

How do Socially Responsible Consumers Consider Consumption? An Approach with the Free Associations Method

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ABSTRACT

Socially responsible consumption, that is the incorporation by individuals of social and environmental concerns in their consumption choices, is growing. Is this new tendency a consequence of a new way of considering consumption? The aim of this research is to verify the existence of different profiles of socially conscious consumers and to study their social representation of consumption. In order to meet these objectives, a study was conducted with 392 respondents. The free association technique was used to induce social representations while involvement in socially responsible consumption was measured with the François-Lecompte (2005) scale. Data analysis shows the existence of four groups of socially responsible consumers with different social representations of consumption.

Keys words: Social representations, socially responsible consumption, free associations.

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INTRODUCTION

Consumption, which lies at the heart of economic, social and ecological debates, is today being increasingly challenged by consumerist and anti-consumption movements. Consumer responses to marketing practices are changing: the questioning or even rejection of brands (Sansolini, 2005), and the increase of private labels (store brands, etc.) and discount stores (Mazzoli, 2005). At the same time, the idea of socially responsible consumption (SRC), understood as the wish to express social or environmental concerns through consumption choices (François-Lecompte, 2005), is spreading within the population. According to a survey by CRÉDOC (Delpal and Hatchuel, 2007), 44% of people say they “take account of social awareness issues when shopping” (not buying products involving child labor, not causing suffering to animals, not polluting, etc.), 61% are “prepared to pay 5% more in order to respect such commitments”, 31% have “boycotted a particular product at some point” and 52% have “bought a *committed* product in the last six months”. Sensitivity to the ethical aspects of consumption has grown, particularly among young people, up 15% since 2002 as against 6% for the population as a whole.

Consumers are better informed, more demanding, and show themselves to be increasingly conscious of the repercussions of their consumption on their environment. Do these new trends correspond to a new way of “seeing” consumption? What is the link between SRC practices and social representations (SRs) of consumption? Are there differences between socially responsible consumers and other consumers in terms of their representations of consumption?

These questions around new consumption behaviors concern both companies in designing their offering and “collective” and institutional actors (INC, DGCCRF, CCAS, CAF, etc.)¹ responsible for education about consumption and for helping people subject

to its undesirable effects (addiction, exclusion, excessive debt, etc.).

The aim of this study is therefore twofold: to verify the existence of different profiles of socially responsible consumers and to study their SRs of consumption. We will first present consumption as both a collective and individual phenomenon that is the object of SR and expound the notion of SRC. We will then develop the empirical study we conducted, specifying the methodology used, and present the findings. Finally, we will discuss the findings and the future research they suggest.

CONSUMPTION, A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Ever since the work of Moscovici (1961), the concept of SR has been mobilized to understand various social phenomena (work, money, craft industry, banking, food, etc.). SR “functions as a system for interpreting reality that governs the relationships of individuals with their physical and social environment, and determines their behaviors and their practices. [...] it orientates actions and social relations” (Abric, 1994a, p. 13). Identifying the SRs of consumption allows us to understand how socially responsible consumers apprehend it, insert their representations into their day-to-day practices and develop them. We will show that consumption is an object of SR and we will present the notion of SRC.

Consumption, an object of social representations

Consumption appears as an individual and collective phenomenon whose SRs form part of a wider context of SRs of the economy.

1. Respectively, Institut national de la consommation (National Institute of Consumption); Direction générale à la concurrence, consommation et à la répression des fraudes (Department of Competition, Consumption and the Prevention of Fraud); Centres communaux d'action sociale (Community social action centers) and Caisses d'allocations familiales (Family allowance centers).

Consumption, a polymorphic phenomenon that has a high social issue value

Studies on the sociology of consumption, initiated by Veblen (1899),² consider that this phenomenon results not only from economic processes but also from social and psychological processes. Baudrillard (1970, p. 79) emphasizes “that one always manipulates objects (in the widest sense) as signs that distinguish you either by affiliating you to your own group taken as a reference point, or by demarcating you from your group by reference to a higher status group”. Bourdieu (1979) introduces the notion of lifestyles and of their systematicity, and consumption then emerges as the result of the interaction between habitus and fields of action.

Marketing is interested in the meanings of consumption, which can appear variously as an experience, as play, as classification and as integration (Holt, 1995; Solomon, 1983; Richins, 1994). Some studies focus on the valorization of the consumption experience (Lai, 1995; Holbrook, 1994, 1999; Aurier, Evrard and N’Goala, 2004). On the basis of such work, one can identify five components of value: emotional, functional, aesthetic, epistemic and social. Heilbrunn (2005) classifies consumption practices into three categories: acquisition (purchase, donation, inheritance, gifts, etc.), use (the various modes of functional and ergonomic interactions) and disposal (all the practices for disposing of objects: throwing them away, transformation, recycling, etc.). These practices, apart from their functional role, allow an individual to structure his identity, to situate himself in relation to others, to acquire knowledge and to experience emotion.

Thus, consumption appears as a polymorphic phenomenon with high social issue value. The relation of people to consumption, as well as their beha-

viors, underpin and guarantee the cohesion of certain groups or tribes (Cova, 1995). One can, moreover, suggest that consumption is very much a representational object in Moliner’s (1993) sense.

The contribution of the concept of social representations to understanding consumption

In the early 20th century, Halbwachs (1912) emphasized the role of SR in the distribution of expenditure and ways of life.³ In general, SRs answer to four key functions: a knowledge function, an identity function, an orientation function and justificatory function (Abric, 1994a). This “naïve theoretical model” (Jodelet, 1989 and 1984) enables people to interpret their socio-cultural, economic, technological and institutional environment and the practices of the various actors in this environment (public authorities, companies, the media, retailers, etc.).

Understanding the functioning of an SR requires identifying not only its content but also its structure, comprising a central core and peripheral elements. The core is the “fundamental element of the representation, for this is what determines both the meaning and the organization of the representation” (Abric, 1994a, p. 21). The core is the element that most resists change, and “for two representations to be different, they must be organized around two different cores”. It can have two dimensions: a functional element, particularly in situations with an operational purpose, where “the most important elements for carrying out the task and forming the central core will be then favored in the representation”, and a normative dimension “in all situations in which social-affective, social or ideological dimensions directly play a part. In this type of situation, we can suppose that a norm,

2. Veblen (1899, p. 19) states: “The end of acquisition and accumulation is conventionally held to be the consumption of goods accumulated [...] Such consumption may of course be conceived to serve the consumer’s physical needs – his physical comfort – or his so-called higher needs – spiritual, aesthetic, intellectual, and so on; [...] But it is only when taken in a sense far removed from its naïve meaning that consumption of goods can be said to afford the incentive from which accumulation invariably proceeds. The motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation.”

3. He states (page 202): “We do not believe that the division of expenditure results mechanically from the size of the family and the size of the income. If there are (as we maintain) SRs of certain types of life (foremost of which are this or that type of dwelling, clothing, or leisure pursuits), we must expect that families with very different compositions, and very variable incomes, allocate or tend to allocate their expenditure in the same way.”

stereotype or strongly marked attitude will be at the center of the representation” (Abric, 1994a, p. 23). The peripheral elements are organized around the central core. “They are directly related to it, in other words their presence, their weighting, their value and their function are determined by the core. They constitute the main part of content of the representation, the part that is most accessible, but also the most dynamic and most concrete part. They include retained, selected and interpreted information, opinions regarding the object and its environment, stereotypes and beliefs” (Abric, 1994a, p. 25). The role of the peripheral elements (See Table 1) is to show what it is normal to do or not do in a given situation “considering the significance and purpose of this situation” and allows “personalized modulation of representations and conduct in a given situation” (Abric, 1994a, p. 27).

In the context of consumption, SRs shape behavior. They enable individuals to understand the modes and codes of consumption, to place themselves within a social group, and to communicate; they guide consumers’ consumption choices and behaviors (purchase, use of products, etc.) and give them a meaning. Although structurally stable, SRs nevertheless include zones of change that can make

them evolve under the influence of cognitive, affective, social or ideological factors. In a dynamic process, they thus contribute to the emergence and development of different consumption values and behaviors.

Consumption: an aspect of social representations of the economy

SRs of consumption are placed within the larger framework of SRs of the economy and economic objects (banking, credit, money, work, craft industry, etc.) (Vergès, 1989, 1998; Roussiau, 1998; Viaud and Roland-Levy, 2000).

For Vergès (1989), SRs of the economy and of economic objects arise both from individuals’ experience and their position in society and from “the work that society carries out on their significance”. They are elaborated in the collective memory, social debate and ideological conflicts, as well as in the subject’s practices and experience (Vergès, 1989; Vergès, 1998).

SRs of consumption would therefore result from the collective memory of a social group or of the

Table 1. – Functions of the central core and peripheral elements (Adapted from Abric, 1994)

| | Central core | Peripheral elements |
|------------------|--|--|
| Functions | <p>Generative: “This is the element by which the meaning of other elements constitutive of the representation is created or transformed.”</p> <p>Organizing: “This is the central core that determines the nature of the links which between them unite the elements of the representation. It is, in this sense, the unifying and stabilizing element of the representation.”</p> | <p>Realization: “Directly dependent on the context, these result from the anchoring of the representation in reality, and allow its presentation in concrete, immediately comprehensible and transmissible terms. They join together the elements of the situation in which the representation is produced, and refer to subjects’ present life and lived experience.”</p> <p>Regulation: “More flexible than the central elements, the peripheral elements play a key role in adapting the representation to changes of context. New information or changes in the environment can then be integrated into the periphery of the representation.”</p> <p>Defense: “The central core of a representation resists change, since its transformation would entail its complete disruption. Thus, the peripheral system functions as the representation’s defense system.”</p> |

society, from ideological debates within these (for example, the debates on SRC and non-consumption and the questioning of marketing practices), and from the subject's own practices (learning about consumption during childhood and adolescence (Gollety, 1997), as well as the processes of perception, memorizing, learning and forming attitudes).

Meier and Kirchler (1998) emphasize the relationship between SR and attitudes. They show that SRs of the Euro determine people's attitudes toward this currency. Similarly, Michel-Guillou (2006) identifies the links between SR and practice, focusing on the pro-environmental commitment in agriculture by pointing out that "practices and SRs mutually influence each other". She makes clear that these links are determined "according to the actor's degree of autonomy and the affective load of the situation. SRs determine behaviors when the affective load is strong or when the individual has a certain autonomy. In the opposite case, when the individual is in a strongly constrained material or social situation, practices and representations enter into interaction with each other" (p. 158).

All these conclusions justify examining the link between SRs of consumption and consumption practices for understanding SRC.

Socially responsible consumption

The questioning of consumption during the period 1968-1973, mounting fears from the 1980s onwards, and more recently "the intensification of social, ecological and ethical concerns" (Croutte, Delpal and Hatchuel, 2006, p. 5) have led academics to think about SRC. Among the definitions put forward (Webster, 1975; Roberts, 1995; Webb, Mohr and Harris, 2007), we adopt the one offered by François-Lecompte (2005, p. 44) who defines SRC as "the fact of purchasing products and services which are perceived to have a positive (or less negative) impact on one's environment and/or the use of one's purchasing power to express social and environmental concerns".⁴ At the present time, her studies are the

most developed in a French context, offering a global vision of SRC and providing a measurement scale.

The dimensions of socially responsible consumption

Roberts (1995) reveals two SRC dimensions: an environmental dimension (avoiding buying products that have a negative impact on the environment) and a societal dimension (avoiding buying products of companies that have a negative impact on society's well-being).

François-Lecompte (2005) distinguishes five dimensions: (1) the firm's behavior ("refusing to buy from firms whose behavior is deemed to be irresponsible"), (2) buying cause-related products (products "for which part of the price will go to a good cause"), (3) the desire to help small businesses ("not buying everything in supermarkets and enabling small store-keepers to survive"), (4) taking account of the geographical origin of products ("the desire to favor products from one's community") and (5) reducing the volume of consumption ("the consumer avoids 'consuming too much' and tries as much as possible to make things him/herself"). Webb, Mohr and Harris (2007) include recycling behavior and modes of consumption that respect the environment (using public transport, favoring non-polluting products).

This evolving conceptualization of SRC allows one to discern the emergence of a more detailed segmentation of SRC behaviors.

Socially responsible consumer profiles

Various groups of consumers are visible according to their SRC practices. For example, the CRÉDOC study (Croutte, Delpal and Hatchuel, 2006) distinguishes six groups of individuals according to their sensitivity to firms' social awareness commitments. François-Lecompte and Valette-Florence (2004) propose a four-group typology: "socially responsible individuals", "vigilant individuals", "not very socially responsible individuals" and "traditionalists".

These conclusions raise research questions that have oriented this empirical study: (1) Can the existence of different socially responsible consumer profiles be confirmed? (2) How are their SRs of consumption differentiated in terms of their structure?

4. See François-Lecompte and Roberts (2004) for an English version of the scale and definition – François-Lecompte A. and Roberts J. A. (2004), "Developing a measure of socially responsible consumption in France", *The Marketing Management Journal*, 16, 2, 50-66.

THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

In order to answer these research questions, an empirical study was carried out on a convenience sample of 392 individuals in 2007 and 2008. We will first explain our methodological choices and then present our main findings.

Methodological choices

A number of points will be addressed: the collection methodology for SRs, identification of their content, and the procedure followed during the study implementation.

Social representations collection methodology

Different methods are used in social psychology and in sociology for collecting SRs (Abric, 1994b). We adopted free association, which is used in many social psychology and economic sociology studies (Vergès, 1992; Roussiau, 1998) and in marketing to isolate representations of brands (Michel, 1999; Garnier-Aimé, 2006) or a sports activity (Baillergeau and Benavent, 2006). This technique allows the central core and the peripheral elements to be identified. Since our intention was to distinguish different profile groups in terms of SRC, so as to then analyze each group's representations and to find out whether these differ from group to group, we chose a questionnaire-based quantitative approach. Free associations were collected on the basis of the following question: "In general, one often refers to consumption. What does this term suggest to you?" Respondents were then asked to offer ten words or expressions by way of response.

Identification of the structure of social representations of consumption

The free associations were analyzed using EVOC2005 software (MMSH:⁵ Junique, Scano, Vergès). The central core and the peripheral zones were isolated by means of a lexicographical analysis (Vergès, 1992; Roussiau, 1998). The aim was to identify the central core of representations of consumption on the basis of the notion of prototypicality (Vergès, 1992). This involves finding the best prototype or element characterizing the SR of a set of objects, in this case consumption. In a given set of objects, certain terms are more representative than others since they are frequently used and therefore have a high degree of typicality. Prototypicality is obtained through a lexicographical analysis that takes account simultaneously of the terms' frequency and the rank of their occurrence. These two criteria allow a four-quadrant table to be drawn up: according to the terms' high or low frequency and according to whether the rank of their occurrence is close or not close. We thus distinguish: the central core that brings together terms whose frequency is high and rank close, the outer peripheral zone that covers terms whose frequency is low and rank is not close, and the potential change zones that include terms whose frequency is high and rank is not close or terms whose frequency is low and rank close (Roussiau, 1998).

Procedure

Data were collected from managers and salaried employees of a bank and from students. In this convenience sample, the average age is 25 and 47% of respondents are women. This self-administered questionnaire was distributed to the students in the context of an initial training course and to the managers in the context of a continuing education course, and was sent out to the bank employees.⁶ The introduction to the questionnaire states that the study concerns consumption in general (without any mention

5. For further information, log on to junique@mmsch.univ-aix.fr.

6. Variance analysis of the SRC items showed that there is no significant difference either between the questionnaires collected in 2007 and 2008 or between the students in initial training and the bank employees.

of SRC). It also makes clear that there are no right or wrong answers. The first part of the questionnaire contains the question that enables SRs of consumption to be collected. The second part (on a different page that is not visible when writing the answer to the first question) contains measures of different variables relating to consumption, including SRC (the items operationalizing the different variables being mixed). The third part contains the identification sheet. To ensure internal validity (Gavard-Perret et al., 2008), we used proven measures: free association for measuring SRs and an adaptation of the François-Lecompte (2005) scale for the practices.

These precautions reduce the impact that the presence of the researcher could have on the answers and avoid the anxiety arising from the feeling of being assessed on one's knowledge. They also prevent the contamination of the instructions on the SRs by the scales measuring consumption behavior. Given the exploratory nature of the study, we did not adopt the constraint of sample representativeness, which can be a limitation on its external validity (Giannelloni and Vernet, 2001).

Results

Our objective was twofold: to determine different groups of socially responsible consumers and to identify the SRs of consumption in each of these groups. The premise is that individuals having different SRC profiles ought to have different representations of consumption.

Constructing a typology of socially responsible consumption

A factor analysis with Varimax rotation was carried out on the 20 items of the scale. After eliminating eight items (those least saturating their factor axis and with a mean correlation lower than other items making up their dimension), we find a satisfactory five-dimensional factor structure of SRC on the François-Lecompte scale (See Table 2).

A confirmatory factor analysis, carried out using AMOS 16, confirms the good psychometric qualities of this scale, in terms of validity and reliability:

$n = 392$; chi square = 89.76 (dof = 44, $p = 2.04$), RMSEA = 0.053, SRMR = 0.046 and CFI = 0.964, the dimensions being mutually correlated from 0.17 to 0.45. Revealing these five elements implies that an individual can have a high level of SRC on one or more of them (for example, by favoring purchases from local producers) and a low level on others (for example, by not making any effort to reduce his volume of consumption or not taking account of the company's behavior).

From these dimensions, we constructed a typology of the respondents so as to classify them into homogenous groups in relation to SRC. The analysis was carried out using SPAD 5.5: the individuals were subjected to a PCA involving the twelve items previously retained; a hierarchical ascending classification was then implemented on their factor coordinates (or scores). Analysis of the tree diagram as well as the tool assisting the SPAD decision suggests adopting a four-group division.

Table 3 describes the main characteristics of each of the four groups (a more exhaustive description of these groups may be obtained from the authors upon request).

Two groups are opposed on all the dimensions: the "SRCs" with a high level of SRC and "the indifferent" category with a low level of SRC. The other two groups are opposed on three dimensions: the "locals" prefer shopping locally and favor French produce, but present an average or low level on the other dimensions, while the "good causes" are especially in favor of cause-related products as well as practicing other forms of SRC such as reducing their consumption volume and taking into account firms' behavior. To a certain extent, this typology is different from that offered by François-Lecompte and Valette-Florence (2004). In these authors' typology, the "not very socially responsible" category nevertheless shows sensitivity to the volume of consumption; the "vigilant" category focuses on companies' behavior and on cause-related products; and the "traditionalists" are sensitive only to local stores.

The structure and content of social representations of consumption

An analysis of the associations of consumption was carried out on each group. We first determined

Table 2. – The results of the PCA on the five dimensions of socially responsible consumption and the reliability analysis

| | Component | | | | |
|--|---|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|-------------------------|
| | 1 Purchase of cause-related products | 2 Helping small businesses | 3 Georg. origin of products | 4 Reducing volume of consump. | 5 Firm's behavior |
| When possible, I buy products of which a part of the price is transferred to a good cause | 0.90 | | | | |
| When possible, I buy products of which a part of the price goes to a humanitarian cause | 0.89 | | | | |
| When possible, I buy products of which a part of the price goes to developing countries | 0.78 | | | | |
| I shop in small businesses (baker, butcher, etc.) | | 0.84 | | | |
| Through my purchases, I help provide a living to the storekeepers in my neighborhood | | 0.79 | | | |
| I go to the market to support small producers | | 0.70 | | | |
| When I have the choice between a European product and a product made elsewhere in the world, I choose the European product | | | 0.89 | | |
| When I have the choice, I buy products made in France | | | 0.83 | | |
| I limit my consumption to what I really need | | | | 0.86 | |
| In general, I try not to consume too much | | | | 0.84 | |
| I don't buy from companies or storekeepers that have direct links with political parties I disapprove of | | | | | 0.86 |
| I don't buy from companies or storekeepers that have direct links with organizations such as the Mafia or sects | | | | | 0.76 |
| Alpha | 0.85 | 0.72 | 0.72 | 0.65 | 0.65 |

Total variance explained: 76.7%.

It should be noted that Cronbach's *alpha* is sensitive to the number of items used in the calculation. The figures of 0.65 for two of the 2-item scales are reasonable given the small number of items used (e.g., an *alpha* of 0.65 for a 2-item scale is equivalent of 0.74 for three items).

the minimal frequency thresholds (from which a word is taken into consideration in the analysis) and the intermediate frequency (allowing very frequently

used words to be identified) with the help of the frequency distribution provided by EVOC2005, which also indicated the average rank (distinguishing a dis-

Table 3. – Main characteristics of the four groups

| Category | Number | Average level of individuals on each of the SRC dimensions | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------|--|-------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|-----------------|
| | | Purchase of cause-related products | Wish to help small businesses | Taking account of products' geographical origins | Reduction of volume of consumption | Firm's behavior |
| Group 1 "SRCs" | 110 | Very high | Very high | High | High | High |
| Group 2 "Locals" | 79 | Very low | High | Very high | Average | Average |
| Group 3 "Good causers" | 124 | Very high | Low | Low | High | High |
| Group 4 "Indifferent" | 79 | Very low | Very low | Very low | Very low | Very low |

tant rank from a close rank).⁷ Tables 4a, 4b and 4c present, respectively, the content of the central core, the content of the peripheral system and potential zones of change for each of these groups.⁸

The content of the SRs was then analyzed using the four levels of consumption suggested by Desjeux (2006) as a provisional coding grid. This breakdown, although "arbitrary in the sense that reality forms a continuum and the line of the boundaries is not naturally inscribed in this same social reality", allows the mechanisms of consumption to be identified and the representations of consumption to be understood. The author distinguishes a macrosocial level ("the scale of classes, ways of life, and lifestyles"), a mesosocial level ("the scale of interactions between institutions, political actors or pressure groups, and issues of consumption in relation to the environment"), a microsocial level ("the scale covering the link between the domestic area, the area of acquisition and the use of goods and services") and finally a micro-individual level ("the scale of conscious and unconscious judgments"). The content of the central

core, of areas of potential change, and of the peripheral system was then analyzed, emphasizing the similarities and specificities of each group (See Tables 4a, 4b and 4c).

– *The central core of social representations of consumption*

The unifying elements of the four groups are *purchasing power, purchase, purchasing, expenditure, spending, eating and money*. A functional dimension of the central core is here apparent, composed of the elements that are most important for carrying out the task, as well as a normative dimension – to consume is to purchase – which shows how people define consumption (Seca, 2005). At the microsocial level, elements appear that allow consumption (purchasing power, money), as well as practices (purchase, expenditure, food shopping/eating).

The "SRCs" distinguish three other groups: they are the only ones to mention *growth*, underlining the negative effects constituted by *waste* and *overconsumption* (mesosocial level), and the only ones not to mention the influence factors of *marketing* and *advertising* (microsocial level). We can therefore suppose that they subsume consumption within the issue of growth, which for them can express a distancing from marketing tools. The "indifferent" category is differentiated from other groups by their mentioning *the economy* at the mesosocial level. Their discourse on consumption is not critical (absence of terms such as *waste* or *overconsumption*

7. The minimal frequency is 4 for the "SRCs" and the "indifferent" category and 3 for the "locals" and "good causers". The intermediate frequency is 8 for the "SRCs", 5 for the "locals" and 9 for the "good causers". The average rank is 5.4 for the four groups.

8. The tables showing the detailed structure of SRs for each of the groups, together with the average rank for each word and frequency, may be obtained from the authors upon request.

Table 4a. – Central core for the four groups isolated

| | “SRCs” | “Locals” | “Good causers” | “Indifferent” |
|-------------------------|---|--|--|--|
| Macrosocial | Mass consumption | Consumer society | Consumer society Mas consumption | Mass consumption |
| Mesosocial | System Growth Effects Waste Overconsumption | Effects Waste | Effects Overconsumption | System Economy |
| Microsocial | Practices Food Purchases Buying Expenditure Spending Eating Objects Products Elements enabling consumption Stores Money Purchasing power | Practices Purchases Buying Food Drinking Shopping Expenditure Spending Eating Using Selling Sale Objects Services Elements enabling consumption Money Credit Purchasing power Influence factors Advertising | Practices Purchases Buying Food Expenditure Spending Eating Use Using Selling Sale Objects Goods Products Elements enabling consumption Money Supermarkets Purchasing power Influence factors Marketing | Practices Purchases Buying Drinking Spending Expenditure Eating Objects Products Elements enabling consumption Money Purchasing power Influence factors Advertising |
| Micro-individual | Motivations Needs, Want | Motivations Needs | Judgment Quality, Price Evaluation Pleasure | Motivations Needs Evaluation Pleasure |

Table 4b. – The outer peripheral zone for the four groups isolated

| | “SRCs” | “Locals” | “Good causers” | “Indifferent” |
|-------------------------|---|---|--|--|
| Macrosocial | Society | Society | Fashion Society | Fashion Society |
| Mesosocial | System Profit Work Production Business Actors Competition Consumers Effects Destruction Dependence Abundance Solutions Consumerism | System Demand Economy Market Production Profits Business Actors Competition Effects Abundance Pollution | System Demand Inflation Supply Production Resources Business Actors Competition Consumers Effects Abuse Abusive Creation of new needs Waste Dependence Destruction Excess Manipulation Globalization Solutions Fair trade Sustainable development | System Trade Inflation Business Actors Customer Consumers Effects Dependence |
| Microsocial | Objects Organic Gasoline Elements enabling consumption Income Influence factors Marketing | Objects Leisure Gifts Elements enabling consumption Budget Consumption credit Influence factors Taxes Brand | Practices Paying Habit Objects After-sales service Service goods Elements enabling consumption Income Credit Influence factors Taxes Brand | Objects Goods Leisure Elements enabling consumption Supermarkets Influence factors Marketing Brand |
| Micro-individual | Judgment Quality Motivations Obligation | Motivations Necessity Obligation | Judgment Choosing Thinking Motivations Impulse Necessary Necessity Desire Want | Judgment Choice Cost Motivations Want Temptation |

Table 4c. – Potential zone of change for the four groups isolated

| | “SCRs” | “Locals” | “Good causers” | “Indifférent” |
|-------------------------|---|---|--|--|
| Macrosocial | Fashion Consumer society | Mass consumption | | Consumer society |
| Mesosocial | System Economy Market Actors Customer Retailing Mass marketing Effects Manipulation Pollution Abuse | System Growth Supply Effects Manipulation Waste Destruction Excess Drug Dependence Overconsumption | System Environment Capitalism Growth Trade Economy Market Energy Actors Customer Retailing Mass marketing Effects Pollution Waste | System Market Investments Effects Manipulation |
| Microsocial | Practices Choice Drinking Behavior Use Using Selling Sale Objects Alcohol Goods Service goods Drink Consumer goods Services Clothing Elements enabling consumption Supermarkets Influence factors Brand Advertising | Practices Choice Shopping Possessing Shopping Use Objects Gasoline Goods Clothing Elements enabling consumption Supermarkets Influence factors Incentives Marketing | Practices Having Choice Shopping Possessing Day-to-day Shopping Objects Service Packaging Elements enabling consumption Stores Income Supermarket Sales Influence factors Advertising Influence | Practices Consuming Use Using Selling Sale Objects Service goods Food Service Elements enabling consumption Stores |
| Micro-individual | Judgment Price Evaluation Pleasure | Judgment Price Evaluation Satisfaction Pleasure | Judgment Costs Motivations Needs Obligation Utility | Judgment Price Motivations Necessity |

that are mentioned by the other groups), and they evoke the notion of pleasure. There thus emerges a view constructed around the economic well-being that consumption can bring. The “locals” register consumption at the macrosocial and mesosocial levels by referring to *consumer society* and *waste*. They differentiate themselves more specifically at the microsocal level by mentioning *services* and *credit* (the other groups do not refer to these notions). The “good causers” are to a certain extent close to the “SRCs” with the presence of notions such as *consumer society*, *mass consumption* and *overconsumption*. They stress the notion of *use* (microsocial level) and are the only ones not to mention needs and to express judgments by evoking *quality* and *price* (micro-individual level). On the other hand, in common with the “indifferent” category, they refer to the notion of *pleasure*.

– *The outer peripheral zone*

In this zone, the elements of the central core are manifested, but with wide variability “depending on each individual and according to the historical context” (Seca, 2005).

All the groups link consumption to society (macrosocial level) and refer to consumption as a system (microsocial level) expressed through the notion of business. The “good causers” and those who are “indifferent” differ from the “SRCs” and the “locals” by linking consumption to the phenomenon of *fashion*.

More specifically, the “SRCs” link consumption to *work*, express the effects of consumption through the terms *abundance*, *destruction*, and *dependence*, and suggest *consumerism* as the answer. The consumer emerges as an actor both through his participation in the system as a worker and through the impact he can have on the negative effects of consumption (consumerism). Consumption can be expressed through an obligation subject to influences such as *marketing* and *advertising*. *Gasoline*, as necessary consumption, and *eco-friendly products*, as the alternative, concretely express the notion of product, present in the central core. The “indifferent” group sees consumption as a *fashion* phenomenon, centered on the *consumer* and the *customer*. Consumption creates *dependence*, the only negative effect expressed, by arousing *envy* and *temptations* which necessitate making *choices*, considering the *costs* that it represents for individuals. The “locals” speak of waste and

the consumer society, viewing these as having only one negative effect, pollution, without offering solutions. Consumption also includes *leisure* and *gifts*, indicating that social interaction plays a role. At the microsocal level, we find several elements that illustrate the notion of purchasing power: *budget*, *taxes*, and *credit*. The “good causers” once again more than the “SRCs” refer to the negative effects of consumption: *abuse*, *misuse*, *excess*, *waste*, *destruction*, *creation of new needs*, *dependence*, *manipulation* and *globalization*. They offer highly specific solutions that are very much directed toward changes in production such as *fair trade* and *sustainable development*. At the microsocal level, we can note the variety of terms used in relation to practices (*habit*, *paying*), to the object (*service goods*, *after-sales service*), to elements that enable consumption (*income*, *credit*) and to influence factors (*taxes*, *brands*). At the micro-individual level, they evoke the tensions that consumption creates between obligation (*necessary*, *necessity*) and desire (*impulse*, *desire*, *want*).

– *Zones of potential change*

These zones are ambiguous: words very frequently mentioned with a high rank and words infrequently mentioned with a low rank (Roussiau, 1998). Interpreting these is essential for tracking the evolution of an SR. As Roussiau (1998) reminds us, Vergès designates “this zone as the source of a possible future change within a representation”; it comprises elements liable either to enter the central core or to enter the outer peripheral zone. The “SRCs” mention the *economy*, emphasizing *retailing*, and the social dimension of consumption with *fashion*. They stress the negative effects of consumption on society through the terms *consumer society*, *manipulation*, *pollution* and *abuse*. This may signify that these concerns are becoming increasingly important for this group and could in future reinforce the central core on the negative effects of consumption. At the microsocal level, we find practices (*choice*, *drinking*, *behavior*, *use*, *using*, *selling*, *sales*), objects (*alcohol*, *goods*, *service goods*, *beverages*, *consumer goods*, *services*, *clothing*), elements that enable people to consume (*supermarkets*, *hypermarkets*), influence factors (*brand*, *advertising*). The term *pleasure* appears in this zone. This could signify that the notion of pleasure is no longer centrally linked to consumption. *Price* also occurs, which may indicate

the emergence of the problems of purchasing power at a more individual level and of the value that may be attached to the product.

The “indifferent” group has a much less developed potential zone for change than the other groups. Nevertheless, the presence of the terms *manipulation* and *consumer society* may suggest a change in the central core through incorporating the negative effects of consumption. Here again, price may be linked to the problems of purchasing power and product value. The “locals” refer to the economy through the term *mass retailing*. At the macrosocial and mesosocial levels, there occur terms such as *mass consumption*, *overconsumption*, *manipulation*, *excess*, *dependence*, *a drug*, *destruction*, *waste products*, which may here again indicate an awareness of the negative effects of consumption. Once again, *price* occurs in this zone, with the same interpretation as previously. Similarly, the term *pleasure* is present, with an ambiguity over its emergence or its disappearance in this linkage with consumption. The “good causers”, again more than the other groups, put forward an economic view of consumption by emphasizing, like the “SRCs” and the “locals”, *retailing* as well as *capitalism* and the notions of *trade* and *growth*. Here, it can be supposed that they are likely to develop a systematic representation of consumption. The negative effects mentioned – pollution, environment, waste – can only reinforce the consequences of overconsumption characterizing the central core. We may wonder whether the presence of the term *possessing* in this zone does not imply a distance taken in relation to capitalism.

IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The first result of this study is to show the existence of four consumer groups that are distinguished according to different SRC dimensions: consumers manifesting responsible consumption in all the dimensions; consumers claiming to support local small businesses and neighborhood stores; consu-

mers purchasing cause-related products; and consumers who say they do not practice SRC. This segmentation qualifies the one offered by François-Lecompte and Valette-Florence (2004): the “indifferent” group is present on all the dimensions, the “good causers” stress reducing consumption volume and the “locals”, to a certain extent, take account of firms’ behavior and envisage reducing the volume of consumption.

The second result is to bring out the convergences and specificities of these different groups’ SRs of consumption. For all the groups, the act of purchase and the economic aspect (purchase/purchasing, expenditure, purchasing power) play a central role in the SRs of consumption: to consume is to purchase and therefore to spend. Consumption refers to a necessity – the idea of feeding oneself is central – to which one responds in a market context. Bauman (2008, p. 161) points out that “contemporary society commits its members above all as consumers [...]. To satisfy the criteria of normality, to be recognized as an authentic member, in due form, of society, one has to respond quickly and effectively to the temptations of the consumer market” (p. 161). The content of the potential zones of change shows, on the one hand, an awareness of consumption as manipulation – consumers are not taken in by firms’ intentions – and on the other hand, the emergence of the concern as to price, which can be linked to the question of purchasing power.

Apart from this convergence, the four groups are differentiated on several points, as the different potential zones of change show. The “SRCs” have the most critical view of consumption. Conscious of the issues and of the societal impact of consumption (François-Lecompte, 2003), they know that they are actors in a system that they decode, and they can develop a motivational state of resistance to consumption (Roux, 2007). The “good causers”, who are very much aware of the system, come up with alternatives linked to changes in trade and in firms’ policy, such as fair trade and sustainable development. The “locals” realize the negative effects of consumption, which can give rise to fears and engender withdrawal to nearby, known territory that is open to protection. The “indifferent” group has a more experiential, less systematic and collective view of consumption, with a potential evolution associated with individual concerns linked to purchasing power.

Managerial implications

This study shows that socially responsible consumers do not form a homogenous group. After confirming the operational value of this segmentation in their sector, firms could adapt their offering to the different segments, drawing on their SRs of consumption.

“SRCs” have an overall, systemic view that is highly critical of consumption. Firms can adopt an approach toward this group that tries to explain how they operate, the way in which profits are re-used, and their practices in regard to suppliers and employees; sanction an activist, even critical, discourse toward consumption by offering another way of consuming; provide information about and discuss (through Internet groups, chat rooms, etc.) their actions in regard to employees, the environment, and suppliers; emphasize not only purchase but also use, and suggest SRC practices that are not linked to purchase; show that consumption does not necessarily involve pollution by establishing green practices, especially in terms of product design (organic and/or “green” products), packaging (by avoiding over-packaging), direct marketing (using recycled paper, and better targeting consumers so as to avoid waste).

The “locals” are progressively becoming aware of the negative effects of consumption, especially waste, and tend to withdraw to their immediate environment. Firms can work with local suppliers, adopt neighborhood retailing with local small businesses by emphasizing the firm’s insertion into the local economic fabric in order, in particular, to create new jobs and to avoid the pollution linked to transport; adopt re-usable packaging and offer to exchange or take back non-used products in order to combat waste and unnecessary refuse; and develop a product offering that allows SRC and budget optimization to be combined.

The “good causers” associate consumption with pleasure while being conscious of the pernicious effects of the system, and advance alternative modes of consumption (fair trade and sustainable development practices). Firms can lay emphasis on the emotional, experiential, epistemic, symbolic and social benefits of SRC, and highlight the value-for-money of their products, the notion of fair price and the possibility of new non-market relationships with the brand and with other consumers, for example, through virtual communities.

The “indifferent” group has a highly microsocial and micro-individual view of consumption that is largely unsystematic. SRC does not form part of their consumer concerns. Firms can emphasize the pleasure aspect of consumption and, if they are aiming to develop SRC, can play on the emotional and experiential qualities of this type of purchasing; consumption does not have to be austere.

Limitations and future research

We note, first of all, that this study has its limitations, in particular using a convenience sample and the fact that the SRs are the expression of a reality at a given point in time. It would be interesting to focus on the dynamics of SRs of consumption, particularly to study the evolution of the zones of potential change.

A number of lines of future research can be envisaged. Since SRC means different things to different consumers, one can ask the following question: What does “consuming in a socially responsible way” mean? The SRC scale used in this study adopts a view of consumption centered on purchasing and shopping. Research could be directed at developing a scale compatible with a much broader view of consumption, including, for example, all the practices described by Heilbrunn (2005): provisioning, use and disposal. Furthermore, it would be interesting to compare SRs of consumption with observations of purchase, use, destruction and resistance to consumption. A longitudinal approach, using, for example, the diary method, could reveal changes in consumption practices. Again with a view to better understanding SRC and its evolution, a further study could address the SRs of other economic topics associated with consumption such as the economy, money, mass retailing, companies and advertising. Finally, studying the representations of other social groups such as isolated individuals and people lacking economic security as well as the generational effects could provide a deeper understanding of changes in consumption behavior.

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