviewees. At this stage the interview transcriptions were consulted only for clarifications.

## FINDINGS

### Sustainability as Constructed by our Informants

**Population:** Chinese students pinpointed the problem of large Chinese population, which is believed to be difficult to control and creates many social, political and environmental problems. When the students were asked to compare Sweden to China the size of population and its density was one of the first differences provided, and presumably was something that struck them while finding oneself in the new social setting. In comparison to China Sweden is regarded as a country in a more favorable position because of the small population and the ease of managing it. For example, while comparing the two countries the informants pinpointed the problem of large population in the following way:

Maria: Sweden is much-much different from China...I think they have fewer people and more resources and that's the basic reason the country is so different from China.

[and later] Of course, in my opinion, this is really the deep reason of all the problems in China. Because of the large population, the resources for each person is small...that's why Chinese people have to fight for everything. [...]

Population is such a huge problem, there must be something done about it...I think one child policy is a very direct way though some western people say that its against the human rights and blah-blah but I don't think do...I say yes to one child policy. [...] the resources are limited, if there is larger population that means resource per person is smaller. For the smaller scale the, people need a house, they need food, but if the country is over populated the food, housing cannot be enough. This is obvious. When I jump out of it and see it in a broad way then it seems obvious.

Sky: [...] in China we have huge population. Transportation there is not good. But here [i.e. in Sweden] due to small population it is easy to handle and manage.

The large population is also regarded as obstacle for changing people's behavior to a more environmentally friendly, as one responded pinpointed Swedish recycling practices and the current situation in China:

Clara: People! I mean the population. In Sweden 9 million I think. In China... let's not even talk about China ....in Shanghai...the city where I am from there are 21 million people. [and

later referring to turning people's behavior into more environmentally friendly] The problem is how...there is such a huge population... people...you can change the mind of one city but there are so many cities far-far away and for them this might not be the first priority...there first priority might be "I want to survive"...

Arnold: I think the main problem is that China has a large population. For example you have a computer room in Lund university, if you want to use it you can use your card to open the door and you can use the computer freely, and in China computers are limited in schools and if it is a busy time and students want to use a computer they have to wait in a queue. Another problem for example is pollution... The main problem is population.

**Technology:** The current Chinese ecological problems and sustainability are discussed in tight connection with the problems of technology. Advanced technology is regarded as a way towards more sustainable economy. Many current problems are regarded as more connected to the production side, then to the consumption side of the issue.

Sky: We [i.e. China] still need support from government and you know encourage companies to use much more sustainable production methods...techniques

For example, when discussing the current environmental problems in China, which are associated with the economic development, one of the informants noted the role of technology for protecting environment during the stage of rapid economic growth:

Max: I don't know...maybe to develop high technology...high technology industry to save the environment at the same time to develop economics but more...most high technology industries are... [ in the Western countries] They won't give that core technology development and we need more money to develop the high technology...its hard to do that...if you take money from the environment .....very easily...made in China...

Maria: I think the future of China in industry is kind of gloomy for me. Mostly China is for factory...its for production...workers and cheap labor force but the inventory of new technology is not so prosperous [...] its only factory and no invention...making stuff and produce but the research department is never in China. The research department is normally in Europe or US.

**Government's Role:** Government's role is consistently emphasized by the informants in terms of elaborating effective legislation, controlling industry development and motivating population to behave in more environmentally friendly ways. For example, when asked about sustainable behavior on the level of individuals the connection is still made to governmental regulation:

Sky: It is a long way to....long way to go... [...] the current situation is not that good...but I have faith in the Chinese government...they will do something good in finish....everything is going better.

The role of the governmental policies was also emphasized in contrast with individual indifference to the environmental issues:

Maria: I think it is the government deciding... less industry... less...not less industry, but clean industry... I always think that there should be the industry which pollutes the most. When the European countries developed they colonized African countries or that kind of countries, so the air polluting industries were moved to those countries. China does not colonize any other countries, so it seems that the country shifts the air polluting industries to some less developed areas of the country. So it colonizes itself.

[...]: I think normally people don't think about it too much. Even in Sweden. The rubbish [rules] are set by the government, and people just follow it. I think if the same system is set in China people will also [sort] their garbage. If they don't have any guidance, any rules they [don't comply with it] I think the reason is that infrastructure is not so good. And another reason is that people's life is not affected by the environment. Even if you can't swim in the river, it does not matter too much, there are other rivers.

Nevertheless, some informants also identify the responsibility of individuals, stating that the problem is not only associated with the weak governmental regulations, but also with the specificities of the local culture:

Arnold: I think Sweden is better....I think rubbish of different kind is recycled ... rubbish is sorted and in China people don't have the idea...the government tried to ...but maybe if the people are compelled to throw the rubbish in to 3 types...It's about idea of the people....the culture ...It's hard to change it ...

One of the informants mentioned the control of consumption, therefore relating the problem to the consumption side of the sustainability problem, but, nevertheless, the control of consumption was also stated as a responsibility of the government:

Clara: [...] one example about this so called one-child policy...the government is kind of controlling the population....which is actually to control the consumption..

[...] Government should control ...also the other thing is they can raise the price of everything...actually nowadays the price of general goods that we consume is much higher than before...much, much higher...however like...I can't give you an example...'cause...like a watch ...when I think about it...ok...no example! The price of the good may be increased a 100 times ...compared to the salary maybe 15 times...actually in this way...the government is controlling the consumption...'cause its more and more expensive...maybe people will spend more harder.



***The relation between economic growth and sustainability:*** Economic growth is recognized as threatening environment by the informants. Nevertheless, some of them see the problem as a trade-off between economic development and environmental degradation, while others believe that economic growth can be sustainable if the regulations and technology aimed at environmental protection are in place.

Sky: The environment is very protected here, whereas in China some local governments are pursuing high GDP, so they don't care too much about the environment. They may say, ok, we are trying to protect environment, but few of them... I mean, are doing good job.

[...] I mean the high GDP is good, but if you're only looking at high GDP and don't care about the outcome to the environment, then that would be bad.

Sky: I mean the Chinese government, they are also taking many steps to improve the quality of the people, the quality of the products, the quality of the environment, and they try to do less harm when we are developing a high GDP economy I mean and or regulation systems are completing... itself... but develop the country,...the government ...the Chinese government,...pretty rich, but not for people...I mean Chinese government they have a lot of money to buy companies...in America, in Africa...whatever...but Chinese people. I mean lot of Chinese people... they are living hardly....

Maria: The environment... on the local scale...in my home town ...it is really obvious, there was a river which used to be good enough even for us to swim there, but now it is full of rubbish. And the ... there is not so much industry in my home town, so maybe this rubbish only comes from people throwing rubbish, like packages.

Who is guilty...? The reason is that China is developing so fast that there is not enough development of infrastructure.

Max: It is possible....but it may...in the...may...yeah...if China protects the environment, the economics will not develop so fast[...]. Environment.....because...you can develop your economics along...but once environment is destroyed... [It] cannot be [restored]...

***The relation between economic growth and human wellbeing:*** Informants note that the national priorities of economic growth, which require the presence of consumer-citizenship, contradict their well-being:

Max: For the country... if you have many buildings in the city ...you can contain more people in the city...that is good for economics...but for each person...in some ways such life is convenient but not always. You can go to supermarket its faster...you can buy coca cola at anytime...everywhere and at any time it is lively environment. In some ways its depressing

Another respondent noted the problem of associated work pressure and its consequences for personal well-being in a similar manner:

Maria: We have much work pressure. Even my mom's generation did not have it. I think the life quality is decreasing, because we have a lot of pressure...because of good salary, because of good position in the company.

[...] I know it is good for the company, for the country development, but as a person I don't like pressure. But it's good for the country.

## Material Aspirations

The interviews tapped different layers of informant's dreams and aspirations; as each layer was uncovered, sharp contradictions were identified between the practical material aspirations versus the idealized lifestyle. The following sections will provide examples of different types of material aspirations and dreams of our informants.

**Career:** Initially, aspirations in terms of future career will be presented following other desired commodities once successful. When asked about future plans after graduation, our informants revealed that they would like to gain work experience in an international environment for the next few years before moving back to China:

Max: It depends on the opportunities, I don't know...first choice, get a job here...second choice, do a PhD...third choice, go back! ....I want to stay here but my parents and friends are in China so now I think about whether to stay here or go back to China ...or which one is suitable for me...I have not decided...but after all ...maybe later a while I will go back to China absolutely but not now.

Arnold : Working here and then go back to China....for 2 or 3 years after graduation... for 2-3 years yeah...[because of ]the working environment...I'd like to work in a big company...it will make my experience richer...I'll have experience dealing with...working with foreigners ..to see how they work.

Interviewer: What kind of job?

Arnold : For example engineering

On the contrary Sky, who is studying Sustainable Business Leadership, aspires to work in a progressive organization which focuses on sustainability:

Sky: [I am interested in] consulting or management at beginning level.... My vision is to be in management....in five years. I don't care where. As long as it is a good company....good

company means... management of the company is farsighted, they are ambitious in global market and ... they respect their employees and they care about sustainability. They are good in CSR.

Maria and Clara were of the opinion that there are more opportunities in China; Jacky asserts that if a person can work in China then she can work anywhere in the world however given a good opportunity they would certainly opt to work in Europe or US for sometime before settling down in China:

Maria: Umm, I don't know...now I am young...I think China is a better place because you have a lot of jobs and a lot of opportunities. In China, there is a basic rule... it's like the American dream...if you work hard, if you are diligent then you can be successful....if possible I would like to work in Sweden for two or three years because its kind of working experience will be helpful for my future career but not necessarily in Sweden...any other European country....even US or Singapore ...if we have a PhD in this field [geography] then you can go to NASA or European Space Agency or even companies which make maps like Google earth or Nokia.

***Future Consumption:*** The findings show the desire of working in good company, to strive for a successful career and the dreams to achieve a better quality of life. For instance Jacky shared very interesting thoughts:

Jacky: [...]I think part of the reason I came here to do my studies is to ... I try to improve my living and my... upgrade my social status ... social class. Maybe it can not change today, but I believe some day, five years or ten-years later I believe I can. Because if you have higher education and ...the more things you see I think you want to achieve more, right? You can't get satisfied with those low quality [things] ... you push yourself to achieve those quality products.

The interviews also revealed what sort of commodities they would like to purchase once they are successful and have a sound career. This ranged from buying different 'valuable' gifts like iPad or iPod for friends in case Sky, travelling and taking photographs for Max and Clara, purchasing good quality electronics like laptops for Maria, to purchasing different commodities for Jacky.

Interviewer: What about the things you would buy if you are successful?

Clara: Well... if you ask a Chinese... I'm Chinese, but I mean, many-many Chinese would tell you LV, something like that, kind of luxurious brands, the things that Chinese girls like, you know. For me...I would like to buy a ticket for major travelling to all over the world, I like travelling, which is also my reason for going to Europe

Interviewer: What about your friends back in China?

Clara: Ahaa! It depends, like a friend of mine [laughs], she went to Paris for a business trip, and she was swapping, swapping her credit card to buy LV bags... And then next time went

to the States also for a business trip and again. Eventually she had 6 credit cards and she did not return any money back. She just took money from one credit card and then used the other card the next month till other credit expired.....For me... not my thing. I prefer to spend money on food, on travelling, on cameras.

Jacky shared interesting insights when asked to imagine herself being rich:

Jacky: [...] I prefer low profile, I would dress up in low profile. Ok, that's only my imagination. Maybe very comfortable trousers, khaki color and then very easy shoes like, you know, expensive brand but ...and then very nice jacket or something, you know... and then maybe Hermes bag, LV is not high enough (laughing). Hermes! Ha-ha-ha... LV is everywhere, it does not mean anything anymore, it can not show my social status, right?!....And of course a very good watch!....If I'm really rich I would buy a super brand, more than Rolex...all the brands which can show my social status I will buy. ..But my point is that I have to be low-profile,....I want to be elegant and then ... because again in China those very rich people, wear a whole set of you know an LV, just for example, LV t-shirt, LV trousers, LV belt, LV shoes... but people will just laugh at you because obviously you are rich, but you don't have the sense, you don't have the taste, right? That's why I say that if I'm rich I prefer low-profile. I just want to feel comfortable and be elegant, I don't want to be laughed at by people.

When asked about how the people in China get ideas about what to buy Jackie mentioned that they were influenced by the media – drama's, fashion magazines always show celebrities promoting luxury brands and the rich lifestyle :

Jacky : Those fashion magazines, they promote “ok, there was a luxury brand or the season or the new product they are releasing” ..... that's one thing I think Sweden is much better than Hong-Kong and China, because people are so... they don't care what you wear or, you know, they just care who you are.....But in Hong-Kong and China.... maybe people don't really understand how to combine the clothes,, they just don't want to be looked down upon. ....[...]And then... so they just follow the magazines or the... “ok, like, what is the latest thing in this season, I will just buy it and follow”. ... [...]...., Hong-Kong is a quite international city, so we're also... being influenced by the Western culture. And then... I think the people in their mind they think “what the celebrity wears, I can do the same”, so I think they try to imitate and then ...yeah, that's what I think.

The description of the desired future commodities along suggest that the given increased purchasing power, the informants would resort to increased consumption, spending their money on branded handbags to camera's and travelling around the world. Moreover, Jacky's explanation identify Media's role in can be identified as being central to promoting consumption.

**Home:** One key finding which was revealed during the interviews was that of owning a home, apartment or flat as a major aspiration and desire of the informants; almost all the informants mentioned how expensive it is to own a house in China. For instance Maria shared what she would like to buy given that she is successful:

Maria: Buy my parents a house, that's all I want! and aah....if I am successful...maybe because house or the car is an icon for successful people.

She further highlighted what type of a house she would like:

Maria: I would like to have an empty house, because I don't like to clean! [Laughs].....Maybe for myself I just need a house like this [pointing to the 30 sq meter room], maybe larger rooms because I don't like a small house ...I want to live with my parents...I need a larger house.

Similarly, when discussing the differences in China and Sweden Max mentioned:

Max : In China we always want to finish the university quickly, finish higher education quickly and to get a job and earn money, buy an apartment. For most people the target is to buy an apartment.....

Interviewer: And what is your target?

Max: Buy an apartment!

An interesting contradiction which was unveiled when informants shared their views on what sort of a house would they like versus their dream house if they had the required financial resources. For Max, the target of apartment was shadowed by the dream house, which looked like his current rented house in Sweden with 10 rooms, courtyard and a garden. Similarly Jacky, who initially mentioned a 3 bedroom apartment with a balcony facing the sea in the city center as her ideal home, had a remarkably different view of a dream house:

Jacky: Ok and of course...if you want to ask more...I want the house to have many facilities...like the big housing estates they will have a garden, or there will the swimming pool... gym room ...of course it will be quite nice to have that ....usually this is quite high class so I am not sure if I am capable to get that.....If I am rich...I mean very very rich then I will buy a villa...if suppose I can afford to buy a car then no matter what brand then at that time ...I prefer maybe living live in some rural area maybe in the middle of the hills...or somewhere then have my villa ...and I have my own swimming pool and some gardeners to take care of my flowers ...you know its just like drama [laughs]!

Interviewer: Which drama do you watch?

Jacky: []... in Hong-Kong there are some phenomena, its very funny... most people who live in Hong-Kong are not rich but TV dramas for many dramas which have good rating they always like ...the story is about a very rich family and they really spend a lot like this, but actually it does not make sense because it does not really happen in our real life. And then like all the properties are like big house, little things and the jewelry and much luxury in such dramas, but actually I don't think its really realistic [laugh].... [...] I think the reason why they are so popular is because people know it's impossible to happen in our real life, so we want to escape from the reality for one hour by watching the drama.

While the informants take into account the fact that owning a house in China is very difficult due to high real costs, they have images of their imagined dreamed houses. Their dreams reveal their idealized lifestyle of lavishness and calmness.

*Cars:* Another material desire of our informants which was identified during the interviews was that of cars. Cars can be categorized as a prestige item in China and there has been a rapid increase in demand over last decade especially in the urban areas. Additionally the author notes that while car ownership is rising, it is still lower than the high rates in U.S and Europe and that majority of the cars owned by the urbanites are small and relatively fuel efficient (Stein, 2009; Dhakal, 2004). Our findings indicate that a owning a car is perceived as a symbol of success as in China. For instance:

Sky: Ahaa ! I would love to buy ...maybe Volvo... maybe BMW ...it's depends....I mean BMW, Benz, Volvo they have very good brand reputation. I mean their repair system and customer services are very nice.....Rich people [in china] always have Benz and BMW.

Arnold: First I will buy a car...Maybe a Volvo....I think it's ok [laugh].It's more safe.... I believe because the product is Swedish.....More and more people get richer in China,

Max: [...The first car I want to buy is Ford Focus. I have a Suzuki in China, Japanese car, [I want to buy this car]...because of driving properties. It has very good accelerating properties.

It was noticeable that the male informants were more enthusiastic about car ownership and also that their responses indicate that their exposure to the Swedish brand 'Volvo' has made it one of the preferred automobiles brands to own. Similar, to the contrast between the practical aspirations versus the dream scenario of a an ideal home, the informants when asked about the choice of their ideal car given plentiful financial recourses resorted to high end luxury brands, for instance:

Max: Lamborghini.... [I like driving fast because it is] Exciting! If you have not done this, you can not imagine how exciting .....It's dangerous, but very exciting. I just want to taste danger!

Clara: Maybe Porsche! I worked with them in China. They were clients of our company. We were doing kind of car driving experiments.

Interviewer: Why do you do like this car?

Clara: [...]...It's great. Like Porsche Cayenne, Porsche sport car. It's nice. Maybe that's the most luxurious brand I've ever been close to.

For Jacky, there was a constant negotiation concerning the need of a car given that Hong Kong has a good public transportation system. She preferred a practical car brand like Toyota or Honda in favor of Ferrari or Lamborghini however there were conflicting ideas between choices of an

ideal dream car versus alternate ways of utilizing her resources. At one end she has these images of multiple cars while in parallel she was contemplating to invest her money elsewhere:

Jacky: I mean if you are really that rich then you should have someone to drive for you but not that you have to drive yourself...just to show your social status. If you still insist to ask me if I am rich then of course I will buy a car ...and then I will buy the limousine....of course will not buy the Japanese brand car If I am that rich [laugh].... and then I will hire a driver I will call and say ' ok... come and pick me up' and of course if am that rich... maybe in the garage I will have 4 or 5 cars ...different ones....if I am that rich right but still the most important thing is that if I have spare money then actually I will not buy many cars but I will buy property instead.

Another contradiction which can be identified is that while informants like Max, Arnold and Sky talk about the grey skies and air pollution in China, owning a car is one of their short term aspirations. Max or Clara do not seem relate the impact of driving a fast sports cars like Lamborghini or Porches with increased carbon emissions. Similarly, none of the informants brought up 'hybrid' or 'electric' or 'fuel efficient' cars as an alternate option considering that air pollution is considered as a major environmental problem by majority of urban Chinese youth (Pasternack, 2008; Chua, 2007).

## Non-Material Aspirations

As was seen earlier, the informants yearn to engage in high materialistic consumption practices which were clearly reflected in their dreams. It was also seen how they seek to emulate the luxurious consumption practices in some instances, as portrayed by the local and international celebrities. Given also the observation that the informants do not associate personal consumption with problems of sustainability per se, it might seem natural and in line with the concern expressed in the literature, that it may be predicted that the developing world would emulate the carbon-intensive, high consumerist culture that the West had adopted for so many years, with increasing purchasing power. However, tapping further and deeper into their aspirations, yet again reveals another side to their stories.

After having being exposed to Sweden ,the informants look back on the stress, the aggression, the constant race to struggle to earn more and more to achieve a better life in China that was routed in their values, while growing up. They compare this, with the realization of the contrasting, laid-back, relaxed attitude that they observe in Sweden, like how Arnold and Clara explain:

Arnold: “My parents dream...they are dreaming to have a house (...) they live near Beijing...and it’s a big city and it is difficult to buy a house...they often argue...they argue with each other ...for example my mother says to my father ‘you should have bought a room four years ago because it’s cheaper...my father says that it was also expensive ..It’s hard for me to buy ... [laugh]...they often argue...apart from the house...the other dream is for me ....to be better and better... I think they want life better for me ....they hope that I earn more and more”

Clara: Some years ago in China., during the period of Chairman Mao’s time, the whole country had no food...it was called the 3 year disaster... it is called I think... my father told me that the family had no food, no money and my grandpa just cut our goat’s leg and sold it to restaurant to get some food....only rice. In my age we can afford food but very basic (...) [but] people are so relaxed here [in Sweden] [laugh]. I mean like one guy in my corridor he is living there for the past 9 years and doing his bachelors...he is like I am young and I have time... when I heard that I was like what!

The informants realize that there is more to life than a constant struggle to earn and achieve material gains, that it is also important to be able to enjoy the simpler things in life, like how Max describes as below, this hitting them more after being in Sweden for the past eight months.

Max: A lot of cities [in China today] are like New York ... many tall buildings and roads...but I don’t like that...For the country its good, for me, it’s not good...For the country....That is good for economics...but for each person...in some ways such life is convenient but not always. You can go to supermarket...it’s faster...you can buy Coca Cola at anytime, anywhere and at any time it is a lively environment. In some ways it’s depressing...the (absence of the) natural environment (...) It is quiet and peaceful [in Sweden] I like the quite environment. The landscape is also good. The sky is blue. In China it’s always dark, grey, In Western areas the pollution is extremely serious and (here) [in Sweden] there is a lot of grass, and it’s quiet and peaceful...the environment is beautiful, perfect, so it makes you feel very happy. You can sit everywhere, on the grass, lie down and look at the sky.

Clara: I like it here [Sweden] ... in the community there is always a place for the kids to play and I feel also that the environment...I mean the air is so fresh and there are so many trees here... also about recycling. I remember when I came here and found out about the recycling I was like wow! I didn’t know about that...Actually after six months I found out that I made a mistake in recycling the trash and I was so ashamed of it, then I finally got it...I am lucky that no one caught me.

The informants try to make sense of their aspirations, wanting both sides of life, yearning for a calm, peaceful life, the ability to step back and relax in the natural environment on one hand, coupled with the stressful, aggressive life determined to earn more and attain more. How Maria tries to make sense of these processes is portrayed below.

Maria: The young generation is very different from the other generations...we have much work pressure... I think the life quality is decreasing, because we have a lot of pressure because of [the need for] good salary, good position in the company...I know it is good for the company, for the country development, but as a person I don’t like pressure. But



it's good for the country...there might be some aggressive people who like such stressful life. ... I think ... the main reason that people live this stressful life is their hope.... To get a higher position, otherwise no one likes stressful life

Interviewer: You said they have their hopes, what hopes do they have..?

Arnold: For working people it's higher salary, good position, higher social class...that's their hope... I want it as well, but I don't like pressure. ..[but] as a young person I would choose a hopeful life...I don't like a stressful life, but it does not mean I don't like a better life

Likewise, Arnold dreams of establishing his own company in the city of Qingdao in China which he describes as a mountainous city with beaches, having cleaner air, compared to the 'polluted' Beijing where his family lives. Similarly Maria desires peace and the natural environment in her dream life.

Maria: [discussing her dream house] In the future...a house like in Sweden...with a garden...I still want to go to the mountain area...have a small house...when I grow old...A life not so aggressive, and not so stressful

After being exposed to the bicycle-friendly Swedish environment, Clara tries to question herself as to how the situation is in China. It needs to be reminded that these discussions surfaced without the informants being directly asked about sustainability or issues of environment friendliness. The fact that the informants rather freely choose to discuss such issues, imply how such reflections get embedded in their minds, perhaps after being exposed to the Swedish lifestyle during their stay.

Clara: I am kind of anti-cars... I cannot drive...my point is that they have metros...take that everyday...what is the point of buying a car... I mean...yeah... well...some people will [also] need [their own driver]...I'm not in that group...[even in my dream life] ..I'm just kind of like ordinary people...

As was seen earlier, although it was Clara who had mentioned that she would like to own a Porsche, where she says that only the super rich own such types of cars in China, she at the same time claims, that she wants to be like ordinary people, even expressing her dislike for cars and wondering why one is not taking public transport.

Clara: My boyfriend...he was in Beijing about 7 years ago....maybe 10...I can't remember...first time he was in Beijing, he saw bicycles everywhere...in Beijing...and 2 years ago when we were in Beijing...We couldn't....it is difficult to find bicycles there...It is a huge difference I mean...Where are the bicycles? In Shanghai, many, many years ago(...) my father rides me to kindergarten, to school every day on bicycle but where are the bicycles today?...It's good [here in Sweden], I think I saw a video about Lund...about being one of the best bicycle towns.

Sky, Arnold, Clara and Jacky discuss with regard to how they do not want to live in America, associating America to be aggressive and less peaceful. For Clara, America was a childhood dream, but she exclaims how she likes Europe now.

Clara: People have American dreams...they want to go to the States...and you know my father...when I was 3 years old...he was kind of studying English...he said, I want to go the States...I want to make money...because people are poor...not poor poor!...yeah but I would say poor...at that time, their monthly salary was 30.....30 Swedish kroner...how can people survive? I mean, you just want food...and yeah!...but he didn't...and when I was 12 years old...when I started to learn English, I wanted to go to America, America, America! Yeah, I mean the dream is still there, the dream is still there but I don't want to stay there...maybe go there...for visit...see what America is like...if it is the same as in my dreams or something like that...but I like it here in Europe...the culture is so peaceful...the culture is peaceful

Interviewer: So you sort of changed..?

Clara: Yeah...America is so aggressive...ok...I say aggressive...not sure if you have watched...The Apprentice [referring to the American TV reality show]...you see they are so real...I mean...they just want to win...I mean they are Americans!

## Negotiations between the Chinese and the Swedish Contexts

Sky discusses how he never wants to live in America in the future, yet the thoughts conflict in his head, with regard to what he wants China to be like.

Interviewer: Would you like to live in America?

Sky: No...Too much pressure...No No, I'll never (...) I prefer a comfortable life.

But then again, banging his fists on the table, he describes how China in the next twenty years will become the next America and that he likes this fact stating "because I prefer the power".

The informants find sharp contrasts between life back in China and in Sweden. Jacky describes how Chinese society forces her to consume and discusses how her aunt explicitly told her to display 'social status' through objects. Perhaps, she finds it shocking how people might take it easy in Sweden and may not always be necessarily displaying their social status all the time through consumed objects as such.

Jacky: My aunty told me "After you work for few years, suppose you can save some money and then you should dress up yourself". Not dressing up in something very colorful you have to implicitly show your social status, I mean... like from your watch and from your shoes and from your bag it can help... like which social class you are from. Like the watch ... those people wearing like Rolex or, you know, it does not have to be very eye-catching but ok when you talk to him you can see that "oh, he's wearing Rolex", "you must have

quite nice job”, right? And the shoes... if your shoes are muddy and you don't polish them!

I feel quite surprised, like in the library, I found some guys, I think the local people, taking off their shoes and walk around the library...with their socks...or sometimes even barefoot, and then I think...ok! [laugh], you feel like home! And then...really...I think it is cultural differences...so you know...I never ever ,ever see anyone do this in China or Hong Kong , unless they are beggars...u know...beggars walk barefoot , not normal people!

The informants after being in Sweden try to evaluate life in China and in Sweden. Sky, Max, Arnold and Jacky want to ultimately go back to China. Even though the informants value the peace and the relaxed environment in Sweden, Jacky, for instance feels that the tough competition is good for the country as how she discusses below and these sorts of ideas conflict in their minds.

Jacky: And then...in Sweden...the government, really takes care of the citizens well [...] okay...but then if you take care of your citizens like that again, I don't feel that the society will improve or maybe it will just slowly, right. But even in China, the competition is very tough , because the government doesn't really take care of the citizens ...Okay I shouldn't really say this...but compared to Sweden .And then the citizens, they will work very hard for themselves , so it makes the society , improve very fast...But in Sweden, it's like...ok! I'm good, no matter what ...or maybe I just say for Lund, it's just a small town...so maybe I come and tell the reality ..but that's what I feel...(...) I prefer to have a job in Hong Kong but its strange because my mom she told me *why do you want to stay in Hong Kong, ...I don't think Hong Kong is very good* ...she said *living in Hong Kong is so tough* ...but I don't know why ... maybe that's the place where I grew up...(...) I think it strengthens my idea ..because when you are in your hometown.... you won't think of how valuable it is to be there. Right?

When the informants picture their ideal dreams, for instance when discussing their dream house, they construct and sew in their values from China, like living with parents (e.g. Arnold discusses how he wants to live with his parents and take care of them) and put conflicting pieces together, both their materialistic aspirations with aspirations of enjoying a green, peaceful environment. For instance, Sky pictures his dream house with a BMW or a Benz in his garage as was portrayed earlier, stating that only rich people have those cars in China. He continues his discussion of his dream house:

Sky: I want to build my house with all green products...products that are sustainable ...(...) I want a big swimming pool in front of my house and then once I open the window then I can see a lot of flowers and trees....[laugh] I can raise some animals...chicken, pigs outside the house...It just has 2 floors. First floor is used to stay with family and with friends. And second floor I have my personal room...personal reading room and shower room

## DISCUSSION

### Sustainability and Consumption

***Construction of Sustainability.*** The interpretations of the interviewees' judgments regarding sustainability and environmental problems indicated that the issue of sustainability is largely looked upon from the perspective of production, and that the interviewees do not associate the current environmental problems directly with consumption. The environmental problems were rather connected with the problems of large Chinese population, lack of advanced technology and infrastructure able to mitigate the negative consequences of rapid industrial growth, inadequate governmental policies and regulations.

Even though informants linked the environmental degradation with the rapid growth of the Chinese economy, the consumption side of the growth was largely ignored. The informants to some extent touched upon the consumption side by mentioning the topic of recycling and noting, however, how unsuccessful the Chinese recycling initiatives are. Informants' discussion of recycling, nevertheless, parallels with their discussion of applying advanced technology for controlling the negative consequences of industrial growth. Analogically, recycling can be regarded as the practice of controlling the consequences of consumption and not the consumption itself.

***Concept of Sustainability in relation to the Ideology of Growth.*** As noted by Bourke & Meppem (2000) the concept of "sustainability" is highly flexible and can keep the balance between environmentalism and growth and development. The way how the issue is discussed by the Chinese students can also be regarded as keeping balance between economic growth and environmental protection, when the two are regarded as capable of coexisting with the help of advanced technology and governmental regulation. Such construction of sustainability is consistent with the dominance of the ideology of growth, which is quite logical given the fact that Chinese consumer culture developed in line with the American model which emphasized private consumption as the engine of economic development which was regarded as a way towards citizens' wellbeing (Stein, 2009).

Moreover, taking into consideration that during the last 25 years China was pulled out from poverty (Ravallion, 2008) due to the policies aimed at economic development, it is not surprising that economic development is regarded as something positive. Even though the negative

consequences of rapid economic growth are becoming more evident for the informants, the need of further economic growth is still unquestionable. The way sustainability is constructed by the informants goes in line with the ideology of growth and the contradictions which they see between environmental protection and unquestionably necessary further economic development are reconciled by technological advancement, improvement of governmental regulation and population control.

Is there any connection between how the interviewees construct sustainability and what role consumption plays there and what aspirations they have? The following section will take a closer look on their aspirations and how they relate to the sustainability and consumption.

### Material Aspirations versus Non-material Aspirations

The informants' aspirations concerning future career and home are a complex mixture of Western and especially American symbols of success and Chinese/eastern traditional values. For example, as was mentioned above, the idea of large house with a pool and expensive car can be combined with the intention to share this house with parents in order to take care of them. The material aspirations of the interviewed Chinese students very much correspond with the neoliberal ideology of growth and consumerism. However, such material aspirations are combined with deep dissatisfaction with the pressures of Chinese everyday life and environmental degradation associated with the economic growth, which itself is however regarded as good for the country.

Simultaneously to discussing their material aspirations and dissatisfaction with the stressful and highly competitive life in China the students discussed hopes for living peaceful, secure life in clean environment. Such hopes clearly clash with the current policies of Chinese government which is primarily oriented at economic development. Moreover, such non-material aspirations conflict with the informants' aspirations regarding career and home. Since private consumption is the integral component of economic development the existence of aspirations about big house, pool and expensive car seems to be quite logical. Nevertheless, the hope of living a peaceful life without much competition does not easily fit into this logic. Interestingly enough the interviewees admit that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve their material aspirations in China. Nevertheless, even though the informants admit that China is not the best place for achieving such aspirations they have a strong intention to go home and still try to attain their dreams.

Baudrillard (1996) considered consumption and production as two inseparable parts of one system. It is especially interesting to see how informants support and at the same time reject the components of one system. On the one hand their aspirations are deeply rooted in the ideology of growth, and on the other hand they admit that the pursuit of economic growth creates much pressure, stress and overall lower quality of life which they do not appreciate on a personal level, but which they think is beneficial for the development of the country in general.

The interesting question is why the informants have such material and non-material aspirations which do not easily fit with each other and where these conflicting dreams come from, and moreover how such dreams are put together in relation to the growing problem of sustainability. In order to answer this question it is necessary to consider the problem from a global perspective, paying attention to the fact that ideas do not exist in a localized manner anymore, but rather flow in an unpredictable manner after they emerge in some point on the globe.

## Flows, Sense-making and Contradictions

The interviewed Chinese students are obviously influenced by various ideas which exist in the modern globalized environment. For example, while being in Sweden, which can be regarded as a different social context and a different habitat of meaning, according to Hannerz's (1996) terminology, the informants are exposed to local meanings which they merge with their old systems of meanings and values. Moreover, the Sweden itself is full of meanings which could come from elsewhere around the globe, and the interviewees need to make sense of such meanings as well.

The responses of our informants reveal that they are aware of environmental- friendly lifestyle of the Swedish society. The clean air, recycling practices, use of bicycles etc. are some aspects of the Swedish lifestyle which they are exposed to directly. While they become a part of this lifestyle during this transition phase and appreciate it, in parallel they draw comparisons of how the China is different. A process of contemplation starts whereby the informants try to make sense of why the same environmental-friendly and sustainable consumption practices are not applicable in their original habitat of meaning; the individuals try to reason out as to what makes the applicability of government led environmental initiatives difficult in China. It may reinforce certain opinions for instance the benefits of one child policy while at the same time question the stressful life in China or construct their respective meanings of the situation. They reflect on why state initiated environmental campaigns like recycling do not work in China, they think about the governments role, the Chinese socio-economic context, lack of technology and population etc.

The idea that their dreams represent the consequence of a mixture of flows from different social contexts in the global environment, reflect notions of fluidity behind Appadurai's discussion on global cultural flows. As was seen earlier, Appadurai sees the current global world being placeless more than ever before, hence rather than treating social contexts being localistic, he argues that cultural flows float around in dynamic, chaotic manners (Appadurai, 1990). The nature of such a chaos was evident in the informants' aspirations that were filled with contradictions of them trying to sew in their materialistic, consumerist desires encouraged by the Chinese social context and pressurized childhood upbringing, together with a growing desire to lead a calm life and enjoy the natural, peaceful environment, perhaps influenced by the Swedish context.

Moreover, it was apparent how their views on sustainable consumption in their minds were full of contradictions themselves. For instance, at one hand, they might point out how they dislike the serious extent of air pollution and environmental degradation in China, yet at the same time picture Lamborghinis inside the garages of their dream house and desire to engage in increasing consumerist behaviour, yet also picturing themselves surrounded by greenery and clean air. At one point, one of the informants, Jacky, even mentioned how contradictory and confusing it felt to her, growing up in a society that forces her to over consume, yet at the same time is now asking her to limit consumption. The example where she discusses how one's shoes should not be 'muddy' and how her aunt explicitly tells her to always dress up and show social status through your shoes, bags and watch, for instance, illustrate how such cultural claws may hold on to her, encouraging her to engage in over-consumption. Perhaps, it may be because those social meanings are so strongly rooted in her mind, that she finds it extremely shocking when she saw some Swedish students without shoes in the library, as in the incident she discussed. Back in China, she could only associate people who may walk barefoot to 'beggars' as she had described.

On the other hand, the informants find increasing ways through which they find enjoyment through non-material aspects of life and these in fact become central constructs in their discussion of future consumption patterns at the same time. Although they may be considered as signs of transformations into more sustainable means of consumption, it is important to note that it is however not a shift in stage from the philosophy to 'consume', 'consume', 'consume' that the society has long presented (Connolly & Prothero, 2003), into a stage where they may benefit the power of non-consumption itself (Connolly & Prothero, 2003). Rather, it is more of a case where conflicting flows rooted in different social structures act simultaneously together, which also act in opposition to each other and the informants find themselves caught up in a frenzy of contradictions.

It is equally important to address that while the dynamic nature of the chaotic flows represents Appadurai's central ideas, it also becomes apparent that the consequence of these intersecting flows is more than a simple case of 'de-territorialisation' as predicted by Appadurai. De-territorialisation" which is one of the most important concepts of Appadurai's global cultural flows, predicts that when these different forces intersect together, they diffuse and become indigenized in one way or the other (Heyman & Campbell, 2009; Appadurai, 1990).

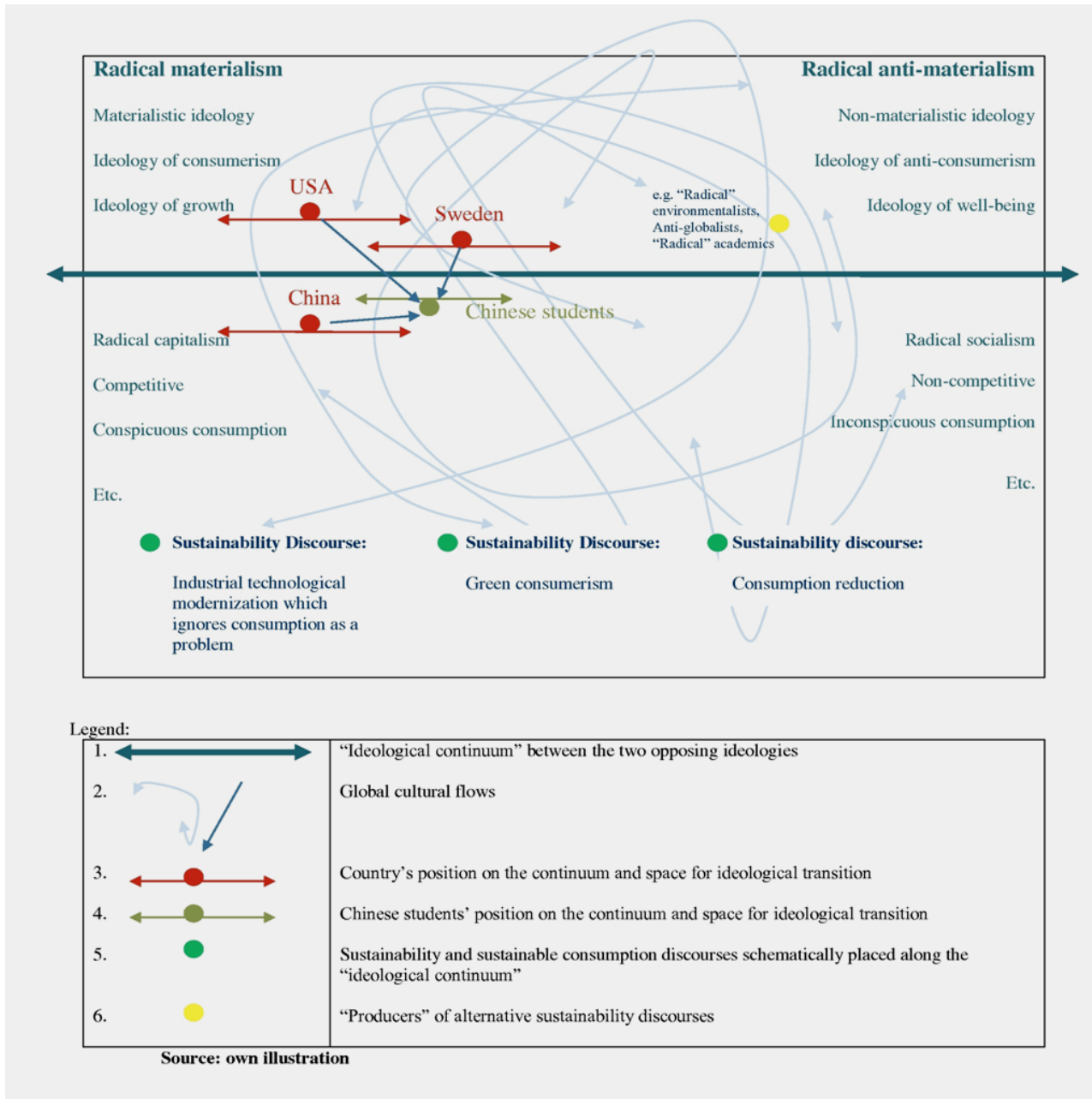
The idea that it may not always result in a scenario of de-territorialisation is in line with Heyman & Campbell's (2009) critique of Appadurai's (1990) concepts, who argue that his obsession focusing on the disordered, multiple flows per se, fail to see the actual relationship between the flows and how they may intersect with each other. Given that the informants are in transition between different social contexts, our findings bring to limelight, the essence of how these interactions may take place. Heyman & Campbell (2009) foretell that, rather than de-territorialisation, it might be that re-territorialisation occurs, a scenario where in which there may be reinforcement of old values for instance.

Our findings show that such reinforcement of old values take place, for example when Jacky observes how things are different in Sweden and mention how it is not always better than China for her. Additionally she mentions that it is only after being away from home that she realizes how valuable her home is. Furthermore, in line with Heyman & Campbell's (2009) views, de-territorialisation, may only be one of possibly many types of processes taking place when different flows come together and our findings bring to attention, the fact that before it is de-territorialization, re-territorialization, modernization, imitation or even divergence that may take form, that there may be a crucial stage of strong contradictions. It is additionally important to note that our findings show that there was no sacrificing in terms of their preferences with regard to the different conflicting elements in their dreams. Rather they construct their ideal dreams with all their preferred elements in place that float in a myriad of contradictions that comes clashing in their minds.

## Macro Forces behind the Micro Contradictions

The contradictions between the aspirations of the interviewees, their attitude to economic growth and its consequences may be regarded as resulting from the bigger ideological and cultural clashes happening in the globalized environment. While being in Sweden and while living in a highly globalized environment in general, the Chinese students are exposed to the influence of multiple flows of meaning they have to make sense of. The diagram below illustrates that significant macro-forces may stand behind such personal micro-contradictions and it is not possible to ignore them while considering the problem of transition to more sustainable lifestyles.





The purpose of the diagram is to show that the interviewed Chinese students are surrounded by the two ideological streams and various discourses produced by different social contexts and groups of people. The discourses and ideas rooted in differing ideologies are floating in a chaotic manner, which is in line with Appadurai's (1990) view. In such environment everything is floating and transforming and nothing is fixed. The future consumption patterns in China may be shaped and influenced by various ideologies that drift according to the chaotic flows that they are exposed to.

The contradictions which were identified during the conduction of interviews with the Chinese students can be regarded as the consequence of being exposed to the two counteracting ideologies and the cultural flows which are produced by these ideologies. The existing sustainability discourses can also be better understood in the view of these counteracting forces. The discourse of green consumerism is tightly connected to the dominant ideology of growth which is based on materialistic values, while the sustainable consumption discourse based on the idea of consumption reduction is based on non-materialistic values. When Chinese students compared China with Sweden they all admitted that Swedish society is much different, and described it as less competitive, more egalitarian, more environmentalist, more relaxed, emphasized good healthcare and education system. At the same time, while describing China they often compared it to the United States, stating that both countries are highly competitive, aggressive and money oriented. This gives grounds to put China and US at the approximately same point on this ideological continuum, while putting Sweden more closer to the anti-materialistic side. The fact that the interviewed students have conflicting aspirations indicates that they are influenced by the two ideologies at the same time which are currently clashing on a global scale.

On one hand they are under the influence of American and Chinese cultural impact and the overall dominating capitalist growth ideology. On the other hand, they increasingly question the consequences of economic growth for their personal well-being and come to the appreciation of non-materialistic values, which is presumably reinforced through being exposed to Swedish culture, which differs from that of China and US. While being exposed to the influence of China, US and Sweden the students are also influenced by the global cultural flows which float around them in a chaotic manner. The internal conflict between the materialistic and non-materialistic values which the students try to resolve can be regarded as a sign of transition, since they start to increasingly question their values. It is possible to presume that this process may result in a different view upon sustainability, when consumption as such can be regarded as the cause of environmental degradation and lower quality of life. However, the transition can also be made in the opposite direction, when the conflict between material and non-material aspirations is resolved in favour of material aspirations. The way sustainability and sustainable consumption are constructed also depends on the direction of such transition.

## CONCLUSIONS

The conducted research indicated an interesting association between the way informants construct sustainability and their material and non-material aspirations. The interviews indicated that the informants largely ignore the consumption side of the sustainability problem, and primarily associate environmental degradation in China with rapid economic growth, inadequate production techniques and governmental regulations. The economic growth itself is regarded as beneficial for the country, even though it is admittedly less beneficial for the informants personally, since it might be associated with poorer environmental conditions and much more stressful life. This view is very consistent with the global ideology of growth. The personal material aspirations of the informants also comply with this ideology. Nevertheless, our study, at the same time, revealed non-material aspirations that were significant to the informants that centred around the idea of a stressless life in a clean environment, which contradicts with their material aspirations and attitude towards economic development.

The conflict between their material and non-material aspirations and the way they construct sustainability is the result of a complex mix of meanings produced by the conflicting streams which they are trying to combine and make sense of, which consequently leads to contradicting aspirations. On one hand it is the ideology of growth, according to which the informants are expected to be successful and to consume in order to indicate their success which goes in line with the stereotypical American dream. On the other hand, they are influenced by ideas which are rooted in the alternative discourses where emphasis is on the non-materialistic and simple values, which conflict with the ideology of growth. Nevertheless, both streams of ideas are somehow combined by the informants and coexist in their dreams.

Therefore, while addressing the issue of sustainability and sustainable consumption, it is not possible to disregard the clashing ideological forces and the strong influence of the social contexts which shape the consumption choices. These forces are so strong that even the concept of sustainability itself is warped by them, changing its meaning depending on the social context at any given time, from green consumerism to anti-consumption for instance. The true problem of sustainability and sustainable consumption may lie much deeper on the level of ideological streams and the dynamic social contexts that individuals take part in.

Our study reveals that these ideological streams are already clashing in the minds of the informants who try to take the best components of the differing ideologies, put them together and make sense out of it.

The idea that individuals pick and select different consumption choices in a chaotic, incoherent fashion also reflects notions behind the postmodern consumption paradigm (Firat, Dholakia, & Venkatesh, 1995). Yet such aspects seem to be paid far less attention to, in strategies towards sustainability when predicting future consumption patterns. For instance, it has been asserted that social learning theory may be used in educating consumers with regard to sustainable development, stating that consumers may learn by emulating other people (McGregor, 2009). These ideas still reflect emulation or imitation, an obsession with how the end product may be mirrored in terms of sustainable consumption rather than focusing on the dynamics that might take place and the forces which drive these processes before an outcome is achieved.

Similarly, consumer culture literature on sustainability has looked at the consumption side, often looking at it in terms of stages where the consumer may reach a destination, for instance from the focus on the social dynamics that consumption of material objects promises to the hopeful identification that non-consumption may also deliver the same social meanings differentiation in the post-modern world (Connolly & Prothero, 2003).

As was indicated earlier in the paper, such research on sustainable consumption is even yet, still focused on developed countries in the West while there is limited attention to less developed countries in the literature. What we may be left with could be imitation or emulation based models which may be presumed to predict consumption behaviour in developing countries such as through the global trickle -down theory. As pointed out earlier, Ustuner & Holt (2010), strongly criticize this model in terms of its ability to explain consumption in developing countries. Apart from a situation where individuals may emulate the West through 'text-book like learning' as was demonstrated in one of the findings from Ustuner & Holt (2010), our study clearly shows that it may not be a situation where sponge-like individuals readily absorb what they choose while detaching themselves from the different social contexts they become part of. It becomes even more complicated also given the fact that the notion of sustainable consumption itself has a number of revolving discourses which too become a challenge for individuals to make sense of. This has practical implications for sustainable policies to approach the subject in other ways, rather than through static, linear approaches.

Our intention is not to disregard what such social learning, imitation or emulation based models may contribute to the understanding of the subject of sustainable consumption, but rather enrich this understanding, bringing into spotlight, the fact that, before it might be emulation, imitation, modernization, convergence or even divergence that might ultimately occur or that might not

occur, it is highly important to understand the dynamics of the transition processes in play. Our study captured a state of strong contradictions in which the individuals are caught up in an aura of conflicting discourses and social contexts which they are trying to make sense of. In today's globalized environments, it may be by capturing this very essence of the actual mechanisms while it is happening, will it hopefully make the challenge of combatting environmental problems be more confidently managed.

We demonstrate that our informants do not associate sustainability with their personal consumption. This may be rooted in the strong forces of their original habitat of meaning which encourages consumerism in consistency with the ideology of growth. Secondly, we show that habitats of meaning are not country bound. Nevertheless, in our study when individuals in transition are exposed to different habitats of meaning, we demonstrate that the intersection of flows may not result in a scenario of de-territorialisation as to what Appadurai (1990) might have predicted. In line with Heyman & Campbell (2009), we demonstrate that de-territorialisation of cultural flows may only be one of many possible consequences by clearly disclosing the contradictions that the individuals are caught up in and we stress the importance of understanding the transition process. Hence, thirdly, we demonstrate ways through which sustainable consumption choices in developing countries may be explained through other ways than merely anticipating whether emulation or imitation occurs.

We conclude by borrowing a phrase from , Kirkbride, Durcan & Obeng (1994, p. 156), on organizational strategic change, who state that "There is a recognition that the destination may be less important than the learning, or learning to learn, that takes place on the journey". Managing any change in the dynamic environment, be it a change towards sustainable consumption, we highlight the importance of understanding the transition process before the outcome fortunately happens.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

We would like to acknowledge the limitations of our research method. Firstly, it should be pointed out that our research centered around the unique experiences, meanings and values of our informants within their particular context therefore our findings and discussion cannot be generalized. Secondly, considering our informants are in a transition phase therefore our phenomenological description of their experiences may differ from other studies conducted on similar sample in a different context.

A future study can be conducted to evaluate consumption habits of individuals who have returned to their original social setting from Sweden and are economically active in China. Such a study will give interesting and useful insights on which specific values have been internalized as a result of complex interplay of different discourses in an international environment. Our study captured the negotiating process during transition, which itself is highly crucial to the understanding of sustainable consumption as was pointed out in this study in today's dynamic environments. However to develop further understanding, a study seeking how individuals formalize their consumption decision in their original habitat of meaning will also be useful.

Similarly a study with a similar research design can be conducted in another country with a consumer ideology different from that of Sweden, for instance Chinese students studying in the US and compare how they perceive sustainable consumption and how they make sense of the different discourses they are exposed to. This comparative study can be used to understand how consumers negotiating and sense making processes vary when they are exposed to conflicting discourses in different socio-economic context and consumer ideologies. For example, if the Chinese consumers are under the strong influence of ideology of growth any attempts to make them reduce their consumption are dubious, since such attempts would contradict their current state of mind, where material aspirations occupy the central position. Therefore, it is possible to assume that in such case the only version of sustainable consumption feasible for implanting is green consumerism. i.e. the discourse of sustainability which does not clash with their aspirations and dreams of a Chinese consumer.

Consumer culture cannot be understood without taking into consideration the forces of globalization as it is bound on the very essence of modernity; moreover consumer culture emerges as an outcome of the behaviour and values of majority of individual consumers in a particular social context (Slater, 1996). Given the contemporary societal context of China, a change towards sustainable consumption can only predicted by studying the Chinese consumers

and not just applying models of sustainable consumption derived from studying consumers in the West.

Quantitative studies show that ‘green consumption’ is becoming ‘fashionable’ in China (Chang, 2010), however qualitative studies should dig deeper and seek who are the agents of change, which specific green products are becoming fashionable and why? What motivates these consumers to buy these products? The notion where social contexts are in a state of mobility with various flows (Appadurai, 1990) which this research takes on, may stimulate further studies that seek to understand which sustainability discourses penetrate the urban Chinese youth in China. Is green consumerism being emulated from the Western consumers or is it regionally constructed? Would flows result in something else other than contradictions? It is important to address such questions in order to identify how consumer cultures are emerging in response to various discourses and ideologies, which in turn may be used to predict the future of sustainable consumption in developing countries more accurately.

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