

THE ROLE OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN ISSUES RELATED TO THE ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract. *Patterns of consumption play a direct and indirect role in issues related to environment. In this regard, the issue of disposal and recycling of products is vital. The statistics realized reveal the fact that waste production is very different among the countries of Europe, as well as waste management which is also different from a country to another. Many studies on consumers have tried to determine what distinct profile has the value for consumers concerned about the environment. As for consumption, it has enlarged the analysis area from environmental perspective, from the recycling of resources in small quantity to the attention to the whole process of production and distribution. The green movement is the common name of the tendency to pay special attention to the impact that human activities have on the environment.*

Keywords: *consumer behavior, environment, green movement*

INTRODUCTION

Environmental issue has boomed in last years. Public's concerns regarding the environment remain, despite the negative reactions and distrust in green marketing "flourishing strategies", from the 1990s. People are becoming more aware of the fact that reckless lifestyles from around the world lead to exhaustion of energy sources, pollution, decline in soil fertility, biodiversity loss and climate change. It is also aware the patterns of consume plays, at the same time, a direct or indirect role in these issues. Furthermore, peoples are increasingly aware that a "greener consumer society" should not be one of withdrawal and no joy, nor oppose to the current system of production and marketing. It all began several decades ago, with encouraging recycling.

Recycling

The issue of disposal and recycling of the products is vital from two perspectives, because of large implications of public policy. We live in a society in which it throws many things, which creates problems for the environment and, unfortunately, the accumulation of waste. To train consumers to recycle has become a priority in many countries. Japan recycles 40% from waste, this relatively high rate being partly due to the social value that is attributed to recycling in Japan: citizens are encouraged by the presence of trucks that drive on the street regularly and collect the waste, and from them it hears classical music or songs for children⁴. The companies are still looking for ways to use resources more efficiently, often at the urging of consumer groups. For example, McDonald's company had bowed to pressures, giving up the polystyrene packages and their stores from Europe experiences the breakfast on corn plates. Even China takes seriously the problem of waste. Hundreds of restaurants had begun to wash and recycle the sticks, and the government plans to put a tax on single use sticks.

Several studies have examined the relevant purposes for which consumers recycle. One of them has applied chain analysis of the means and goals, to determine in what way the specific instrumental goals are related to abstract terminal values. The most important goals on lower order identified were "avoiding land filling," "waste reduction", "recycling of materials" and "saving the environment". They were related to the other terminal values, such as: "health

promotion/illness avoidance," "achievement of sustaining life goals" and "insurance of future generations". Another study had reported that the perceived recycling effort had anticipate the best if the people will submit it or not - a pragmatic dimension, more important than the general attitude towards recycling and environment in anticipation of the intention to recycle. And another study (European) had dropped the conclusion that, among other things, a major motivating factor is the efficiency of the recycling action, perceived in very high degree, meaning if the consumer believes that recycling is useful. By applying such methods to the recycling study and removal of the products, for the social sellers will be easier to design a creative text and other messages witch falls into the fundamental values that will motivate the peoples to adopt more often an environmentally responsible behavior.

Even then when it is take into account the difficulties of measurement, the statistics reveal that the waste production is very different among the countries of Europe. Through the end of 1980s, the annual municipal solid waste per capita in the countries from western continent ranged from 231 kg in Portugal to 608 kg in Finland. By comparison, the corresponding number from USA was 864 kg. The different levels of waste generation are due to differences in the overall income and consumption patterns.

Waste management is also different from a country to another. In Denmark, many recycling programs encourage people to reduce household waste and recycle as much as it is possible, because the municipal waste management systems charges the consumers based on weight or volume of waste. Danish waste management model, that emphasizes local responsibility of the separation of sources programs, now sells at global level, through visits and videos at the scene fact. In Germany, producers are required, by law to assume the responsibility for redistribution and recycling of waste. Besides recycling, they are other waste removal programs that have captured the interest of the public. In several European countries, like Spain, Italy, France and Denmark, the state offers economic incentives for car owners, in order for them to replace old cars with newer ones, in order to reduce air pollution, and increase road safety.

The concern on the environment, or environmental science, no longer reduced now only to recycling, but applies to all aspects of production and consumption processes and affect the marketing strategies of products, from cook dishes to fast foods. For example, Ecover, a Belgian manufacturer of detergents and cleaning products, very responsible for the environment, has appeal to consumer concern in a funny way, recycling the old TV commercials of the competition. The company used five black and white commercials from the 1950s and overlapped on them a color image of its brand, the voice of hidden commentator explaining that the old commercials were recycled. It was argued that the concern for the environment is becoming gradually a new universal value, not under an activist value but as an implicit premise of acceptance degree of the products. It can reach a greater awareness through natural products and those obtained by smaller, independent producers. Thus, various consumer groups are pressuring the producers to produce so as to preserve the nature and the resources, instead to exploit them.

Some European retailer's chains initiate strategies that respect the environment. Migros, Switzerland's largest retailer chain, reduced packaging material, often appealed to train transport and introduced various forms of nontoxic deposits, well isolated, in order to reduce energy consumption. Tengelmann from Germany (products without chlorine, devices for recycling of the containers for milk), Otto, the largest firm of orders by mail from the world (the respect for the environment as a corporate culture, collaborations with World Wildlife Fund), Sainsbury (recycled plastic bags, Penny Back scheme, through which it donates the refunded money to charity institutions) and Tesco (extensive labels, programs of healthy

nutrition and products organically grown) from UK are among the pioneers retailers of environmental issues.

There are obvious differences between European countries regarding the role of environmental concern. It is an issue more important from political point of view in Germany, Denmark and Sweden. A study of environmental concerns in the purchase of cars has indicated that this concern is very important in Germany, and the United Kingdom, France and Spain.

The attitude and behavior of respect for the environment proved difficult to predict. Some have sustained that the trend seems to disappear, because an organization like Greenpeace has registered a decrease in the number of members. Others have concluded that, although, the attitude is "green", the behavior itself is unlikely to change. It is a study from 1991, about the Danish consumers. Since then, the demand for organic products from dairy, eggs and vegetable sector has taken a strong wind, and in Denmark, and in many other countries. Another significant clue of the fact that the concern for the environment becomes (more or less) a global value, not a passing fashion, is the role that it plays in the means of mass information for youth, like MTV and lass but not least, in school curricula.

Many studies about consumers have tried to established what distinct profile has the value for consumers concerned for the environment, discussing, for example, if there are more oriented to themselves or to society. It was noted that values like "close relations with others" and "social justice" are associated with very friendly attitudes and behavior towards the environment.

An environmental issue, as the use of growth hormones in milk and beef is a common problem in trade negotiations between Europe and the USA. Based on scientific data, some argue that do not present any risk, others that it is a matter of ethical production and consumption, more than the risk for consumers.

Lately, debate of the risks regarding the beef with growth hormones was overshadowed by the problems created by BSE (disease of mad cow), which led to a general distrust to beef from Britain in 1996, when the disease was first detected in this country and abroad. Since then, the disease has spread to other European countries, leading to the renunciation of beef in some countries, especially in Germany and Italy (where sales has decreased with 30% at national level). Even in Sweden, where the disease was not been detected, 41% from consumers were expressed the doubt on the consumption of beef and 11% have reduced their consumption of these food. Two percent have not eaten beef at all.

Such feeding phobias led to distrust in the methods of modern industrial production, especially in the food industry, as a result of the logic expressed by many consumers, namely "when you turn cows into cannibals only for money, obvious that the things do not work properly". It was suggested that we live in a **risk society**, in which our ways of producing goods generates, increasingly, bad and risks, of which the consumer must take account when he takes a decision. Another area where unknown risks have wake the consumer skepticism about the benefits suggested by the industry is that of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). One of the concerns expressed by consumers in a study of acceptance or rejection of GMO food in Sweden and Denmark was exactly the one of the excessive concentration of power in a few giant corporations that dominates both research and industry. So, on the level of consumers, the stakes is the confrontation between economic and moral logics, regardless of international economic interests involved.

The similar results were obtained in several European countries, through an international study. Testing the consumers attitudes and their intentions of buying food with GMOs, it was concluded that the general rejection of the technology has taken place in Denmark, Germany, the UK and Italy (country in which consumers have a more slightly

negative attitude, because, as it was testified, they know less about GMO). For this study were tested several materials, some of them informative, others with emotional character, to estimate the potential of informative campaigns to change negative attitudes. But any information offered to the consumers, did not made that their attitude to be more negative. So, any indication, even positive, given to the consumers about the fact that a product contains or was obtained through GMOs turn them against the product, which sends to the deep nature of skepticism among European consumers.

The presented things represent a clue of the fact that the consumers understand more deeply the political and moral consequences of consumption opportunities. This means that a green consumer is followed gradually or turns into a political one. This uses its purchasing pattern as a weapon against firms who don't likes, to support those who reflect similar values with his. Political consumer select products according to the ethical behavior of the company, that implies respect for human rights and the environment, animal protection and support of the various charitable causes. The political consumer is supported by agencies like Adbuster from Vancouver, who involves in deceptive campaigns of large companies that, for various reasons, they pursue for their immoral or harmful behavior. For example, they parodied the acclaimed campaign of the Coca-Cola Company with the polar bear, drawing a family of bears on a thin ice, next to witch writes, with the characters of Coca-Cola logo, "Enjoy yourself by the climate change", thus protesting against the fact that the company uses harmful gases for ozone in his automats. This type of peaceful revolt against what is considered to be the major control exerted over the minds and our imagination was named as being *cultural jamming*.

But not all companies adopt the defense position. The Body Shop is based on the idea of natural products, not tested on animals, and by the maximum concern for the environment. But her concerns are oriented in the present moment toward a wider range of social values. Recently, the company was involved in the debate about beauty ideals with Ruby, a Barbie doll with very round shapes, to fight against tyranny of weight loss and of the impossible ideal body of the supermodels, promoted by the body of the doll. The reaction was a predictable one: Mattel Inc., the producers of Barbie, legally charged The Body Shop, because Ruby resembles at face too much with Barbie.

The comment of Adbuster Company on the fact that Coca-Cola uses HFC gases, and this fact contributes to climate change has had the desired effect. In a press release in August 2000, Adbusters congratulated Coca-Cola for the decision to abandon the HFC gases latest at the Olympic Games from Athens 2004.

In the present, many companies are struggling to avoid the problems encountered by Shell in Denmark, the Netherlands and Germany in the case Brent Spar or the difficulties encountered by exporters from French after nuclear tests from 1996. The mineral water company Ramlosa makes campaign to clean water in the Third World, Red Cross in Scandinavia under the slogan "Water for Life" and British Telecom campaign has highlighted his work for the elderly and peoples with handicap. The two largest beer producers, Heineken and Carlsberg withdrew their plans for large-scale investment in Myanmar (Burma), after consumers had protested against what they considered that supports directly the oppressive military government from the country.

The political consumer risks to become an even more cautionary one, politically correct, as happened in American political and cultural climate. In fact, some British consumer groups acted against companies who have broadcast their commercials during the controversial film *The Last Temptation of Jesus*. The problem that arise is the following: what is the demarcation line between morality and moralization?

The consumers boycotts

Because we live in a time when many consumers are becoming more aware of the fact that their consumption pattern is part from a political and economic global system, there is a measure in which they become political consumers. Sometimes, a negative experience can trigger an organized and devastating reaction, as when a consumer group organizes a boycott of the products of a company. Their efforts can translate through generalized protests - for example, against investing in a undesirable country from political point of view (the case of Carlsberg Company, which withdrew the investments from Myanmar, as we shown above, or Shell Company accused that tolerates the pollution and political repression of the people from the region Ogoni of Nigeria) - or efforts to discourage the consumption of products made by companies from certain countries (boycott of French wines and other products during nuclear tests in the Pacific from 1996, action strongly felt in the Netherlands and Scandinavia). In the United States, the inclusion of obscene or feverish verses led to threat with boycotts, as it happened when organizations that require law threatened to boycott Time Warner after he shared a rap piece composed by Ice-T, entitled "Cops killer".

A well known case in which was boycotted Shell Company, following its plans to abandon an old drilling platform, Brent Spar, from the North Sea. In Germany, the company's profit fell by almost 30%; the boycott was felt in Denmark and the Netherlands as well. Ironically, the fact that Shell suddenly changed his mind about abandoning the platform has not only confirmed to the consumers that the company was indeed guilty, despite the obvious proofs supporting that throwing the platform in deepwater represent the most environmentally friendly solution.

The boycotts are not always effective - studies have shown that, normally, only a limited percentage of consumers from a country participating in it. However, those who do have influent opinions and are well educated, so they make a group of consumers that companies want to keep. Negative PR resulting from the published news about the boycott becomes an issue for the company on long-term, in competitive advantage. After finishing the boycott of French wines in Denmark, they have lost 20% from their market segment. But this was not the biggest problem, since the general impression was that all consumers could be persuaded to return to them, with the fact that supermarkets have reorganized their shelves to make more space for Italian and Spanish wines.

An increasingly popular solution applied by sellers is the creation of an operative group in the organization that boycotts, in order to try to solve the problem through discussion or compromises. In the USA, McDonald's has done so with the Environmental Defense Fund, concerned about the use of polystyrene containers. The company agreed to test a organic program and to convert to simple brown containers.

Lately, the political resistance opposed by consumer to the behavior and sellers of companies is associated with globalization process. The global market has been accused that it based on unfair principles trade and destroys the social and cultural patterns from the world, in favor of the rich countries and of the West at the expense of other countries and cultures. The demonstrations from the World Trade Organization meetings have dropped the attention of media means as the action conducted by a cheese French producer, oriented against the construction of a McDonald's restaurant in his hometown from the southern of the France. The target was not *per se* restaurant, as the processes it represents, sometimes called *McDonaldization*, meaning the cultural erosion and wilting of the quality standards of large-scale production. In consequence, the activists behind the action have formed an organization whose name translates, approximately, "farmers against bad food. This, and other, as ATTC, puts under the sign of doubt the benefits of what they perceive as uncontrolled global market,

enjoying lately of a great success. Therefore, we will discuss some aspects of globalization, consumption and marketing.

CONCLUSION

The green movement is the common name of the tendency to pay a special attention to the impact that human activities have on the environment. As for consumption, it has enlarged the analysis area from environmental perspective, from the recycling of resources in small quantity to the attention to the whole process of production and distribution.

Green movement may be an indication of a wider trend through the reflection more aware of the ethical aspect of consumption. *Political consumer* "votes for his own shopping cart" in the attempt to make companies to take into account the natural environment, but also the human one, adding problems as human rights to the dimensions set that influence the purchases.

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