Becoming a Responsible Consumer: Using Narratives to Study the Development Paths and Goals

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Even though responsible consumption is widely studied in the consumer research field, little is known about the subjective process which leads someone to be responsible. This paper contributes the existing literature on responsible consumption by focusing on the subjective process of development. Leaning on the theoretical and empirical findings, the responsibility is here thought to be as a consequence resulted from the existence of particular personality variables and influence of socio-cultural environment. Different goals for being responsible and three distinctive paths of growing into a responsible consumer were revealed through the narratives written by French and Finnish consumers.

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of Study 1 in another scenario. Besides, the boundary condition for the interaction effect on consumers’ customization evaluation will be addressed.

Discussion
Theoretically, this research finds that the effect of regulatory focus on the number of options retained in the final customized offering is contingent on customization mode, which adds knowledge to the multi-option screening literature. Another contribution of the current research is to extend regulatory fit theory into a customization service context. Managerially, this research answers how to match customization mode with regulatory focus in order to accomplish superior customer value in customization service.

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References

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The concept of a new consumer type, an alternative consumer, appeared as far back as the 1970’s so the phenomenon itself is not very new. Characteristics like ethicality, green, fair trade and the concern toward developing countries became to define this new consumer type (Gabriel & Lang, 1995). This paper explores how the responsibility is constructed as a part of a consumer’s life.

The theory is drawn here not only through the attitudinal dimensions, but especially through the personality indicators and the influence of the overall social structure. As Degevos (2005) states, the importance of socio-cultural and socio-psychological determinants should not be underestimated in the consumer studies.

The responsibility can be seen as a consequence led by the particular personality variables and the specific events in the socio-cultural environment. These personality variables include such inner entities as values, motives, moral conceptions and subjective norms. Especially the existence of certain nature related values have been found to have an influence to the responsible consumption behavior (e.g., Grunert & Juhl, 1995). Also, the change in a value system (e.g. anthropocentric values ? ecocentric values) is assumed to precede the behavioral change (see Rokeach, 1973). Besides the normative nature of subjective norms, the social norms often advise consumers to behave in a certain way. It depends on the nature of cultural and political environment how the sustainable consumption is adopted in a certain country. Both the person’s subjective development processes as well as the influences outside are here assumed to be the principal factors explaining the process of growing as a responsible consumer.

Qualitative research was conducted to study respondents’ subjective experiences about responsible consumption. Written biographies were chosen as a narrative research method (see Riessman, 1993). The written biographies are found to be appropriate in the identity development studies (e.g., Hole, 2007). Therefore, in this study, I used written truth based stories for finding out how responsibility has become an integral part of respondent’s self-identity. The study was based on a sample of Finnish and French consumers at the age range from 24 to 63, whit a bias toward the lower ages. There were a total of seventeen informants; four males and fourteen females. Four of the informants were French including two of them living in an autonomic eco-village. The sample choice was a convenience sample followed a snow-ball sampling. It was considered as crucial that the sample members were responsible consumers. In order to assure this, the respondents needed to meet at least one of the following criterions: 1) Buying fair trade and/or organic products regularly 2) Boycotting products found being unethical 3) Collective activity, as a membership in associations.
A postal questionnaire was developed and which was similar to all informants. In the first part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to write a truth based story of a following topic: “Me as a responsible consumer”. They were asked to describe the events from childhood until the present day. In the second part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked about socio-demographic characteristics including age, gender, education and the nature of being a responsible consumer (the frequency of buying fair trade/organic products, participation in associations, boycotts).

The analysis was made at two levels. At the first level, the differences in the thematic structures of stories indicated how the responsible consumption appears mostly as a specific goal for the respondents. Each of these four goals included two main themes which were found through the content analysis. These goals vary particularly according to the motives, the level of commitment and the actualized responsible actions. The goals I nominated as follows: 1) Responsibility as a way to rational consumption 2) Responsibility as a way to healthiness 3) Responsibility as a way to save the nature 4) Being comprehensively responsible. These goals are not absolute in the sense that the same respondent can have more than just one goal. Moreover, the changes in goals over time became apparent in the stories. For example, the responsibility starts to have more meanings in respondent’s life and this lead adopting new goals and perhaps also new behavioral patterns.

At the second level of analysis, the plot structure of stories was used to identify whether there are differences in the developing paths. Through that I noticed that each story can be divided into three life stages: childhood, youth, and maturity. Three distinctive developing paths were nominated as follows: 1) From childhood landscape into eco-consumerism 2) Through teenage rebel into savior of earth 3) Through slowly changing into a critical consumer. This life stage separation allowed recognizing not the particular stage of life in which the identity as a responsible consumer started to develop but also the possible changes in time concerning the personal commitment and goals. For example, the changes in the subjective values and motives or in social environment seemed to have an influence on the process of growing into a responsible consumer.

The study indicates firstly the different positions of responsible consumption in respondent’s life. For example, for one the responsible consumption appears as a goal to be healthy while for another it appears as an intention to change the “badcapitalistic world”. For most of the respondents, the commitment appears as daily routines including such actions as recycling, giving donations, buying fair trade/organic products and boycotting unethical business. On the other hand, the goal of being comprehensively responsible indicates more radical form of responsibility (cf. The Simple Living Movement). Secondly, the life stage division helped to recognize the special events and changes in timeline. This permitted again finding out the specific life period which was significant in terms of growing into a responsible consumer. Worth noting is also the changes in the level of personal commitment and goals which can lead someone to move from modest behavioral patterns toward more extreme or vice versa.

References

The Role of Quality-of-Experience and Affect in Maladaptive Food Consumption
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“Hungry? Why wait,” asks a popular advertisement for a candy bar. Perhaps more curious is the inverse, “Waiting? Why hunger?” In a recent survey, 47% of 16-24 year-olds and 40% of 35-44 year-olds reported that they had eaten because they had nothing better to do (BBC News, 2004). This is an important issue since such maladaptive behavior undermines long-term life satisfaction (Kushner and Foster 2000).

The accepted knowledge of consumer behavior posits that consumers exhaust resources in order to satisfy needs. In eating, consumers use up natural resources–animals and plants–to sustain themselves. Yet, as the BBC survey indicates, eating that is not motivated by sustenance is a common occurrence. So which need is satisfied in such consumption? In addition to sustenance needs, people have experiential needs to “keep consciousness in an organized state, focused on some activity that requires attention” (Csikszentmihalyi 2000, p. 270). When people satisfy such needs with high-quality experiences, they also satisfy the ultimate goal of feeling good (Csikszentmihalyi 1993, 1997). The present research proposes that people eat when they are deficient in QOE to improve their experiential and affective states.

There are other options besides eating to satisfy experiential needs; one could engage oneself in work or hobbies, for example. However, humans often use shortcuts to satisfy psychological needs. Eating both immediately engages attention and, as many studies have shown, provides a psychophysical response that improves one’s affective state (e.g. Christensen 2001, Van der Does 2001). While this sounds like a promising solution, studies have shown that consumers are happier when they are having high-quality experiences than when they are consuming (Csikszentmihalyi 1997, 1999). As a result, the following relationships among quality-of-experience (QOE), eating, and affect are proposed: