Towards an Understanding of Consumption Objectors

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ABSTRACT
This article studies the topic of meaning in consumption practices that are related to the critics of consuming society. In a postmodern world characterized by symbolism in consumption and a global “crisis of meanings”, a deep critical posture of consuming society is studied through its contribution to identity construction processes among “very responsible” consumers whom we refer to as “consumption objectors.” An interpretative analysis of fourteen narratives from forty interviews enables us to enter into the details of the meanings given by these consumers to their consumption by studying how they construct their identity. Through this analysis, the article shows that all consumption objectors have a certain set of common features: quest for authenticity, social integration, control, suffer and the sensation of compromise.

INTRODUCTION
During the past few years, many spectacular actions and events have been taken by individuals and groups aiming to raise public awareness about consumption. For instance, the tires of sports utility vehicles, targeted for their polluting effects, have been deflated. Advertising posters have been vandalized to denounce their disrespect of consumers. Mountains of packaging have been abandoned in supermarkets. Feasts such as burning man or buy nothing day have been organized to demonstrate against the frenzy of consumption.

The discourse has also changed: individuals are encouraged not to reject the whole economic system blindly, but rather to limit their consumption (Firat and Venkatesh 1995), to think more about their purchases, to adopt solutions that encourage sustainable development. Consumers are advised to become more responsible so that they have “the set of voluntary acts, situated in the sphere of consumption, achieved from the awareness of consequences judged as negatives of consumption from the outside world to oneself; these consequences arising therefore not from the functionality of the purchases nor from immediate personal interest” (Ozcgaglar-Toulouse 2005, 52). Some consumers however, do not limit their actions to the conservation of the planet, but are very critical of consumption and the place that it now occupies in the Western lifestyle. Therefore, we will call them consumption objectors. How can one define these consumption objectors? Consumption objection is not a complete negation of consumption; its promoters are convinced that consumption can also become beneficial when it allows the development of communities as in the case of fair trade (Ozcgaglar-Toulouse, Shiu, and Shaw 2006). In the field of responsible consumption, consumption objection can be distinguished according to its aim as a consuming act. It is not an act of moral conformity. As a deep critical posture, the message of consumption objection can derive either from political essence or from a desire for liberation of the consuming society. Consumption objection has a global vision of the world that one should protect, and which should be recognized by the individuals who have their role in the project of a new society.

Various interpretations can be made of consumption objectors. Historians will underline, for example, that this is not the first time that consumers have made their voices heard. Even during the Middle Ages, consumers were already protesting against the abuses of the traders; and in the 19th century they organized themselves in cooperatives (Chatriot, Chessel, and Hilton 2004). Sociologists will evoke the symbolic character of consumption objection as behavior or the rejection of alienation that its symbolic character denotes among consumers (Groupe Marcuse 2004). In marketing, a number of studies have investigated the strategies of consumer resistance such as Peñaloza and Price (1992), Thompson and Haytko (1997), Kozinets and Handelman (1998), Holt (2002). But probably the most interesting reading of consumption objectors, as it is the most contemporary one, consists in considering the attempt these individuals make to give a meaning to their consumption and include the latter as an element of their identity construction. This will be discussed later in this article.

CRISIS IN MEANING WITHIN THE WESTERN SOCIETIES
According to many philosophers and sociologists, Western consumers are going through a deep crisis driven by a search for some meaning, at least because of two reasons: the crisis of modernity on one hand and the loss of social significance on the other.

Western society, while leaving modernity (e.g. “The crisis of the modernity” from Alain Touraine 1992), has abandoned the project of a society turned towards the future and left individuals alone to get rid of their fears resulting from micro and macro social risks (Giddens 1990). Multiple social risks ranging from the ever-increasing difficulty to attain satisfaction in spite of a growing number of available goods and services, environmental deterioration, and risks to future generations resulting from limited natural resources, troubling economic instabilities and the persistence of famines and wars, are now internalized by individuals. Since society doesn’t know how to provide a suitable answer to these issues, the individual needs to find them by himself. The quest for identity can be part of this.

Every society creates its own world by creating elements of meaning. These elements structure the representations that one has of the world, identifying social norms and indicating the type of affects that reign in society. According to Castoriadis (1996), the unique representation communicated by Western Society is the image of a man who earns more to consume more. Not all consumers recognize themselves in this model. But as for the individual who refuses this representation, the search for uniqueness becomes difficult due to the fear and awkwardness of stepping outside the borders of society (Fromm 1976). Hence, the individual must give himself another social identity than the one proposed by society and adopt a critical approach towards consumption.

So far, search for the personal identity and search for a social identity both seem to be at work in the consumption objector’s mind. This suggests that identity could be a relevant concept to explore consumption objectors. The link between identity and consumption has long been investigated in academic marketing research since the first work of Levy (1959) about consumption symbolism (e.g., Belk 1988; Schouten 1991; etc.). The most recent studies adopt a hermeneutic perspective that provides the personalized cultural meanings that constitute a person’s sense of self-identity (Thompson 1997).
GENERATING NARRATIVES FROM CONSUMPTION OBJECTORS

In order to delve in a phenomenological way into the thoughts and feelings which the informants hold about the significance of consumption in their daily lives, a research method that relies on the propensity of people to talk about the social experience of their daily lives was selected. Consumption objectors are not usual consumers and an appropriate research design had to be constructed, in order to by-pass the current distrust that propels consumers away from marketing studies. Offering the respondent at least a certain amount of autonomy not only in his/her answers but also in the organization of the interview was a better way to encourage cooperation with consumers (Fouquier 2004). Moreover, they are not in the habit of reflecting the meaning that they give to their consumption or the link that exists between their acts of purchase and their life. It therefore seemed necessary to “provoke” the consumers into speaking not only about their consumption but also about their own self-defined consumption story. This sort of compiling of information is not unknown in humanities or social science, where it is referred to as the method of “narratives” (Stern, Thompson, and Arnould 1998). The narratives method consists of asking the informant to tell his/her own story, with his/her own words at his/her own pace.

Studying consumption from the story that the consumer tells about his/her life is a research strategy that allows us to combine objective phenomena and subjective experience to understand and to analyze “the act in situation” (Bertaux 2000). The narrative does not reflect the totality of what happened in reality: the setting in narration is the interesting aspect of the present research.

A database consisting of 800 consumers, which is stored from a former quantitative survey on responsible consumption performed by one of the researchers, was used to recruit the sample. Some of these consumers were selected along their “very responsible” character. According to the qualitative research, people belonging to diverse groups and showing differentiated types of responsible consumption behavior were included progressively. Gender parity and diversity of socio-professional categories were taken into account as far as possible. In such interpretative studies, diversity is important to get different kind of meanings: six men and eight women, living in two cities in France, from different socio-professional categories constituted the sample.

Each narrator, except two of them, was interviewed three times in order to increase the richness of information, as advised in the narrative literature (Atkinson 2002). These interviews employ few pre-planned questions. The first interview was focused on general life span and lifestyle. The second one was focused on consumption meanings and the third one on objection modes of consumption. Forty interviews were realized during forty-five hours in which the narratives of fourteen consumers were transcribed on more than five hundred pages. These were supplemented by various notes taken during and after the interviews, observation of the phenomenon studied (participation to some Adbusters performance, shopping in alternative retailers, discussion on Community Supported Agriculture), factual data on the narrators, “sneaky” information, such as lifestyle indicators, captured during the interviews (Newholm 1999), etc.

IDENTITY THROUGH LIFE SPAN IN THE CONSUMPTION OBJECTORS’ NARRATIVES

Each story was first read in its entirety. Further readings were necessary to develop an integrated understanding of the consumption meanings (Thompson 1997). Many identity issues and concerns emerged during these interviews. For a better understanding we have chosen to present them according to a dynamic approach of identity. For a good part of two decades, the term of identity has given rise to a large amount of definitions in various social sciences and humanities and to an even larger amount of research. Social psychology, psychoanalytic tradition or sociology all can be involved in investigating consumer identity. We would like to focus on a dynamic perspective as narratives allow us to approach the transitions of self. Identity can be considered as the crossroads of five processes (Marc 2005): the process of individuation, the process of identification, the process of valorization, the process of conservation and finally the process of realization.

The process of individuation refers to the awareness of one’s uniqueness by differentiation. Terms like people, society, and mass market are very often used by consumption objectors to refer to others who are not. One respondent illustrates the desire and the process of individuation particularly well. Two years ago, Christelle, 41 years old, quit her job as a director of marketing for a large company because she felt she was too different from her colleagues (“I was the only one who was thinking about the consequences of marketing”). At one time, she was successful member of senior management, but she slightly realized she had little freedom and slowly felt she was going to be laid off. It was very painful and time consuming for her to realize this and to quit (“This events prevent me from sleeping”). Another one comments:

“I never feel myself to form part of a group completely. Because I have the feeling to have too many elements which do not correspond to a group”. (Magali, 25)

Sabine underlines her need to be different, to go always a little further:

“I raise my difference with pride. But, I think that I will be happy that everyone makes effort on his/her consumption. Of course, I will nevertheless find something to go further.” (Sabine, 33)

The process of identification leads consumption objectors to constitute networks through the necessity to meet each other in order to better take on the responsibilities and alienation associated with their “marginal” behavior (Moisander 2000; Moisander and Pesonen 2002).

“I have also a feeling of community of thought or community with other people who can act like me.” (Laurent, 29)

Some of them are concerned about the environment and belong to ecological movements; some others are or were members of a political party. Many are engaged in charity or social NGOs such as OXFAM. At a more local level, they are concerned with their neighborhood life or their relation with local producers. In a more positive perspective:

“I find important also this direct relation with producers from the same area with me or even from outside of the area.”

The process of valorization. Consumption objection seems to be driven on one hand by the desire to do something “counter-cultural”, but on the other hand by a need for creativity. Moreover, certain attitudes such as responsible, critical or ethical consumption can be socially valued. For this reason, being critical of consumption can be considered positively by others and allow the individual to develop a positive perception of oneself. Most respondents express their pride in being consumption objectors, although they...
are conscious of being far from perfect and are reminded of sustainable development issues.

“When you buy a fair trade product, it is perhaps a political act but also, it enables you to be distinguished, or while buying you have the impression to belong to an avant-garde movement” (Magali, 25).

The process of conservation. For consumption objectors the autonomy they have to leave the culture of mass consuming society and create a subculture that practices consumption objection is fundamental. The process of conservation allows the construction of an identity with a larger temporal base (the concept of autonomy referring to the concept of control and continuity). Moreover, consumption objection generally is built on concepts such as sustainability and inter-generational continuity, which also relate to the notion of conservation.

“...to be autonomous, to know how foods are produced... as I know what awaits us in the future, to be autonomous, it is important and reassuring; in the future that will be vital.” (Mathias, 33)

The process of realization. For the narrators, consumption objection seems to compensate for the meaning of a world judged as unauthentic and for a disillusioned consumer society. As they do not wish to be reduced to their role of consumers, they view their critical stand as a way to address the possibility of being more a “person” than a simple consumer and to create an identity identifiable by others (Cherrier and Murray 2002).

“I have a little feeling to change the world by my consuming behavior.” (Mathias, 33)

These five processes are present on a different level in each narrative. Besides the identity aspects, many issues have emerged during the analysis of narratives. We have looked for patterns and differences across interviews.

EMERGING ISSUES

The comparative analysis has led us to find common features among the consumption objectors whose narratives we analyzed. Without falling into the trap of over-generalizing, we believe that any consumer who progressively moves towards critical thought about consumption and consumption objection practices may be confronted with these feelings. Cherrier (2005) has already been identified three of them. The quest for “authenticity” (1), “social integration” (2) and “control” (3), which are confirmed and deepened here. Two other features also appear in the data: “suffering” (4) and “compromise” (5).

Literature generally studies “authenticity” (1) through the study of product origins (Camus 2002). However the quest for authenticity by the consumption objectors goes beyond the purchase of specific products. The individual is in search of a “real-self” (Cova and Cova 2002) which he or she believes tends to disappear in consumer society, but could be partly recovered with consumption objection practices (“Mass consumption, it’s the consumption of ourselves!” one of the narrators says).

The consumption objectors’ acts - where the origin and the impact of the products (in social, environmental or political terms) have a major importance in the final consuming decision - are a way of opposing conformism.

Consumption objection allows a move away from an individual’s identity as “a consumer”, one which is banal and inherited from the disenchantment of the mass. It is about a self-referent identity labeling (Biddle et alii 1987) in Shaw (2000), which is above all the construction of “someone” identifiable by him/herself (Gergen 2000, in Cherrier and Murray 2002).

The “social integration” (2) is located at two different but complementary levels. The first one is related to the ‘imposed’ social norm (Moisander and Pesonen 2002; Craig-Lees and Hill 2002). Consumption objection is indeed for the narrators an ambitious stand against the current economic system, while at the same time their speech reflects some efforts to avoid dropping out of society (“I don’t want to be on the margins of society” one narrator says). The second level is related to the ‘desired’ social norm. In this view consumption objection is seen as a sum of practices (products to buy or to not buy), symbols (resistance, criticism) and beliefs, (“we can change the world!”) enabling the building of a new social community. Social integration is the expression of a quest for social links (Rieunier and Volle 2002) and relies on processes of valorization and identification. The valorization of oneself through consumption objection is related to the conviction of being part of an anti-conformist minority which is ahead of the rest of society. Our narrators often tend to define themselves in their opposition to the rest of the “mass” made up of drab and conventional consumers who are unable to oppose the system.

With a dual movement of identity, consumption objection is also the expression of the awareness of one’s likeliness with others. It is essentially about a search for recognition, which means that a social identity is under construction. There is here a social aspect: the singular place that one occupies in a social group is not, therefore, appreciated only for itself, but in relation to others.

The “desire for control” (3) is based on a wish for autonomy and mastery. Having the impression of being directed by the art of marketers (Dobscha 1998), these consumption objectors want to regain control of their lives by “knowing where the products come from”. The desire for control implies a perception of oneself as an autonomous individual, able to self-determine, to construct a life by oneself, to decide one’s behavior, as well as to master oneself and the environment (Marc 2005).

Control is often related to a sense of urgency (Rieunier and Volle 2002). The adepts of consumption objection generally hold very strong environmental convictions, with the desire not to break the harmony of Mother Nature that develops the life and not to risk harming her. They are often fans of “DIY” (do it yourself) and try for example, to have their own vegetable garden, etc. (Dobre 2002).

“Suffering” (4) is both the expression of the difficulty to accept the values of the society we are living in and the negative impacts of our lifestyles, and of the difficulty to reconcile some values and types of behavior that seem hardly reconcilable (one of the narrators says: “[through my behavior] I feel guilty about letting the planet suffer”). Moreover, mass consumption leads, for some of the narrators, to a feeling of impoverishment. This suffering reminds us of the need to affirm one’s existence and the need to feel secure in the group. Consumption objection seems to attenuate it and allows the consumer to rediscover a sense of the world through his own life choices.

Suffering and, hence, anxiety highlight the need to affirm one’s existence, which is clearly linked with the need to feel safe within the group. The use of consumption objection allows the consumers to affirm his/her identity.

Finally, the practices of consumption objection are sometimes financially (purchase of more expensive or rarer products), socially (risks of isolation, need to convince one’s relations, social embarrassment of vegetarians, etc.) and time (finding alternative distribution networks, culinary preparations, etc.) demanding, since the
dominant model of the consuming society has been constructed through a modernist approach in total opposition to this behavior. This difficulty is especially daunting, as these consumers don’t wish to marginalize themselves too much or to step outside society. The adepts of consumption objection live their consumption as a set of “compromises” (5) with other people between their desire for social integration (“I am not either a rebel in total opposition with the rest of the society!”) and themselves. As a result, the practices of consumption objection are not always feasible or easy to carry out (“The other guy, the one who consumes in the standard way, is also the other half of myself” recognizes one of the speakers).

In this context each one adopts a variety of practices according to the situation or one’s arguments, and sometimes according to one’s capacity for “resistance”. There are three main ways of expressing this compromise: through voluntary simplicity, through the renunciation of possessiveness and through the acceptance of a certain level of fragmentation to avoid dropping-out.

Compromise corresponds to a certain paradox of identity. On one hand it results from the need for valorization. In the quest for recognition, each one expects to be given a certain value, a positive image of him, sent back by others. Self-esteem is often bound to the image of him, sent back by others. Self-esteem is often bound to the consideration of others (Marc 2005). On the other hand, compromising with the system weakens the identity construction of consumption objectors since it makes them question the strength of their convictions and their capacity to carry through their commitment without contradiction.

**CONCLUSION**

The consumption process has been considered as a destruction process by economists for a long period of time, then as a way to fulfill needs and desires. Recently it has been identified as an addiction for some individuals (Valence, D’Astous and Fortier 1988). The research related here emphasizes another function of consumption: one that contributes to a great extent to self-construction, at least for consumption objectors. This function is not really a new one, as symbolic aspects of consumption have long been investigated. But yet, the role played in self-construction has been limited to certain products (such as luxury goods or cars) or practices (cosmetic surgery). In the case of consumption objectors, paradoxically, any consumption act contributes as a whole to this self-construction. But instead of a biological reduction of the tension created by need, consumption can lead to greater tension (the necessity to compromise), discomfort and even suffering. Therefore, a new way of developing fair and ethical consumption could be to find a means to release this suffering.

These results have emerged from a small group of consumption objectors and can not be extended either to consumers as a whole or to occasionally responsible consumers who sometimes purchase ethical and fairly traded products. In any case these results do provide a new approach to consumption objectors and suggest that a self-construction process is at work. It would be of great help to know if such a process is also at work in the case of individuals who are less concerned than consumption objectors, but still feel the need to buy “ethical products” or engage in other responsible consumption practices. These results could allow a better communication program for the development of responsible consumption among this less involved consumer group. Moreover, the narrative approach used in this study has proven to be productive for analyzing consumption meaning and could be extended to other related subjects. In particular, such a methodological strategy could be used in cross-cultural consumption research as one’s life path is linked to the economic and political context of each country as well as to one’s personality. Building large cross-cultural research programs could be one of the next possible steps in international consumption research for the investigation of the consumption objection.

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