

MAPPING CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT IN COMMUNITIES OF ETHICAL CONSUMPTION

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Abstract:

Ethical consumer behaviour has been gaining increasing attention among both practitioners and academic researchers in recent times. This trend is evident in the increasing number of papers published on the topic. Nevertheless, even though ethical consumption has been often considered as an economic vote in the marketplace, the concept of consumer empowerment has not been thoroughly explored.

The present paper aims to contribute towards this area by focusing on communities that practice ethical consumption. At this purpose, a combination of qualitative techniques was employed, including focus groups, in-depth interviews, observation and documentary analysis. The results reveal new conceptualizations of consumer empowerment when ethical consumption is practiced in communal contexts.

Keywords: *ethical consumer communities; responsible consumption cooperatives; consumer empowerment; sustainability; responsible consumption*

MAPEANDO EL FORTALECIMIENTO DEL CONSUMIDOR EN COMUNIDADES DE CONSUMO ÉTICO

Resumen:

El comportamiento ético del consumidor ha ido ganando cada vez mayor atención en los últimos tiempos, tanto entre profesionales como investigadores académicos. Esta tendencia se evidencia en el creciente número de artículos publicados sobre el tema. Sin embargo, aun cuando el consumo ético se ha solido considerar como un derecho a voto económico en el mercado, el concepto de fortalecimiento del consumidor no ha sido minuciosamente explorado.

El presente trabajo trata de contribuir en este área centrándose en las comunidades que ponen en práctica el consumo ético. A tal fin se utilizó una combinación de técnicas cualitativas, incluyendo grupos focales, entrevistas en profundidad, observación y análisis documental. Los resultados revelan nuevas conceptualizaciones del fortalecimiento del consumidor cuando el consumo ético se practica en contextos comunitarios.

Palabras clave: *comunidades de consumidores éticos; cooperativas de consumo ético; fortalecimiento del consumidor; sostenibilidad; consumo responsable*

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1. Introduction

Even if ethical consumer behaviour exists in different guises for over two centuries (Cowe and Williams 2000; Lang and Gabriel 2005; Low and Davenport 2007), it has gained more attention during the last three decades. As testament to the aforementioned, there is a growing multi-discipline literature on this evolving and dynamic phenomenon with relevant contributions from social psychology (Sparks and Shepherd 1992, 1995), consumer behaviour (e.g. Grønhoj 2006; Bekin et al. 2007), sociology (e.g. Borgmann 2000; Caruana 2007; Cherrier 2007; Haanpää 2007), marketing (e.g. Diamantopoulos et al. 2003; Auger et al. 2001, 2004; De Pelsmacker et al. 2005; Fernández and Merino 2005), anthropology (Wagner 1997) and human geography (Barnett et al. 2005; Low and Davenport 2007).

Early research (e.g. Henion 1972) indicates a more narrow study of the green consumer, prompted by the consumer movement of the alternative consumers of the 1970s (Lang and Gabriel 2005; Chatzidakis and Mitussis 2007). Later on, a variety of issues were incorporated in the agenda of the ethical consumer (Fletcher 1990) such as fair trade, social injustice, human rights, genetically modified products, nuclear energy (Newholm and Shaw 2007).

To all these issues, ethical consumers replied by adopting a series of ethical consumer practices reflected on diverse lifestyles, consumption levels, product choices and disposal of products. Boycotting (Ozcaglar-Toulouse et al. 2006; Shaw et al. 2006, 2007), boycotting (Kozinets and Handelman 1998; Klein et al. 2004), downshifting of consumption (Shaw and Newholm 2002; Cherrier 2005; Huneke 2005; Miller and Gegan-Paxton 2006) are some of the forms that ethical consumers express their ideology through purchasing decisions.

At the same time, collective spaces emerged to serve as outlets for the new movement of consumers. Klein (2000) lists more than twenty different websites, such as those of the *Adbusters Media Foundation* (<http://www.adbusters.org/>), *Corporate Crime Reporter* (<http://www.corporatecrimereporter.com/>) and the *Alliance for a Responsible, Plural and United World* (<http://www.alliance21.org/>), where consumers can get informed and/or interchange opinions in forums.

Low and Davenport (2007) focus on the “*Fair Trade*” movement and discuss the appearance of voluntary ethical spaces such as Fair Trade cities, Fair Trade universities and higher education campuses in UK, US and Australia. Barnett et al. (2005) review some of the organizational forms that appeared: ethical trade organizations (see, e.g., *The Body Shop*, *Triodos Bank*), Fair Trade campaigning groups (e.g. *Intermon Oxfam*, *SETEM*¹), boycott campaigns against multinational companies (as *Nike*, *Gap*, or *Shell*) or countries with oppressive regimes (e.g. Burma)², and cooperative movements (such as the *UK Cooperative Bank*).

2. Literature review

2.1. Defining consumer empowerment

In recent years, consumer empowerment appears as a promising research area in consumer studies (Wathieu et al. 2002; Denegri-Knott et al. 2006) leading though to fragmented research, due to the great diversity of existing intellectual traditions on consumer power (Cova and Dali 2009).

Wathieu et al. (2002) challenge previous views that limited consumer empowerment to wider sets of choice, and see consumer empowerment as the ability to define one’s set of choices. In line with Wathieu et al. (2002), Wright (2006, p. 1) defines *consumer empowerment* as “*the mental state usually accompanied by a physical act which enables a consumer or a group of consumers to put into effect their own choices through demonstrating their needs, wants and demands in their decision-making with other individuals or organisational bodies in the marketplace*”.

According to Thøgersen (2005), consumer empowerment is achieved by removing constraints that impede consumers to make their own choices such as the lack of information and by motivating consumers to strive for change and control taking. According to Cova and Dali (2009), empowered consumers manage to open dialectical spaces where they can interact with companies. Simply put, they

¹ *SETEM* is a Spanish federation consisting of 10 non-profit organizations in favour of more fair relationships between North and South at worldwide. As an example of their activities, we can mention those in favour of the Fair Trade movement, or the “*Roba Neta*” campaign focusing on the issue of sweatshops.

² An updated list of current boycotts can be found at <http://www.ethicalconsumer.org/>.

get to voice themselves and even impose their rules in the marketing exchange instead of accepting the offer made by the companies. Hence, consumer empowerment could be seen as the quest for more consumer control and power.

Even though ethical consumers search for more control by renegotiating the production process of what they consume, very little empirical evidence –with the exception of Shaw et al. (2006)– has focused on how consumer empowerment is experienced through the variety of ethical consumer projects that were described above.

2.2. Identifying the research gaps

Several gaps in the literature can be identified. First, there is a limited number of studies that explore the meaning of consumer empowerment in the context of ethical consumption. Furthermore, even fewer studies examine the nature of consumer empowerment for the case of collective projects of ethical consumption, given that most studies in ethical consumer research have been limited to the study of individual ethical consumer projects. Hence, this new perspective can complement the understandings on the control gained both from collective and individual projects of the ethical consumers.

This could be particularly useful, since low effectiveness of individual consumer decisions has been brought up as a problem for consumers willing to practice ethical practices throughout the ethical consumer literature (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Mohr and Webb 2001; Carrigan et al. 2004; Moisander 2007). Whether the participation in ethical collective action translates in more empowered consumers and establishes sustainable lifestyles in a more solid way remains unanswered.

Additionally, most empirical evidence in ethical consumer research comes from certain cultural contexts with an emphasis on the United Kingdom (e.g. Shaw et al. 2006; Bekin et al. 2007). Empirical findings from diverse cultural settings can offer insights on whether ethical consumers perceive and experience consumer empowerment in different ways.

3. Methodology

Given the limited empirical evidence on consumer empowerment and ethical consumption, an exploratory research paradigm was adopted. Aiming a greater richness of findings, a combination of research techniques was selected as the best option, including focus groups, in-depth interviews, observation and documentary analysis. In this way, data did not depend only on retrospective narratives of the participants, but also on what the researcher sees and observes herself (Patton 2002; Sapsford and Jupp 2006). More specifically:

- Four focus groups were conducted where thirty two cooperative members participated. The duration of the focus groups was between ninety and one hundred and twenty minutes.
- Nine in-depth formal interviews that lasted from forty to one hundred and twenty minutes.
- In and out observation that took place for over fourteen months through repeated visits in cooperatives, assistance in events organized by cooperatives and ethnography through the subscription in the mailing lists of two cooperatives.
- Documentary analysis of internal documents (e.g. statutes of the cooperatives) and of a magazine written, edited and published by the members of the cooperatives. In total, fifteen issues of this magazine were analysed representing a five year period from 2003 to 2008.

The Spanish magazine *Opciones*³ and cooperatives' directories⁴ acted as initial sampling frames. Also, the snowball technique was employed throughout the fieldwork to identify rich in information cases that could confirm or disconfirm the emerging findings. In terms of geographical scope, the study focused on the Spanish region of Catalonia for two main reasons. First, the project of the Responsible Consumption Cooperatives has gained increasing popularity in the specific geographical region in recent years. Second, such decision allowed an easier follow-up in cases that more information was required.

³ *Opciones* is a magazine containing practical information about how to practice responsible consumption which is published by the Centre of Research and Information in Consumption (CRIC) in Barcelona.

⁴ The directories were found in *Ecoconsum*, which is the coordinator entity of cooperatives of responsible consumption in the region of Catalonia, in Spain, and in the website of the cooperative *Germinal*.

This study chose to focus on *Responsible Consumption Cooperatives* (RCCs) in the Spanish region of Catalonia, due to their increasing popularity at grass root level and their emergence as an alternative to big commercial chains. RCCs are neighbourhood based collectives whose main project is the collective purchase of products⁵. A wide range of products can be found depending on the level of organization of the cooperative; from vegetables and fruits to detergents and cosmetics. The criteria that these collectives set for the collective purchase is the preference of smaller and local producers, the avoidance of intermediation and of big commercial chains and the natural, ecological ingredients of the products.

4. Results and discussion

This section examines and discusses how consumers that participate in ethical consumer projects manage to regain control in the producer/consumer dyad exchange.

4.1. Control over production process

First, the members recuperate the direct relationship with the actual producers of the products, which got lost with the increasing popularity of intermediation and outsourcing. It also makes highly opaque the whole production process. Consumers do not know who produces the product, where it is produced and how it is produced, but in the cooperative they get access to this information.

So, they carefully choose their producers and suppliers. As already explained, the producers should usually comply with their criteria of small, local, ecological and no intermediates. This procedure takes place before making any arrangements with the producer by the commission of purchases of the cooperatives. But this does not exclude later controls of the production process through regular visits. This offers a greater sense of control in three main aspects of the production process:

Control of the produce: the committee in charge has to make sure that the producer complies with the criteria. It is reassured through regular visits that no pesticides are used and that the products are ecological and healthy.

“Because of my work I have a lot of contact with producers and a personal relationship with them. And I trust them... So, I go there and he explains me how he (producer) does it and maybe I agree with him, maybe not. But I prefer this over a brand that they tell me that the production process respects the society and the environment. I prefer to know and see myself” (Marta, Focus Group C).

Furthermore, the members of the cooperatives are considering the establishment of an ecologic quality standards system for the evaluation of the products other than the established by the Catalonia Government.

“Look, this label CCPAE of Catalonia. We don’t trust it. What happens now with the genetically modified is that because we are 8 years with genetically modified cultivations and they say that there is contamination. So the council says... hmm...0.9 percentage of genetically modified can be tolerated in the ingredients. But us no! We don’t tolerate it! It’s just that... er... a moment comes that.. .er... like a cooperative the label we can have it with a question mark, if we want it or not!” (Carmen, Interview I).

The creation and implementation of a certification system by RCCs provides an alternative route for the quality control of the produce. In addition, it further proves the intention of these consumers to take more control and defy existing market structures, even when these structures refer to ecological agriculture.

An interesting contradiction that should be mentioned is that while the participants are able to control better how the product is produced, they delegate control over to the farmer as to which products will be produced and so consumed. This means that the members accept that the farmer will decide what types of vegetables and fruits will be cultivated and supplied. It should be clarified that this is not a matter of personal preference of the farmer, but of producing the seasonal products since a naturalistic perspective of production is adopted. Therefore, while the member controls the quality of the products, the farmer indirectly controls the diversity and the type of diet of the members of the cooperative and of their families. Nevertheless, the delegation of control over to the producer is seen in a positive manner and does not affect the general perception of the participants of gaining control as members of the cooperative.

⁵ Most cooperatives buy their products on a weekly basis, but there were cases that the purchase would take place once per fifteen days or just once every six months.

“Now it is a surprise! (referring to the box of fruits and vegetables that arrives each week). What is there going to be? I like cooking things that I had never eaten. Me, the pumpkin? I had never eaten it before the cooperative. Or the beet. It is an experience” (Kat, Focus Group A).

Control of Labour conditions: another aspect that the participants manage to control through their participation in the cooperative is under which labour conditions the products they produce are made. The members make sure that their suppliers do not treat unfair their employees, in case there are employees, since often the preferred producers are family businesses.

“It is better to consume something within a coop than from a multinational because like this, I know the labour conditions that it was made. This is one of the joys when we consume here” (Sheila, Focus Group B).

4.2. Control over purchase impact

Dickinson and Carsky (2005) employ the metaphor of voting in the marketplace to describe how consumers use their purchase power to send a message to companies by choosing or avoiding them, just like voters do to political parties in elections.

The issue of the perceived impact and effectiveness has been previously raised in the literature as empirical evidence reveals that low consumer effectiveness act as a barrier for taking action (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Mohr and Webb 2001; Carrigan et al. 2004). But the empowered members of the cooperatives understand that their actions are effective. They perceive that change is generated and it is observable, which motivates them to carry on.

“You don’t have to do anything, but it just happens. Everyone wants to enter and companies every time think more in these things. I think that we don’t have to do anything else but coming here, buy and everything will happen” (Marti, Focus Group A).

“But there many, many things that are more positive, no? That also new forms of consumption come out such as the cooperative. We are a few but they come out. And it is curious that they come out now and not 25-30 years ago they didn’t exist. But now, yes there are!” (Angels, Focus Group C).

As a matter of fact, their participation in the cooperative empowers them more because of the collective nature of the project. The members manage to support the market structures they wish through their group purchase and that they belong in group of people with similar ideals and objectives reinforces their motivation to continue.

“Obviously, I feel that I have more power as a part of a group than as an individual. We have the opportunity to participate in the changes going on, not just in the cooperative, but in general to replicate this structure” (Sheila, Focus Group B).

5. Conclusions

Previous research has demonstrated that a common meaning derived from ethical consumer experiences, both collective and individual, is the seizing of control and empowerment (Bekin et al. 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Cherrier 2005; Shaw et al. 2006). This study further confirms these findings.

Specifically, we chose as unit of analysis the consumers/members of Responsible Consumption Cooperatives (RCCs) who feel empowered from their participating in the cooperative. They feel they can make a change and that they can control the impact of their purchase on society, especially since they do it as a group. In this sense, Shaw et al. (2006, p. 1059) also found that consumers felt more empowered because of belonging to *“a much larger vaguely articulated collective group of consumers”*, but in the concrete case of the cooperatives this feeling becomes more tangible due to the formalized nature of the group.

Furthermore, Shaw et al. (2006) refer to consumer empowerment as the indirect control over the impact of the purchase. In this study, control gets more meanings in addition to the conceptualization of consumer empowerment as an economic vote in the marketplace. It refers to the direct control the participants exercise upon the production process in terms of how the product is produced and who produces it.

The cooperative project allows for stricter and more rigorous quality checks in the ingredients, the origin and production process by establishing regular visits to the producers and negotiation regarding the farming methods used. The shorter production-consumption cycles offer a greater level of transparency overcoming the problems caused by the “papaya” phenomenon that Cook describes (2004). Thus, in this case control is not gained simply by giving “your money where your ethics lies”, but also by actually keeping up with the actual production of products.

This sense of empowerment is further proved by that participants challenge not only the rules of the traditional market, but also the rules of the organic market in Catalonia. Participants wish to bring about social change, even at the local level. In relation to that, it is important to keep in mind the organisation and philosophy of these collectives, as the adherence to the cooperative norms implies that decisions are taken by everyone and consensus is necessary for the cooperative to carry on. It seems as if, cooperatives signify a form of democratic social organisation that is missing from modern society. This is actually raised by some of participants in one of the focus groups.

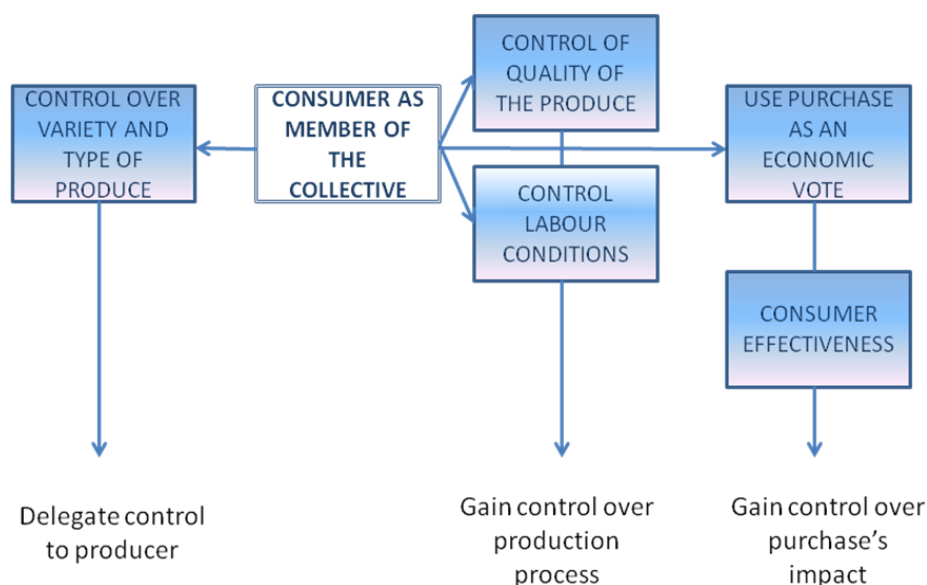
“We cannot opt for the easy thing always. If not, with the elections every four years we would be happy. Because this is very easy” (Marc, Interview IV).

Interestingly though, participants are only willing to delegate control to the producer only in terms of the variety and type of the produce. However, in this case, they do not actually delegate control to the producer, but to the nature as products need to be seasonal and naturally grown. In other words, by delegating control to the producer they are actually rejecting one of the supposed advantages of the modern mega-distribution channels; unnatural variety of produce that brings unnecessary consumerism. At the same time, this behaviour is adopted in a form of nostalgia towards past and more natural forms of consumption.

“But it is a bit go back in the past, to the local, to what the earth has to produce and when it has to produce it, like tomatoes! To disengage from the supermarket. To wake up and not fall in the temptation of consumerism, buy because just yes! Go back in the past and retake the whole story. Do what people did before. Recycle clothes between friends, rethink and avoid to buy” (Cecilia, Focus Group C).

These findings lead to a new, different conceptualization of consumer empowerment in the ethical consumer context that is more graphically demonstrated in the Figure 1.

Figure 1. Consumer empowerment from participation in the cooperative



Source: own elaboration

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