Who Done It? a Study of Responsible Consumers’ Evaluations of a Malfuctioning System

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Responsible consumption is framed in existing work as a reaction against something that is fundamentally wrong in contemporary societies, a malfunctioning of the system. By using grounded theory, this paper explores whether responsible consumers have a shared belief about the reasons for this malfunctioning. The main finding of this paper is that responsible consumers report doing different actions, acknowledge pursuing different goals and their actions have different targets, according to their beliefs about the ultimate reasons for the malfunctioning system. Not only are those beliefs, goals, and actions interrelated but they reflect deeper views of what kind of power should be exercised on consumers´ side to counteract those forces.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

One of the features of the fourth wave of consumerism is the use of consumer power as a means to get changes in the marketplace (Gabriel and Lang, 1995). Authors have given this movement many names (Barnett et al, 2005) but today, “responsible consumption” (RC hereafter) is preferred as an umbrella term.

We define RC as “any practice of consumption in which explicitly registering commitment or obligation towards distant or absent others is an important dimension of the meaning of the activity to the actors involved” (Barnet et al, 2005: 29). This broad definition of RC does not limit the issues about which consumers may care or the actions they can perform.

Previous research presents RC as a reaction against the “system” or the “paradigm” but only mentions the symptoms (environmental degradation, social injustice, inequities) without analysing the roots of the problem (Kilbourne et al, 1997). From the aforementioned research we conclude that RC emerges as a reaction against something that is “fundamentally wrong” (Cherrier, 2007: 330) in contemporary societies; a malfunctioning of the “system”, in the structures, in their agents, or in the underpinning values.

Moreover, researchers have not examined whether responsible consumers have a shared belief of the reasons for this malfunctioning. If consumers do not share a common evaluation of the system, they may not undertake the same actions to promote change.

The inductive methodology Grounded Theory was used to examine this issue. We interviewed 30 self-defined responsible consumers that were representative of the Spanish responsible consumer segment (CECU, 2010).

Our main finding is that responsible consumers report doing different actions and pursuing different goals according to their beliefs about the reasons for the malfunctioning system. Moreover, these beliefs, goals, and actions are interrelated and reflect deeper views of the power that should be exercised on consumers’ side to change the system. The contribution of this paper is threefold.

First, a taxonomy of RC actions is proposed, based on two criteria: focus of action (mainstream vs. alternative) and type of action (buying vs. refrain from buying). The combination of these two axes yields four RC strategies: voice, exit, smart shopping and simplifying. The distinction between mainstream and alternative market is essentially a distinction between “reform” and “revolution”, concepts taken from the classifications of new social movements (Starr, 2000). We make use of this literature because RC has been considered a new social movement (Cherrier, 2005).

Second, we identify two super ordinate goals for engaging in RC: political and moral. In the former case, consumers aim at changing economic, political, and social practices or structures (Barnett et al, 2005; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Micheletti et al, 2004). In the latter, the main consumer goal is to construct oneself as a virtuous person; we call this segment ‘moral selves’ (Allahari, 2000, in Dolan, 2005).

Third, we propose a taxonomy of consumers according to their beliefs about the reasons for the malfunctioning system. Inspired by culture theory we differentiate between fatalists, hierarchicals, egalitarians, and individualists (Seyfang, 2004). None of the interviewed consumers can be considered fatalist. In contrast, all the interviewees fit into the group called ‘egalitarians’, since they all state that the real problem is a materialistic culture, oriented towards extrinsic goals; therefore, all interviewees report the need for a cultural system change.

Therefore, we differentiate between “egalitarians-hierarchicals” and “egalitarians-individualists”. Hierarchicals believe that the ultimate cause lies in government and companies. If the State gains more power and multinationals lose it, the system will be transformed. Therefore, they use exit and voice strategies (boycotting brands; buying from white lists, cyber activism), and smart shopping actions (fair trade or organic buying) to help bring about the new system they want.

Individualists believe that the ultimate reason lies in humans’ need to accumulate, to possess. They criminalize business or governments little or nothing. Their actions are oriented towards drastic reductions of consumption, rejection of the symbols associated with the materialist society and other “alternative” consumers’ actions.

This distinction between egalitarians also draws on different conceptualization of power (we follow Bachrach and Barats, 1970; Lukes, 1974 and 1993; Ham and Hill, 1984, for this explanation). “Hierarchicals” believe that to amend the system, they should exercise power as defined in its first dimension (putting pressure on brands, through boycotts) and second dimension (by voicing their concerns via activism to introduce new issues on corporate agendas).

In contrast, “individualists” exercise power as defined in the third dimension (“symbolic power”). By living austerely, they contribute to delegitimize the main actors of the current system: corporations and neoliberal institutions.

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