

RESPONSIBLE CONSUMER FACING SOCIAL CONSTRAINTS, CORPORATE STRATEGIES AND INDIVIDUAL CHOICES

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to understand consumers' behavior and to reveal the multiple motivations of buying goods. There are multiple types of consumers, but our interest is for those socially responsible. As consumers are not currently embracing the nexus of social responsibility, they have to be educated to understand the importance of the social aspects of their consumption, as component of strategic thinking. We do not agree the individualization of consumption' social responsibility and we proclaim the need of structural social measures, of macrosocial changes.*

Key words: *consumption, consumer behavior, nexus, responsible consumer.*

1. Ethical Concerns and Socially Responsible Consumer

In the last decades consumers' attitudes towards ethical issues have become of great importance. This paper highlights the debate concerning a subject of increasing interest, namely ethical consumption. Pursuing ethical choices, consumers inevitably face tensions in their everyday life. For this reason, is difficult to be an ethical consumer and the concept of *responsible consumer* might be a broadly applicable one. We argue for the idea of consumers' social responsibility as a target easier to reach. Current consumption practices are irresponsible, more specific to a logic of unlimited abundance. Responsible Consumption does not exist as itself but it is a movement refocused of the consumption values. Responsible consumer is a different type than the current model of consumer - the citizen-consumer concerned about the impact of his/her everyday consumption.

In terms of methodology, our study contributes to the theoretical discussion regarding these aspects.

The aim of this paper is to understand consumers' behavior and to reveal the multiple motivations of buying goods.

Presumptions: Consumption is a social, not an individual practice so that consumers' choices cannot be equated with individual freedom, or with total rational calculation.

Responsible consumers are concerned about the social and environmental impacts of what they buy.

This perspective also involves interconnected aspects: on the one hand, corporate social responsibility strategies to drive responsible behavior of consumers and, on the other hand,

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responsible consumption as a tool to drive producers to develop corporate social responsibility strategies.

2. Literature Background

In the post modern world, the production-based approaches shifted to consumption-based ones, as the society is premised on commodity consumption. The focus lies on the consumer, with his individual choices, seen by theorists in different views: as self determined individual, as rational homo economicus, or as manipulated person with the illusion of freedom.

Consumerism is understood as a preoccupation with, and an inclination toward the buying of consumer goods and services, and the view that increasing purchases of these is advantageous to the economy (Schechtman, 2013, p. 2). Consumerism is more than an socio-economic process; it is the way our society functions, it is a system. In this respect, the malls represent a large scale situation and are based on structures that will resist the effort of individual consumer to escape the process of buying goods.

Presenting the historical development of consumption and consumerism, Schechtman underlines the environmental pressures from rising material consumption and the fact that in consumerist cultures, high consumption appears to be central to most people's identities.

The search for self-identity is a modern problem, as Giddens states, "perhaps having its origins in Western individualism" (1991, p. 74). In conditions of high modernity, we all not only follow lifestyles, but we are forced to do so – we have no choice but to choose (1991, p. 81). As Orazi states, "consumption is the result of individual choices not so much between products but between different kinds of relationship. A basic choice in the formation of a "modern" individual concerns the lifestyle to be adopted, and from this follows his/ her positioning within the social system" (2015, p. 36).

In the consumerist society there is a special way of defining social identity – by acquiring goods and the maintenance of personal identity has become linked to consumption (Soroni, 2010). Consumption is intimately tied to the creation and production of sense of self (Todd, 2012, p. 48).

Individual choices are restricted by social norms - social constraints. Habitual behavior is an essential part of normal life in a complex world, but also a key obstacle in changing consumption patterns (Schechtman, 2013).

Achieving individual behavioral change requires changes not only in the habits of the individual, but also in the social norms and relations surrounding the individual (Yeow et al., 2014)

Living today in a system of corporate capitalism, with socially constructed needs (Wolter, 2010) consumers are dominated inside a culture of Sign value. "Ultimately, consumers acquire objects since conformity to the consumption code is integrating. Yet, sign value is desired not because people are materialistic or vain, but because human longs for and need a sense of community" (Cherrier, Murray, 2004, p. 522).

Analysing the new means of consumption, Ritzer refers to the "spectacular society", with the proliferation of seductive and phantasmagoric commodities. Actual societies are in their structure set up as "cathedrals of consumption". The author delineates the character of the new means of consumption "as controlling, exploitative, legitimating and spectacular" (2001, p. 200).

The importance of consumption can be highlighted by the high share that consumption has in real GDP, in Romanian economy - for a period of ten years, an annual average share of consumption of 82.92% in the GDP was calculated (Herman, 2011, p. 135). Attendance at so called “cathedrals of consumption” is proven by the alarming recent statistics for our country: the turnover of retail trade in 2015 - except trade of motor vehicles and motorcycles - increased over 2014, as gross series by 8.9%, according to data communicated by the National Institute of Statistics (NIS, 2016). This increase is about 2.5 times higher than GDP growth and it deepens the major inconsistency between output of goods and services and the revenue available to the public.

Even if in the last decades consumers’ attitude towards ethical issues have become of great importance in Western developed countries, ethical consumption is considered a niche, not a mainstream phenomenon. Consumer behavior, in its ethical dimension, is a complex concept (Pecoraro & Uusitalo, 2014) and it means decision making, purchases and other consumption experiences that are affected by the consumer’s ethical concerns (Yeow et al., 2014, p. 88). There are serious difficulties faced by ordinary people as they try to understand and respond ethically to large scale social and ecological problems (Soron, 2010).

Responsible consumer behavior might be a preferable and much broadly applicable label (Smith, 2011).

The present era is also one of heightened awareness of responsible business. The paradigm of corporate social responsibility (CSR) developed by business ethics means that corporations “do well by doing good”. Because of consumers’ pre-eminent position as the ultimate evaluator of corporate strategy, CSR activities have not to be in conflict with consumer demand. This implies that the creation of consumer social responsibility is going to increasingly fall into the realm of responsibilities of corporations and not consumers (Devinney et al., 2012, p. 234).

3. Marketers and Consumers Joining Emotional Behavior

Marketing plays a key role in maintaining existing consumption habits. Marketing treaties devoted separate chapters to brand policies developed to attract and retain consumers, to cultivate their loyalty. Consumers are often perceived as rational, deterministic, but in fact, consumption cannot be equated with total rational calculation, because motivations for buying goods are hybrid (Cherrier, Murray, 2004), among them emotions having an important role.

There is a crucial concern of “developing a brand awareness” (Pop, 2011, p.278) and in this respect, international known works in the field of brand reputation reveal the emotional side involved in the consumers preferences (Hannington, 2004), (Travis, 2000).

As consumers are not currently embracing the nexus of social responsibility (Devinney et al., 2012), they have to be educated to understand the importance of the social aspects of their consumption, as component of strategic thinking.

3.1. Lovemark Concept

The essence of the Lovemark concept is based on a simple, but efficiently used idea: the human being is considered to be a reasonable being, but the truth is that it is fairer to

assert that the human being is influenced by emotions. Neurologist Donald Calne, quoted by Sheehan, holds that „the basic difference between emotion and reason is that the former leads to actions, while the latter determines the conclusions” (Sheehan, 2013, p. 16). As modern buyer, the individual enjoys choosing his/her own “settings” and resorts more and more to *personalization* (Jenkins, 2006, p. 68). Consequently, brands are continuously changing and so is the buyer, who does not only want to listen to advertising messages but also to be part of them.

Brand can enhance affective elements, fact noticed by Kevin Roberts, who launched the concept of Lovemark (popular, loved mark) in 2004, with the idea to replace and update the concept of “brand”, given the new realities of the market and increased competition. Conceptual reassessment took place by highlighting the strong emotional bond between the public and certain brands.

It takes three key-ingredients for a product to qualify as a lovemark: *mystery*, rendered through impressive stories, ancient times, myths, dreams and a lot of inspiration, then the creation of a complete experience through the union of the five senses (*sensuality*), as well as a close relationship with the consumer (*intimacy*) provided by commitment and empathy (Roberts, 2004, p. 74-79). In parallel with this first set of ideas, an additional coordinate is proposed and exploited: the *love-respect coordinate*. The system aims to measure both the level of emotion and that of commitment as efficiently as possible (Roberts, 2005). A genuine lovemark both loves and respects its clients.

3.2. Understanding Nexus

Some objects of social thinking showing a strong affective valence are called *nexus*, concept launched by M.L. Rouquette in 1988. This term refers to objects characterized by intense emotional elements and a low level of knowledge. The author believes that they are emotional knots pre-logically common to a large number of individuals. The affective appraisals are maximized at the expense of cognitive elements, evading reflection or reasoning, and adherence or rejection towards them are total (e.g. Nazi nexus).

The features of nexus are presented synthesized on six directions, based on Rouquette's texts interpretations by scholars such as R.P. Wolter (2010, p. 91-92):

1. Collective characteristics and shared by most members of the community.
2. It mobilizes and cancels for the moment the intra / inter group differences.
3. It is enabled in times of crisis and danger.
4. It represents an elaboration of the social imaginary, not of reality.
5. It is expressed by a unique term, irreplaceable.
6. Lack of measurement of affect is expressed through empathy and language vehemence.

What remains, however, a dilemma is that it is not known how some nexus disappear and what is considered a certainty is that a nexus conceals another (Lemieux, 2010). The Nexus is much easier now self-sustaining, in a media society. In literature, the term nexus is present with reference to social representations (Lo Monaco, 2010), (Wolter, 2010) and the most common nexus examples are: freedom, homeland, unity, equality, crazy, Nazi.

3.3. Nexus – Lovemark Boundaries

The objects of nexus type do not represent an individual emotion, but they are collective, shared by most members of a community (Lo Monaco, 2010, p. 118]. In contrast, adherence to a popular brand expresses individually, and the aggregate preferences of all consumers results in the Lovemark concept. However, nexus have a cohesive character unifying temporarily a heterogeneous group of individuals.

A lovemark succeeds in pushing a consumer's loyalty beyond reason, forming a special connection. The modern client's critical spirit is more and more developed and he/she seems to become immune to the daily invasion of messages. But this appeal to emotions determines us to choose, keep and use certain brands. „Lovemarks are special, charismatic brands which people love and strongly defend; products, services and experience create long-term emotional relationships with the consumers” (Florescu). It is worth mentioning that an authentic lovemark offers more than emotions associated to the present moment; it provides genuine feelings towards the specific brand or the complex and long-lasting state which determines us to continue buying the same product (Bujor, Georgescu, 2015, p. 485)

Also, we note that the low level of rationality specific to nexus would place it in another quadrant of an imaginary matrix compared to Lovemark term.

3.4. The common Nexus – Lovemark denominator

Our concern was focused on what experts present as being the potential cohesive, mobilizing and unifying nexus effect, masking the differences inter and intra-groups Lo Monaco, 2010, p. 122). Also, what we want to emphasize is the common aspect of both concepts and also the realities of social thought, namely strong emotional elements (Georgescu, 2015, p. 90).

	RATIONALITY	
High level	<i>LOVEMARK</i>	
	AFFECTIVITY	
Low level	High level	
	<i>NEXUS</i>	
Low level		

Fig. 1. Positioning Nexus / Lovemark concepts on rationality-emotionality matrix
Own schematization (2015, p. 91)

Our contribution is that of vicinity of the two types of approaches found in the literature regarding the social thinking and marketing, for an interdisciplinary vision on creating and strengthening the ties between emotions and responsible consumption. That is because “the ethical argument might be only one premise of consumption choice among others, which could, for instance, be: health, economy, convenience or time saving” (Pecoraro & Uusitalo, 2014, p. 47].

To develop the Nexus of responsible consumption, based on emotional side of individuals, is what we propose.

4. Conclusions

In the post modern world, the production-based approaches shifted to consumption-based ones, as the society is premised on commodity consumption. The focus lies on the consumer, with his individual choices, seen by theorists in different views: as self determined individual, as rational homo economicus, or as manipulated person with the illusion of freedom.

In fact, individual practices of consumption are influenced by social constraints and are determined by habitus. Consumption is a social, not an individual practice so that consumers’ choices cannot be equated with individual freedom, or with total rational calculation.

To consider the everyday consumption from a moral perspective could drive a burden of tension in each act of buying. “The presence of consumers who consider the impact of their purchase on the environmental and social front, who put a specific ethic of their action before the mere satisfaction of a need, even if induced, redefines the role of consumers with respect to the ideas that have been built over time on this actor” (Orazi, 2015, p. 42).

Ethical consumption is a very complex, culturally constructed phenomenon. Therefore, a *softer* behavior is more adequate - that of socially responsible consumption. We do not agree the individualization of consumption’s social responsibility and proclaim the need of structural social measures, macrosocial changes. The market economy acts like a system, and the enmeshed individual in consumerist behavior is required to escape from it on his own, which is very difficult.

Responsible consumers are those concerned about the social and environmental impact of what they purchase. They are citizen-consumers, who aim to contribute to a better world, the way they spend money.

CSR activists, in the effort to show a socially responsible behavior, have an important role to play in building a new kind of responsible consumerism. This perspective involves interconnected aspects: on the one hand, corporate social responsibility strategies to drive responsible behavior of consumers and, on the other hand, responsible consumption as a tool to drive producers to develop corporate social responsibility strategies.

The positive side of consumerism is that it gave everyone a tool to escape the classical dichotomy: *to have* or *to be*. Acknowledging that human beings are not defined by what they own, individuals can say “this is what I am because I chose it”. To choose responsibly could be a mainstream phenomenon.

Finally, as Nexus represents a collective emotion and have a cohesive character, it could be a target to shape the Nexus of responsible consumption.

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