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To reduce or not to reduce?
Exploring motivations on the adoption of ethical consumption practices

I. Theme/topic and its importance

In work-based societies, affluence is a reality which has become the main purpose of people's lives – it offers choice by increasing the range of experiences (Ransome 2005). The primary purpose of consumption is no longer just to serve basic human needs (Princen 2002), but instead is the pleasure dividend to which previous efforts have been directed (Ransome 2005). Objects convey desired self-images, meeting status requirements (Etzioni 2004), reflecting a sense of identity and expressing social relationships (Schor 1998).

Hence, materialism represents a frame of attitudes concerning the importance of acquisition and possession of objects (Belk 1982) and, at the highest level, possessions claim a pivotal place in a person's life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction (Richins and Dawson 1992). Still, many materialists suffer from performance anxiety and depression (Brister 1987 cited by Hirschman 1997). Not only materialism is negatively associated with life satisfaction (Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002), but also highly materialistic people report a lower subjective well-being due to their own disappointment (La Barbera and Gürhan 1997).

Indeed, some consumers are realizing that consumption is not contributing to a healthy self (Schor 1998) and this acceptance motivates the adoption of a voluntary simplicity lifestyle (Zavestovski 2002). It is a lifestyle of low material dependency (Leonard-Barton and Rogers 1980; Iwata 2006), based on the need for new solutions to deal with a stressful life (Bekin et al 2005), with the aim of bolstering non-materialistic sources of satisfaction (Etzioni 2004).

This lifestyle is characterized by 5 basic values: material simplicity, human scale, self-determination, ecological awareness and personal growth (Elgin 1977, 1998). The simplifier's motivations may range from concern for the environment, spirituality, self-orientation or physical well-being (Craig-Lees and Lee 2002; Johnston and Burton 2002; Miller and Gregan-Paxton 2006). Simplifiers

struggle against threats, such as pollution, overpopulation, waste, dehumanization and stress (Cherrier and Murray 2002; Pierce 2000; Zavestoski 2002; Bekin 2005) and this critical reflection gives them independence from social chains (Cherrier 2007), facilitating the adoption of ethical consumption practices (Shaw and Newholm 2002).

The focus on ethical consumption emerges because consumer choices have a significant effect on the surrounding environment and, therefore, at least the potential to remedy both social and environmental problems. Moreover, executives worldwide see more opportunities in these areas than they did before, and believe that the demand for more ethically produced products, demand for more investment in developing countries and demand for healthier/safer products will be key-matters in the next 5 years, according to the third McKinsey Quarterly survey on business and society (2008). However, while executives are becoming somewhat more comfortable in dealing with sociopolitical issues that affect their standard operations, they appear puzzled by what to do in regard to these new consumer demands.

II. Research problem

The current literature (Cherrier 2002; Elgin 1998; Etzioni 2004; Zavestovski 2002) states voluntary simplifiers as a group of consumers and considers that the differentiation among individuals who simplify their consumption (also considering downshifter and holistic simplifiers) concerns only with reduction on consumption levels. Thus, there is a gap in research concerning the motivations of voluntary simplifiers in regard to their values, attitudes and beliefs, impacting their consumption behaviours, namely in regard of specific ethical consumer practices, based on animal welfare, human rights, environmental sustainability and corporate responsibility. Thus, the main questions that will be addressed are:

- What are the forces which motivate the adoption of ethical consumption practices by voluntary simplifiers?
- In opposition, do materialistic individuals tend to adopt less sustainable consumption practices?

Identifying values or social norms that are associated with high/low sustainable consumption could help us explain why some consumers are (un)willing to invest in a sustainable future, hence

providing both policy makers and corporations with the necessary information about which values/social norms to express in their communications.

III. Philosophical Approach and Research Design

Consumer behavior consists of the psychological and social processes people undergo in the acquisition, use and disposal of products, services, ideas and practices. The why and how of consumer behavior have been approached by multiple methods and the mix of traditions and perspectives in consumer research makes it a shapeless body of knowledge (Bagozzi et al 2002).

In what concerns with the philosophical approach, one main and lasting crisis has been the debate over positivism and interpretativism. In the former, the research focus has been an attempt to find overarching, universal laws to social behavior and history. In the latter, by contrast, the emphasis is on empirical study itself - that is, making accurate descriptions of social reality in terms of the experience of the persons involved, regardless of whether they fit a grand theory or explanation. These two approaches have been predisposed to provide themselves to favor either quantitative or qualitative methods, correspondingly. In addition to these two orientations, there is a third outlook: a kind of social rationalism, which makes use of axiomatic presuppositions in order to explain social reality, and which approaches research data with complex logical and mathematical modeling (Braybrooke 1986; Rosenberg 1995).

Thus, a quantitative approach to research is traditionally associated with logical positivism (Gill and Johnson 1991) and, as such, seeks to establish causal relationships among objectively specified variables, testing hypotheses derived from predictive theories (Kerlinger 1996). Using this approach, variables are precisely measured and data are collected under standardised conditions. This rests on a clearly different philosophy from qualitative methods that are phenomenological in approach and concerned with gaining an understanding of the unique experiences of the individual.

Some authors argue that the adoption of voluntary simplicity depends on the context where the individual is integrated. Moreover, the ethics of consumption depends on the consumers' subjective view on ethics and their concerns, expressing it in diverse individual actions (Newholm 2000; Cherrier 2005). This approach recognizes that voluntary simplifiers are responding to changes in their environment, contesting the complexity of consumer culture and questioning their ethical concerns.

Although there are many known barriers to the integration of qualitative and quantitative research (Bryman 2007), the fundamentally different philosophies underlying quantitative and qualitative research are not irreconcilable, since they can serve different purposes.

To fulfil the understanding of human behaviour and its drivers, this study will start by a qualitative research type. As an exploratory research, qualitative research relies on the reasoning behind various facets of behaviour, investigating the why and how of decision making. The focus will be on smaller samples of voluntary simplifiers rather than large random samples, in order to categorize data into patterns as primary basis for organizing results. A constructivist approach will be applied to characterising social embeddedness. Social embeddedness may be a justification of the causal link between the social situatedness of the agent, employing a constructivist strategy in its modelling. As Checkland and Holwell (1998) argue, social reality – what counts as “fact” about the social world – is continually being constructed and re-constructed in dialogue and discourse among human beings, and in action which they take.

Thus, a focus group is planned to initiate this research. Questions regarding the adoption of a voluntary simplicity lifestyle and about ethical consumption practices are asked in an interactive group setting where participants are free to talk with other group members. Then, based on the focus group results, in-depth interviewing will be held. Laddering techniques will be applied in order to understand consumers’ perceptions and their motivations for their choices of different ethical products. This methodology is based on the Means-end-chain theory, which describes linkages between product attributes, the consequences for the consumer provided by these attributes, and the personal values the consequences reinforce (Reynolds and Gutman 1988).

Based on the findings derived from the exploratory research stage, we sought to develop an understanding of motivations on the adoption of ethical consumption practices using the extensively applied behavioral model called the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen 1985). The theory of planned behavior is a theory of attitude-behavior relationships that aims to provide an explanation of behavior, and link attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, behavioral intentions and behavior in a fixed causal consequence. Each of these measures have underlying beliefs. Evaluation of those beliefs will consider an individual’s evaluation as to how important these beliefs are. Although the theory of planned behavior has been applied in a variety of behavioral domains, the context of ethical concerns in consumer decision making has been neglected. The theory of planned behavior in its current form does not consider ethical or social issues within its model measures.

Hankis et al (2000) and Shiu and Hassan (2002) suggest that structural equation modelling is the preferred analytical technique for analysis of the theory of planned behavior framework, because it allows the specification of a chain of causal links from beliefs, via constructs through to behavioral intention and also permits the specification of latent factors, enabling the modelling of cognitive constructs underpinning the model.

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