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# WORKING-PAPER – UMR MOISA

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## Paradoxes of sustainable food and consumer coping strategies

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### Résumé

Cette étude s'intéresse aux comportements des consommateurs face aux paradoxes de l'Alimentation durable. Une recherche qualitative a été menée auprès d'individus non engagés en France et en Italie puis, auprès de consommateurs engagés dans les circuits courts. Les résultats mettent en évidence des stratégies de coping différentes en France et en Italie pour les individus non engagés ; en revanche, les participants engagés évoquent une culture supranationale avec des représentations et des pratiques similaires.

### Mots clefs

Alimentation durable, Consommation durable, Stratégies de coping, Culture

### Abstract

This study aims to approach consumers' behaviours towards the paradoxes of sustainable food. A qualitative research was carried out with non engaged individuals in France and Italy and, in a second step, with consumers who have already engaged in the local purchase network. Results show different coping strategies among non engaged French and Italian consumers in compliance with the environmental and cultural conditions; on the contrary engaged participants evocate a supranational culture, as well as the same practices and representations.

### Keywords

Sustainable food, Sustainable consumption, Paradoxes, Coping strategies, Culture

JEL: D18, M31

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## Introduction

Our purpose is to investigate paradoxes in Sustainable Food and coping strategies adopted by French and Italian consumers. The two countries propose different conditions for Sustainable

Market Offer	France	Italy
Nature	- Environmental dimension	- Solidarity connotations

Consumption and socio-cultural characteristics. In the first and second sections of the paper we present a targeted review on sustainable consumers' behaviours, key elements influencing these practices in both countries and, paradoxes emerging in Sustainable Food with the adaptation of Mick and Fournier (1998)'s model to our research domain. In the third section we present the methodology divided into two working steps: use of semi-structured interviews to approach French and Italian consumers and, later, an ethnographic investigation of environmental contexts. Results are reported in section four. Our findings shed light on different coping strategies adopted by non engaged French and Italian consumers. Participants are, notably, affected by conditions of each context and culture. Consequently they behave in a different way and perceive more concrete paradoxes. On the contrary engaged subjects show similar cultural references. In practice they report the same behaviours and abstract paradoxes. In the last section, we give some contributions to advance in the conceptual knowledge of consumers' behaviours and paradoxes affecting Sustainable Food, as well as the methodological adaptation of the Mick and Fournier's model. Finally we discuss about possible obstacles to SC in each country.

### 1. Sustainable consumption

Sustainable consumption (SC) is a key concept to connect consumers with global issues of Sustainable Development (Schrader & Thøgersen, 2011). SC concerns "*a multitude of consumption-related behaviours*" (Hinton and Goodman, 2009) as well as embracing different consumers' profiles, both non engaged individuals and more concerned subjects (Jackson, 2005). A targeted literature reports anonymous practices (Schrader & Thøgersen, 2011) but, also, alternative engagement forms, such as participation in the Associations promoting local purchase networks, such as the AMAP in France (Association for the Preservation of Local Farming) and the GAS in Italy (Solidarity Purchase Groups) (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2009; Forno, 2009). SC needs taking into account the elements coming from the context conditions (services, informative devices..) to support consumers' choices (Jackson, 2005; Thøgersen, 2005) and those closer to the human sphere, such as the psychological dimension affecting decision-making process and the socio-cultural norms shaping consumer's behaviours (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Jackson, 2005). Consequently, different sensibilities are emerging among the countries, depending on the specific consumers' culture (McCluskey & Loureiro 2003).

In this study we focus on sustainable behaviours in two targeted contexts: France and Italy. The two countries show divergent sustainable pathways in terms of market, sustainability-related communication and socio-cultural characteristics of people (Table 1).

Sales (2011)*	- Organic : 3.756 mil/€ - Fair Trade : 315 mil/€	- Organic : 1.720 mil/€ - Fair Trade : 57.5 mil/€
Actors	- Big actors (corporations, large retail chains) - Strong alternative channels	- Growth of large retail chains but weak interest of corporations - Small alternative chains, located in the North of Italy
<b>Sustainable communication</b>	- More information: ads, Sustainable Development week	- Less information through media, institutions...
<b>Socio-cultural characteristics of people</b>	- Progressive individualization of the French society (Hoibian, 2011)	- Socialization persisting among the Italian consumers (Sassatelli, 2004)

\* Organic sales: FiBL- AMI- IFOAM 2013; Fair Trade sales : <http://agritrade.cta.int/fr>

**Table 1 Sustainable consumption environment in France and in Italy**

The two market contexts are different for the proposition (more environmental-related dimension in France vs social connotations in Italy), involved actors (French big actors vs Italian smaller chains) and, not least, for sale performances. Besides in France we observe several sorts of communication (commercial ads, media reportages, institutional campaigns), while in Italy the information set is less important. In other words, a progressive individualization characterizes the French society, whereas socialization is more persisting in everyday practices among the Italian consumers (Sassatelli, 2004). We will take the environmental and socio-cultural aspects into account to associate consumers' behaviours with the paradoxes of offer of sustainable food products.

## 2. Paradoxes of the sustainable food offer

The increasing marketing proposition of sustainable products is certainly important to allow individuals to adopt sustainable practices. However the evolution drives new questions (Pollan, 2007) and, sometimes, paradoxes.

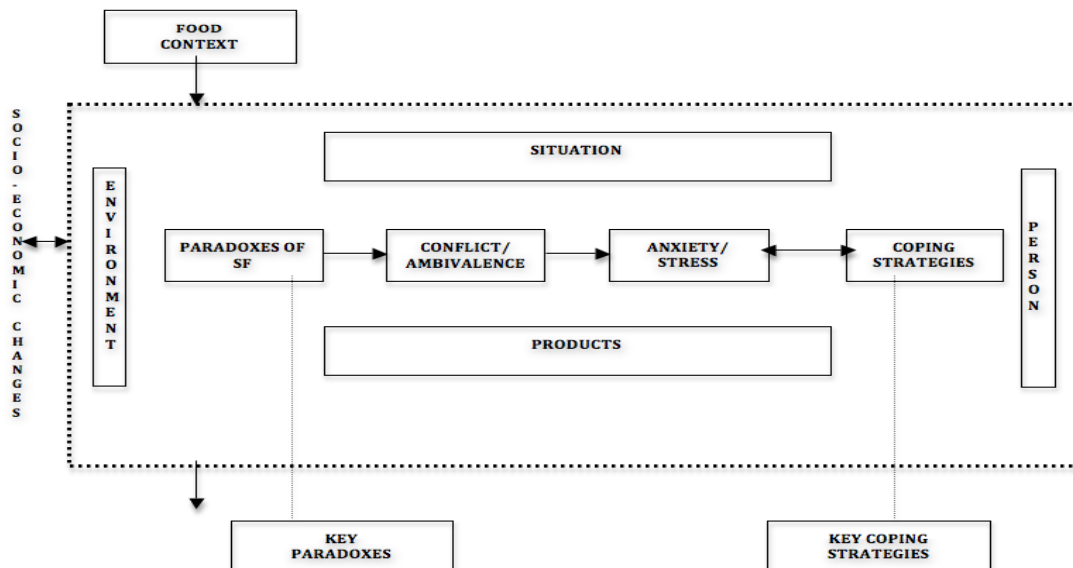
A paradox concerns the idea that there exist, simultaneously, two opposite conditions of the same situation (Quine, 1966)

In the sustainable food domain, paradoxes may emerge from three aspects:

1. Concept of sustainable product: a lack of consistence between the product and sustainable principles (i.e. a sustainable product which is “eco-friendly” in terms of production but not in terms of transport (carbon oxide gas)..);
2. Its environment: what is around a sustainable product, for example excessive packaging (a carton box with a plastic wrap);

- Actors offering these products: credibility of actors towards the sustainable issues, such as corporations/large retailers' chains coupled with green, ethical, fair trade goods.

For investigating the paradoxes of sustainable food products and, consequently, the behavioural responses, in terms of coping strategies (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), we adapted Mick and Fournier (1998)'s model to our specific research field. The linear structure shows, in entry, key paradoxes of Sustainable Food (SF) and, in exit, coping strategies (behaviours), whereas in the middle there is the cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1956) and the emergence of stress and anxiety (figure 1).



**Figure 1. Adaptation of Mick and Fournier (1998)'s model**

We propose 10 key paradoxes (Table 2):

- 8 paradoxes coming out of the model: control/chaos, freedom/dependence, new/obsolete, competence/incompetence, efficiency/inefficiency, satisfaction/new needs, integration/isolation, engagement/disengagement; and
- 2 paradoxes on the basis of the literature review: from competence/incompetence (capacity/incapacity to choose) we distinguished good conscience/bad conscience (to make a good choice for one sustainable dimension but not for the others); from engagement/disengagement (a passive form of attachment to convictions) we proposed conciliation/resistance (acting in the market or out of market).

KEY PARADOXES OF SF	
1. CONTROL/CHAOS	Perceived control but at the same time perceived chaos in front of the sustainable offer
2. FREEDOM/DEPENDANCE	Freedom to choose different sustainable products but at the same time dependence on market propositions
3. NEW/OBSOLETE	New aspects that enhance the sustainable offer but at the same time obsolete aspects that affect the sustainable offer
4. COMPETENCE/INCOMPETENCE	Capacity but at the same time incapacity to choose among different sustainable offers
5. EFFICIENCY/INEFFICIENCY	The sustainable offer makes everyday practices more efficient but at the same time does not help
6. SATISFACTION/NEW NEEDS	Sustainable offer helps fulfilling sustainability needs but at the same time creates new needs
7. INTEGRATION/ISOLATION	Perception to be inside a community but at the same time perception to be isolated
8. ENGAGEMENT/DISENGAGEMENT	A form of attachment to sustainable principles but at the same time a disinterest towards sustainable principles
9. GOOD/BAD CONSCIENCE (added)	<i>To make a "good" choice for one sustainable dimension but at the same time to make a "bad" choice for the other sustainable dimensions</i>
10. CONCILIATION/RESISTANCE (added)	<i>To act in the market but at the same time to act out of market</i>

**Table 2. Description of paradoxes**

Later, coping strategies were listed “before adopting sustainable choice” and “at the time of adopting sustainable choice” and in accordance with Lazarus and Folkman’s categories (1984): (1) coping strategies aiming to avoid cognitive dissonance and (2) coping strategies aiming to solve problems (research of information and confrontative strategies).

Before adopting sustainable choice: (1): ignore, refuse, delay (besides inertia, effort to get round dissonant perception); (2): test, heuristics (confrontation between diverse kinds of products, places, etc.), extended decision making (research of information, word of mouth), extended warranty (trust in producers, associations, labels).

At the time of adopting sustainable choice: (1): neglecting, abandoning, distancing; (2): partnering, accommodation, substitution, mastering, mixed practices (compromise, intermittence, change of sustainable choice).

We used this adapted model to explain perceived paradoxes of the sustainable food offer and coping strategies *via* the influence of the context conditions and culture in France and Italy.

### 3. Design of the study

A qualitative survey was carried out in two middle-sized towns and their surroundings, specifically Montpellier (France) and Piacenza (Italy). First, we conducted semi-structured interviews in the home of 84 non engaged consumers aged 22-68 years. Later, 18 engaged subjects (age from 27-60 years) adhering in AMAP and in GAS were interviewed. All respondents were recruited in accordance with socio-demographic aspects and met between May and December 2011. Interviews lasted 1.5 hours and much more when we approached couples. Simultaneously, we adopted an ethnographic perspective to know better the environmental settings and consumers' responses (Olivier de Sardan, 2008). Collected data were finally investigated by a content analysis regarding our research topics and by a continuous return to field. First, each interview was analysed; then a transversal analysis was conducted with all interviews.

### 4. Findings

Findings confirm the perception of key paradoxes and, further, the adoption of coping strategies. A multiple plot of strategies and paradoxes emerged from the analysis. Nonetheless, we wanted to overcome this initial approach to give some useful elements on SC. We observed that non engaged consumers are more affected by each national context and socio-cultural norms, whereas a supranational culture comes out of participants to local purchase networks.

#### 4.1. Non engaged consumers: The context influence

Although non engaged consumers adopted, mainly, mixed strategies in association with more concrete paradoxes (i.e. control/chaos,...), some differences derived from the way of approaching sustainable products, as well as acting in everyday consumption. Consequently we present the related strategies and paradoxes emerged from consumers' responses of the two countries. In addition, strategies are reported in the two moments: *before purchase* and *at the time of purchase*.

*Before purchase*: the control feeling is mentioned by French and Italian consumers, but through the adoption of specific strategies.

The French context is richer of information displayed on different places (i.e. outlets, market, alternative shops...). So, French consumers show the control feeling in relation to the presence of labels, as Constance says: "*There the information (AB label) is displayed on the market [...] I think displayed information as « a sustainable label » allows me to choose a product and I trust this label*" (46 years-old, environmental technician, 1 child).

In this case the context provides tools (such as labels), which help Constance to make a decision.

On the contrary, in the Italian context information is marginal and certifications are not so relevant. Consumers perceive control through other strategies, such as the "word of mouth communication". For example, respondents approach new forms of consumption thanks to friend suggestions. Sara: *a friend of mine convinced me [...] the meat.. we buy it from a local producer* (36 years-old, secretary, 2 children). Or they are willing to make additional efforts, for example to engage in the purchase of the products made by disadvantaged producers even



if there is “no guarantee”: Anna: « *I know the products of “Libera Terra<sup>1</sup>” (a solidarity offer) because a friend of my sister went and saw the Association. So I often buy these products [...] at Christmas.. [...] they are much more expensive [...] but they are made by people* » (31 years-old, elementary school teacher, pregnant).

In other situations people have a direct knowledge of retailers/producers, so they trust them as Jlenia says: “*I ask my (local) producer “do you eat this meat ?” Do you give it to your son ?” Yes .. it’s ok*” (45 years-old, high school teacher, 2 children).

The Italian consumers cope with a lack of supports from the context (i.e. information, certifications) through a net of social relations.

At the time of purchase: different paradoxes and practices emerge.

French consumers prefer acting as individuals in everyday life. Consequently, they rely only on themselves and perceive the competence feeling. Sabine: “*I was searching for a product but I didn’t find one close to me [...] I am searching on the internet, I will compare the price [...], where the product comes from [...] I select it and I receive it directly at home*” (34 years-old, homemaker, 2 children).

While, in the Italian discourses the human dimension is dominant. For this, participants act together, for example through sharing purchases: Sara: “*[...] so I go with my father and my neighbour, we know when the animal has been killed and we buy some pieces together*” . They feel to be more efficient.

#### **4.2.Engaged consumers: A supranational culture**

Engaged participants are more similar. Discourses shed light on more abstract paradoxes (satisfaction/new needs, integration/isolation, conciliation/resistance) and the same perception of business strategies from companies and large retail chains: Mario: “*all sustainable products of the supermarket [...] are under a business logic [...] all these are paradoxes*” (GAS, 41 years-old, computer technician, 2 children).

On the contrary local networks are seen as reliable. Caroline: “*the AMAP is the perfect network [...] because you know where the products come from [...] you know the producer [...] it’s an engagement of trust*” (AMAP, 35 years-old, homemaker, 1 child). At the same time: Mario describes the GAS as: “*the tools for a change [...] I go to the person [...] I see how she does [...] I know the producer I don’t abandon him*” .

Their choices respond to diverse needs: a closer production, a relationship with producers and, finally, the opportunity of meeting “*people adopting sustainable consumption*” like them. In everyday life we observe:

Before purchase: they show their engagement in association with the adoption of heuristic strategies: Etienne: “*For me it’s ideal to have a less-100-km-distanced producer that offers organic products. I look at the provenance and if there is an organic offer closer to me I buy these products* (51 years-old, professor, 3 children). At the same time Mario says: “*if there is a 100-km-distanced product and another from 5km here [...] we choose the one which is 5 km from here*”.

At the time of purchase: they choose alternative networks but they are also forced to integrate their purchases in other places (local market, an organic shop like “*BioCoop*” ..).

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<sup>1</sup> Libera Terra: a network of cooperatives working over the lands confiscated to Mafia.

When they make purchases at the supermarket chaos and resistance emerge. Caroline: “*when I enter the supermarket I have no control over the functioning [...]*” and Lucia: “*the supermarket displays a few aspects on sustainable products [...] I don’t know if a local product is really local [...] I don’t know if the boss pays his employees.. if they are exploited or not*” (37 years-old, employee, 2 children). Whereas, Mario shows resistance toward market: “*[...] (at the supermarket) you can find sustainable products but you participate in the market cycle*”. Supermarket is also perceived as a restrictive setting: “*There isn’t at the supermarket what is between the producer and me for me it’s a constraint, it doesn’t work*” (Gisèle, AMAP, 42 years-old, social assistant, 1 child).

In conclusion, engaged participants seem to be less affected by context conditions. On the contrary a common culture emerges from their practices and perceptions.

In synthesis, we report below coping strategies coupled with key paradoxes from non engaged and engaged consumers (Table 3).

	NEC (FRANCE)	NEC (ITALY)	EC (FRANCE & ITALY)
<b>PARADOXES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• control/chaos + competence/ incompetence</li> <li>• engagement/ disengagement + conciliation/resistance</li> <li>• competence/ incompetence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• control/chaos</li> <li>• engagement/ disengagement</li> <li>• efficiency/ inefficiency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• satisfaction/new needs + integration/ isolation + engagement/ disengagement</li> <li>• conciliation /resistance</li> </ul>
<b>COPING STRATEGIES (BEFORE PURCHASE)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• search for displayed certifications + trust in local products</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• trust in word of mouth communication + direct relation with producers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• heuristics + choice of amap/gas</li> </ul>
<b>COPING STRATEGIES (AT THE TIME OF PURCHASE)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possible abandon, rejection &amp; distance with the offer</li> <li>• individual purchases</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• partnering: ethical purchases</li> <li>• sharing purchases</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distancing with supermarkets</li> </ul>

**Table 3. Compared coping strategies and paradoxes**

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The study allows us to improve our knowledge of SC in the two countries and highlights different consumer profiles. Context conditions and cultures do have an influence more precisely, non engaged consumers act because of environmental conditions and the cultural background. As suggested by previous literature, our results confirm that attractive sustainable consumption options and, sufficient available information (quantity and quality) are prerequisites for consumers to act in a more sustainable way (Thøgersen, 2005; Schrader, Thøgersen, 2011). Excessive information and lacking communication are two facets of a broader problem. If Jackson (2005) proposed some concrete examples for promoting SC, our study highlights the attention needed to be paid to the national context. To understand engaged consumers, further research based on the Culture Consumer Theory and the recent

advances on culture production from individuals would be needed (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

As to methodological implications this study shows that the Mick and Fournier (1998)'s model, developed for new technologies, may be adapted to other domains such as Sustainable Food. Our findings point out a network of primary strategies and key paradoxes, as well as secondary links associated to the previous ones or complementary to them. There may be a cascade of more actions, (i.e. "word of mouth" + engagement in supporting an ethical offer without having a concrete guarantee) or integrated actions (*via* AMAP + other outlets).

In conclusion our suggestions are towards managerial aspects: 1) stressing the environmental dimension in the French offer, or the solidarity connotations in the Italian proposition; 2) reinforcing transparency along the agro-food chain to strengthen confidence; 3) reducing the specific communicative constraints and giving clear and exhaustive information; supporting the socio-cultural consumer practices (i.e. more possibilities of individuals purchases on the web in France vs more propositions of sharing purchases in Italy). Finally, for marketing actors it would be important to acknowledge the critical elements perceived by engaged consumers to reduce these constraints. On the other hand we are conscious of the limits of this qualitative study. To be able to draw further conclusions concerning sustainability promotion on a national level, further research is needed.

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