

The Profile of The Socially Responsible Consumer: Trends and Typologies

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Abstract : This article explores the evolution of consumer behavior, highlighting a growing trend to integrate non-economic considerations, such as ecology and solidarity, into purchasing decisions. Two contradictory concepts are highlighted: "Homo economicus", focused on the maximization of financial resources, and "alter-consumers", who value ethics and sustainability. A typology of ethical consumers is presented, including ethical, semi-ethical and selfish consumers, each with distinct motivations. The article also discusses the impact of sustainable development on the market and responsible consumption segments, with a focus on "green" trends, fair trade and ethical purchasing practices.

Keywords : Responsible consumption, Consumer behavior, Consumer typologies.

Introduction

Consumer behavior has evolved considerably over the decades, becoming increasingly complex and diverse. While economic concerns have historically dominated purchasing decisions, a new era of consumption is emerging, marked by ethical, environmental, and social considerations. Today's consumer is often torn between two contradictory trends : on the one hand, the traditional model of Homo economicus, who seeks to maximize his resources, and on the other hand, a more engaged approach, that of the socially responsible consumer, for whom the impact of his choices on society and the environment is essential. This article aims to explore this growing phenomenon by studying the different profiles of responsible consumers, examining the factors that influence their behaviors, and analyzing the implications for the market. Through the examination of scientific typologies and practical contributions, we will attempt to better understand how this new generation of consumers integrates non-economic values into their purchasing decisions and how this redefines current business practices.

1. The socially responsible consumer What profile?

When we look at consumer behavior, we generally see it becoming more complex and chameleonic. Over the years, the monolithic market has been transformed into a multi-faceted concept that represents the aspirations and ways of working of different people. So, in this fourth section, we'll look at how consumers integrate non-economic considerations into their consumption decisions. Here are a few scientific and practical contributions to the typology of the socially responsible consumer.

While it's true that consumer issues represent the whole range of problems facing modern society, a number of factors have come to the fore today. This is mainly due to heightened expectations in terms of reassurance such as health, ecology and solidarity (Rochefort, 2001), possibly linked to recent fear phenomena (food crises, environmental disasters, climatic catastrophes). These trends can be combined with a growing awareness of the broader concept of sustainable development. These include old-fashioned consumption of other channels (organic), brands on this register (Nature et Découvertes, Body Shop), and other distinctive signs other than brands (fair trade labels such as Max Havelaar). On the other hand, the most striking phenomena are linked to expectations and behaviors, which manifest themselves in the search for “bargains” and lower prices. This has led to the development of discount and hard discount distribution channels, and a growing offer of entry-level products, including from low-cost countries.

Markets and their customers are evolving, and commercial practices are being affected by these two opposing trends. Thus, the historical polemic about the growing social role of marketing has been reinforced by more altruistic and collective expectations, and also conditioned by dominant behaviors based on highly individualistic visions of transactions.

1.1 Homo economy and alter-consumers: two contradictory concepts of consumption:

It is impossible to question the contradiction of the consumer without a quick look at the fundamentals of the economic model that consumers operate today. For each aspect, brief parallels are suggested, both from a sociological and economic point of view, and from a more marketing perspective.

1.1.1 Homoeconomics has become the dominant model of consumer behavior:

Economists generally view the act of consumption as a rational approach to satisfying needs by maximizing the possible acquisition of goods and available financial resources. The growing importance of the monetary dimension in consumer behavior has coincided with the rise of mega-capitalism, and the effectiveness of human well-being seems to depend on its translation into economic form. The concept of materiality becomes dominant, and individuals fetishize the concrete, directly perceptible aspects of their economic transactions (Caille 2005). The quest for “bargains” in the economic sense is part of this perspective, and is cited as the fundamental wave most representative of relationships with things. This is reflected in the phenomenon of aggregation, which tends to exclude the middle segment of the market in favor of the high-end segment, particularly the low-end segment (Estin and Berg 2005). This utilitarian vision of human well-being contains fewer functional aspects and is more directly oriented towards identifying individuals with their actions. Human subjects fundamentally want to achieve a self-sufficient image of themselves and take responsibility for their appearance in multiple worlds (Caille 2005). Guided by modern homoeconomics, the pursuit of commercial interests is therefore a necessary balance between the purchasing process and self-image. It leads to the development of an identity based on the recognition of one's ability to do “good business” beyond mere conduct. A growing proportion of people systematically seek out low prices and promotions that offer satisfaction and social value.

1.1.2 Emerging social values and “other” consumers :

Stock market analysis shows that, despite intellectual debate, the economy remains the most important driving force. The latter denounces the universal “greed” it provokes and the havoc it wreaks on the Third World and the environment. At the same time, emerging phenomena such as the alternative globalist movement, the alternative cycle, fair trade and responsible investment are in line with this contestation...

For several years now, management sciences have been addressing this societal trend, based on a variety of consumer behaviours. Two trends can be identified :

- Green consumption due to environmental concerns (Kinnear, Taylor, Ahmed 1974, Giannelloni 1998),
- Named citizen consumption, which can be viewed from different angles. Firstly, ethical consumption involves the degree of integrity of an individual's conduct in the area of

consumption (Berkowitz and Latterman, Smith 1990, Muncy and Vittel 1992, Holbrook, 1994) and their various effects on purchasing behavior. Sustainable consumption is based on a macro-marketing vision of the market, taking into account cultural influences as a frame of reference for consumers. It is part of a global, multi-dimensional macro-cultural project that goes beyond simple consumer involvement and examines all economic, institutional and political forces. Finally, socially responsible consumption can refer to a broader social and environmental vision of consumption (Webster 1975, Roberts 1995, François Lecompte, 2004) or to a narrower vision of corporate social responsibility (Mohr, Webb and Harris, 2001; Carrigan and Attala 2001). Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001).

Today, the identification of alternative consumers by numerous economic players, and their recent integration into sociological and marketing planning, are evidence of the omnipresence of these currents of thought. The links between these new exchange values, these new types of consumers and those mediated by the broader sustainable development movement are clear. The concept thus rests on three considerations - economic rights, social rights and environmental rights - which are strongly interdependent and sit on the same hierarchy. Although controversial, this vision of sustainable development remains the most progressive, as it emphasizes basic needs for justice and affirms the importance of the natural environment as a foundation (C. Gendron and Reveret J.P. (2000)). Like environmental protection and socially responsible consumption, sustainable development remains an evolving social issue of expressions, values, attitudes and behaviours (Binninger and Robert 2005).

1.2 Market segments and ethical consumption :

There are many contributions to ethical consumer segmentation, both scientific and practical.

1.2.1 Academic contributions :

Several authors have proposed different consumer typologies, based on their concerns about the ethical properties of products. In this section, we introduce the typology of Bird and Hughes (1997) and Bouquet and Hénault (1998).

According to Bird and Hughes (1997), consumers fall into three segments : ethical, semi-ethical and selfish consumers (see Table 1). The authors distinguish between these three categories :

- Ethical consumers are primarily motivated by their ethical status. They are passionate about social responsibility and sustainable development activities. Then compare the benefits of each brand and product, and choose the product or brand that best matches your expectations. These symbolic expectations reflect the ethical consumer's values of social commitment and responsible consumption. What's more, they are willing to pay extra to establish philanthropic and supportive relationships with various members of society. The main motivation for semi-ethical consumers is perceived quality and brand status. Good product quality and brand image motivate them to make ethical purchases. They combine the benefits of sought-after symbolic ethical products with the advantages of emotionally satisfying tokens. They show a certain mistrust of ethical purchases, but are open to convincing arguments for consuming this product category.
- Selfish consumers are highly sensitive to product price and quality. Their first criterion is to buy based on the product's excellent value for money. They are not interested in social causes or philanthropy. Bouquet and Hénault (1998) argue that there are similarities between consumers of fair trade products and those who are respectful of the environment. Based on these similarities, they identified consumers as polycentric, ethnocentric and egocentric, similar to the groups suggested in previous research on green consumers, classified into two groups (see Table 1).
- Multi-axis consumers are highly sensitive to social issues. They strive to consume products that comply with ethical standards. These consumers pursue their personal interests as well as those of others by consuming and purchasing ethical products. They want to give meaning to their spending to help others, without expecting anything in return.

This group of polycentric consumers involved in community and political activities will have a significant impact on the consumption behavior of those around them. With good education and high social status, these consumers are the ideal target group for fair trade, but polycentric consumers represent a small percentage of the North American population, between 5 and 15%. Ethnically centered consumers demonstrate a sense of social responsibility, but emphasize personal gain. They value social responsibility only when it affects them directly. This group of educated, economically well-off consumers represents 30% of the North American population. Selfish consumers seem to lack social responsibility. They show a certain resistance to the fair trade discourse. These are consumers with little education and low social status. This category of consumers represents 55% to 65% of the North American population.

As such, we recognize that there are ways to motivate polycentric consumers to consume fair trade products that meet their ethical expectations. We also need to educate ethnic consumers to encourage them to purchase fair trade products.

As the following table shows, there are similarities between the consumer categories defined by Bird and Hughes (1997) and Bouquet and Hénault (1998). Indeed, the first category of consumers has a sense of social responsibility and seeks not only personal benefits, but above all symbolic benefits such as concern for others. Consumers in the second category are very socially responsible, and put their personal interests first. Consumers in the third category are not concerned with social responsibility.

Table 1 : Comparison of market segments according to two typologies

| Categories | Bird and Hughes (1997) | Bouquet and Hénault (1998) | Similarities |
|---|---|---|---|
| Category 1 : Strong sensitivity to the ethical values of products | Ethical consumers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have socially committed values • Seek symbolic benefits • Are motivated by their ethical stance | Polycentric consumers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly sensitive to social causes • Seek personal benefits and those of others • Educated, high social level | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sense of social responsibility • Seeking benefits other than personal ones |
| Category 2 : Moderate sensitivity to ethical product values | Semi-ethical consumers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivated by perceived quality and brand status • Seek personal and symbolic benefits • Are fairly wary of buying ethical products • Open to persuasive ethical consumer discourse | Ethnocentric consumers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fairly sensitive to social responsibilities • Seek personal benefits • Educated, fairly high social status | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The search for personal gain • Fairly sensitive to social responsibilities |
| Category 3: Low sensitivity to ethical product values | Selfish consumers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are very sensitive to price and product quality • Not sensitive to social responsibility | Self-centered consumers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have no sense of social responsibility • Poorly educated, low social status | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are unsympathetic to social causes |

Source : CREDOC

Furthermore, according to Lecompte (2003), the typical fair trade consumer is an urban woman aged between 25 and 59, belonging to the middle or upper socio-professional category. He explains that people living in urban areas are more sensitive to discussions on fair trade because they are better informed on the subject by the media, particularly posters. In fact, poster campaigns are more likely to take place in urban areas than in rural ones.

The majority of consumers willing to pay a premium for Fairtrade products are women under 35 from higher socio-economic categories. This group represents the best target group for fair trade (Intel, 1995, cited by Bird and Hughes, 1997). Bouquet and Hénault (1998) similarly describe the typical fair trade consumer as follows: “Female, aged between 20 and 55, university graduate, well paid and involved in social action (professional or voluntary)” (Bouquet and Hainaut, 1998: p12). The segment formed by these consumers is attractive to marketers because they are educated, socially active consumers and young opinion leaders with high social status. In fact, these types of consumers are more likely to be attracted by their social behavior. Information on the fair trade movement is displayed. Information on this subject encourages them to buy fair trade products. The positive impact of information extends beyond those who have access to it. Consumers who take part in social activities can influence the choices of those around them by providing opinions and information on fair trade products. In addition, young consumers reflect short- and medium-term societal expectations. Moreover, economically well-off consumers are willing to pay higher prices for fair trade products.

Researcher A. François. Lecompte (2004) carried out a hierarchical typology analysis on 488 people and separated four groups of consumers.

- Practitioners of “social consumption” in all forms of CSR are adults aged between 30 and 50 who live in rural areas and tend to consume responsibly because they have children.
- People who are “vigilant” about the behavior of their organization and wish to buy products where part of the price is used for legitimate purposes. These were women who lived in small towns and held jobs such as “clerks”.
- The “socially irresponsible” don't practice any form of CSR other than restricting consumption. They are mostly city dwellers and single people still at school.
- The “traditional” group includes those who prefer French/European/regional products and want to keep small shops. They are not sensitive to other forms of CSR. In a childless couple, you would be the type of man who does management work.

1.2.2 Some applied research :

Based on a survey conducted in 2006 by CREDOC (France) on the social and environmental commitments of French consumers, a typology was drawn up and summarized in the following table :

Table 2 : Survey : “Living conditions and aspirations of the French”, early 2006

| Group most sensitive to the idea that the company is committed to ... | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| - Do not use child labor. Reminder: 50% average | - Make the product in France. Reminder: 37% on average | - Manufacture the product without generating pollution. Reminder: 26% on average | - Ensure compliance with employee working conditions. Reminder: 25% on average - Intermediate profession (32%) |
| - Do notate part of your turnover to help medical research - Reminder: 13% on average | - Do not make animals suffer - Reminder: 13% average | - Do notate part of your sales to initiatives to help people in difficulty find employment - Reminder: 12% on average | - Do notate part of your to third world aid - Reminder: 12% on average |
| - Student (22%) - Under 25 (19%) | - Employees (18%) | - Housewife (19%). - Monthly household income under 900€ (17%). | - Student (23%) - Under 25 (21%) - Living in Paris and its suburbs (18%) |

Source : CREDOC

In order to take into account all the opinions expressed regarding the sensitivity of civic values, a typology was drawn up to synthesize the information gathered. The typologies were obtained from the factorial coordinates of the individuals using the ascending hierarchical classification (AHC) method. This table clearly shows six different groups :

Table 3 : “Living conditions and aspirations of the French” survey, early 2006

| | In early 2006 |
|---|----------------------|
| - Child protectors | 24 |
| - Environmentalists | 19 |
| - Supporters of French manufacturing | 11 |
| - Animal lovers | 7 |
| - The hesitant | 26 |
| Total | 100% |

Source : CREDOC

Let's take a closer look at the composition of these different groups :

- 24% of respondents belong to the “child protectors” category: outraged by child labor, the vast majority say they are ready to boycott a product in its name. In general, this group is attentive to a company's civic-minded arguments and, as proof of their deep interest, they are prepared to pay more for products that honor this promise. This group tends to be female, well-paid and often highly educated.
- 19% of respondents could be classified as “environmentalists” : for them, pollution is the main issue. Forty-five percent cited being pollution-free as their first “citizenship” commitment, while 60% would boycott products they thought were made with pollution. Compared to “child protectors”, “environmental protectors” pay more attention to the “citizenship” standards displayed at the time of purchase. They are also willing to pay more for it.

Members of this class are undeniably better-educated than the average, and ecological sensitivity seems to be most developed among executives and those with a bachelor's degree.

- 11% of respondents are sensitive to national production : for 84% of them, production in France is the most important “citizenship” criterion. 87% are ready to boycott a product on the grounds that it is not “Made in France”.

However, this discussion needs to be put into perspective. Indeed, in this group, corporate citizenship is rarely taken into account at the time of purchase. The extra costs involved in fulfilling civic commitments are much less accepted locally than elsewhere.

Retired people make up almost a third of the class. Rural areas are also clearly over-represented (34%).

- 7% of respondents support animal protection in their speeches : 80% of respondents would be willing to boycott a product developed to cause animal suffering. Thirty-nine percent placed the issue at the top of their civic engagement (almost as much as child labor, which obtained 40% of the votes). Virtually all those who mention animal suffering are in this class.

But make no mistake. We are dealing here with people who buy without having a more than average awareness of their civic commitments: 43% take them into account when purchasing products; 58% are willing to pay for it. This group is quite feminine (57% women), 21% are over 70 years old. Low and middle income earners are overrepresented (30%) among animal defenders.

- 26% of French people are hesitant. In fact, they say they do not take into account the civic values demonstrated by companies when they buy a product. At the same time, a small majority of them say they are always ready to pay more to ensure that certain obligations are respected.

But what commitment is this? This group favors "made in France" production. At the same time, it is also interested in respecting working conditions and integrating people in difficulty. In the choice of reasons for a possible boycott, child labor stands out the most (although it was very little mentioned in the previous question) : 43% mention it. Layoffs are also particularly frowned upon when the company is profitable (29% condemn them).

In short, this is a group less sensitive than average to civic issues used in consumption and reacts to different issues when it comes to favoring a purchase ("made in France") or boycotting a product (ban on child labor). The first four groups, on the other hand, showed good agreement on these two points. The socio-demographic profile of the "skeptics" is not very clear. Let us just note that they represent more than a third of the self-employed, 33% of the inhabitants of medium-sized towns and 31% of students.

- 14% of the people surveyed pay little or no attention to civic values. They can be described as indifferent "not concerned". Among them, 89% do not pay attention to them when purchasing, and 83% refuse price increases for this reason. In addition, for 41% of them, none of the reasons given justify a boycott. There is little interest in not having child labor (cited by 33% as the most important value) or in promoting medical research (11% of votes, twice the average).

This group is poorly educated and has weak people. 21% who earn the least are also in this category. Even among the non-graduates, 20% said they were not worried.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the evolution of consumer behaviors, marked by the emergence of the socially responsible consumer, who takes into account ethical, social and environmental criteria in their purchasing choices. Faced with contemporary economic, ecological and social crises, consumer expectations have diversified, creating a consumer landscape where two opposing trends coexist: on the one hand, the quest for low prices and "good deals" in a traditional consumerist model, and on the other hand, the rise of alternative values such as fair trade and sustainable consumption.

The typologies presented, in particular those of ethical, semi-ethical and selfish consumers, offer a useful reading grid for understanding these complex dynamics. These different profiles show that there are varying levels of sensitivity to ethical issues, which influence purchasing decisions and can be exploited by companies to better target their customers.

Managerial contributions :

On a managerial level, this article proposes strategic orientations for companies seeking to meet the expectations of socially responsible consumers. Companies can segment their market according to different consumer profiles (ethical, semi-ethical, selfish) and adapt their products and services accordingly. By highlighting ethical and sustainable business practices, they can not only attract consumers who are sensitive to environmental and social issues, but also strengthen their brand image. Communication around these commitments, in particular via fair trade labels or actions in favor of sustainable development, then becomes a crucial marketing lever to retain this clientele.

Academic contributions :

From an academic point of view, this article contributes to the literature on ethical consumption by proposing a typology of consumers based on empirical studies. It enriches existing work on consumer behavior by introducing a more nuanced view of consumer motivations, going beyond simple economic considerations. This study also opens up perspectives for future research on the impact of corporate social responsibility policies on purchasing decisions, as well as on the evolution of consumer behavior in a context of ecological and social crisis.

In short, a deeper understanding of the socially responsible consumer not only allows us to better meet their expectations, but also to contribute to more sustainable and equitable economic development.

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