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From sustainable consumption to sustainable practices

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From sustainable consumption to sustainable practices

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Abstract

This study examines the sustainable practices adopted by private individuals. Ten households observation, twenty-two face-to-face interviews and three hundreds questionnaires highlight a number of daily practices combining sustainability-oriented and individualistic motivations. Three spheres of sustainable practices (purchases, habits and share/transmission) three patterns (occasional adoption, integration and compensation) and different consumer clusters appear. Recommendations for sustainable marketing are provided.

Keywords

Sustainable practices, sustainable consumption, practice theory

De la consommation durable aux pratiques durables

Résumé

Cet article étudie les pratiques durables adoptées quotidiennement par les individus. L'observation de 10 ménages, 22 interviews en face-à-face et 300 questionnaires permettent de comprendre la diversité des pratiques durables des individus oscillant entre motivations tournées vers le développement durable et tournées vers des intérêts plus personnels. Trois sphères de pratiques durables (achats, usages et transmission), trois régimes de pratiques (adoption ponctuelle, intégration et compensation) ainsi que différentes classes d'individus identifiées selon leurs pratiques motivées apparaissent. Cet article se termine par des recommandations pour le marketing durable.

Mots-clés

Pratiques durables, consommation durable, théorie des pratiques

JEL: D1, M31, Q01

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In 2012, familiarity with the concept of sustainable development (SD) and sustainable consumption is improving. The 1994 Oslo Symposium on Sustainable Consumption defined it as “the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimising the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations”¹. There is not one definition in the academic literature but several, ranging from the purchase of “green”, organic or Fair Trade products to anti-consumption (Banbury *et al.*, 2012). However, few academic studies concern the individual, discreet and non-purchase practices (Webb *et al.*, 2008). The aim of this study is to understand the interaction between commitment through the purchase of sustainable products and commitment through other sustainable practices. The first section will be devoted to the literature related to sustainable consumption. In the second section we present the methodology (a qualitative and quantitative study), while in the third section we examine the different types of sustainable practices and individuals observed according to their practices.

1. The Different Sustainable Consumption Practices

1.1. Commitment to SD through the purchase of sustainable products

In a system founded on individual freedom and freedom of consumption, some consumers opt to take on the task of civic vigilance in the sphere of their consumption (Micheletti *et al.*, 2004). In this context, the choice of a product is not seen as only a response to a personal need but also as a stance in favour of a fairer society and a fairer market, in particular from an environmental and social standpoint. Traditionally, the concept of socially responsible consumption (SRC) has been used in the field of marketing to designate this type of purchasing practice. The concept of SRC has gradually been extended to include recycling practices and the rejection of products which are harmful to the environment (Webb *et al.*, 2008).

There already is an extensive body of research on sustainable food choice (de Boer *et al.*, 2007) and organic food consumption (Aertsens *et al.*, 2009 ; Hughner *et al.*, 2007). Several of these studies identify clusters of sustainable consumers based on values (Krystallis *et al.*,

¹ <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org>

2008) consumption styles (Schäfer, Jaeger-Erben, and dos Santos, 2011) or on behaviors (Gilg, Barr and Ford, 2005). Nevertheless, no study so far aimed to characterize purchase and non-purchase behaviors as well as understand the underlying motivations of consumers.

Besides we continue to observe the difficulty encountered by academic studies in recording the diversity of consumer actions and understanding more tangible change in our daily practices, such as a reduction in consumption or the decision not to buy (Peattie and Peattie, 2009).

1.2. A wider perspective of the commitment to SD : the visible and invisible practices.

Non-purchase practices have been studied adopting different perspectives such as consumer resistance (Kates and Belk, 2001), voluntary simplicity (Shaw and Newholm, 2002) or anti-consumption (Black and Cherrier, 2010). But most of them have attached considerable importance to the visible commitment of consumers by studying boycotts (Friedmann, 1991), political positioning or, anti-advertising movements. Studies of more regular, discreet and imperceptible means of commitment are still few and far between. In this study we adopt a practice theory perspective, to examine both what people do (their actions), and what they say (their representations) taking into account the dual factual and discursive nature of practices. This notion enables us to see beyond the simple decision of purchase and to consider all the practices occurring before, after and around the use of the product. These practices are related to personal experience but are also anchored in social attitudes (Warde, 2005); they can be intentionally sustainable or not, collective or individual.

While studies on behaviours focus on individuals, the practice perspective focuses on the individual and social components of practices: choice but also access to resources (economic, social, cultural), norms of social interaction, as well as infrastructures and institutional organisation that constrain individual autonomy (Spurling *et al.*, 2013). Adopting a practice perspective for this study re-frames the question from “who are the sustainable consumers?” to “what are the sustainable practices?”

More precisely three questions form the framework of our work: Which sustainable practices do individuals adopt and why? How are purchase and non-purchase practices combined in everyday life? Can we characterise individuals according to their purchases and other sustainable practices and the motivations underlying their practices?

2. Methodology

The study took place in France and is based on a qualitative phase and a quantitative phase. During the qualitative phase, 22 individuals were interviewed in person. Each person had to recount a “typical day” in detail from “I get up in the morning” to “I go to bed at night”. The practices were the basis unit of the study. By using prompts, we focused on the practices and noted the practices previously identified as being “sustainable”². At the end, we asked more specific questions concerning respondents’ own notion of SD. The answers to these questions, compared to the spontaneous description of the practices when recounting a typical day, reveal the reflexivity of individuals in relation to their practices and indicate if they perceive them as “sustainable”. In addition, we observed the daily life of 10 other households during a week-end³. These observations revealed some practices that the interviews were not able to reveal. The transcription of the interviews and observations constitutes our qualitative database. The data analysis has been conducted in two phases. First we looked at each interview and observation transcript and looked for indicators of categories. Categories were then compared, selected and collapsed into broader thematic groups for the analysis.

Using a list of 70 practices identified as being sustainable in the qualitative phase, we retained 40 practices in order to create a questionnaire⁴, answered by 308 people in the train between different French areas⁵. For each of the 40 practices, we asked each person 3 questions: “do you do this?” If yes, “how often” (on a 4 point scale of 0-“never” to 3-“almost always” to make the respondent task easier) and “what are your reasons for doing it?” (2 answers possible). We ensured that we distinguished practices adopted for reasons relating to SD (i.e. intentionally sustainable, such as “environment”) from sustainable practices implemented for other reasons (i.e. not intentionally sustainable such as taste, convenience). The questionnaire ended with a scale measuring the declared awareness of environmental, social and economic concerns and a series of socio-demographic characteristics questions. In order to study and compare all the practices of the individuals interviewed, we transformed these variables into scores for each practice. Per individual, there are as many scores as there are practices cited,

² List drawn up on the basis of a bibliographical review (eco-civic works, website of the French Ministry of the Environment and Sustainable Development, media recommendations)

³ For the sample description of interviewed and observed individuals, see appendix 1.

⁴ Examples of practices for the purchase sphere: Purchase of organic products (7 products tested) ; for the habits sphere : Use of green detergents ; for the transmission sphere : Signing petitions

⁵ For the sample description, see appendix 1

ranging from 0 to 3 according to the motivations (0 for not intentionally sustainable motivation; 1 for intentionally sustainable motivation) and frequency (0 to 3) with which the practice is implemented. For example, if a consumer declares buying always organic eggs for taste, the “motivated score” of the practice is 0 (frequency 3, motivation 0, score: $3*0=0$). If he declares buying most of the time organic eggs for environment, the “motivated score” of the practice is 2 (frequency 2, motivation 1, score: $2*1=2$).

3. Results

3.1. Broader identification of sustainable practices: *three spheres of practices*

The analysis of the qualitative data reveals three spheres of practices which intersect and enhance each other.

a) *The sphere of purchases* includes all the practices involved in choosing a product when shopping. Within this sphere, we distinguish: **purchases of labelled products, purchases of products considered to be sustainable, even though they are not labelled** (“*buy fruit and vegetables in season*” (R)⁶, “*local products*” (Q)); and **non-purchase or boycotting practices** (“*I never buy disposable wipes*”(R)”, “*I never buy bleach*” (R)). For certain individuals, the “sustainable” labels are reference points for purchasing decisions but others, show a form of resistance to purchase. “*When I see the Max Havelaar label, I don’t buy the product. I don’t believe in it! [...] Honestly, we are not fooled, at least I’m not!*” (woman, 25, student, single). This resistance does not for all that mean a rejection of the principles of SD. Most interviewees adhere to the SD project, but show their commitment by purchasing non-labelled products (local or seasonal products) or by other practices.

b) *The sphere of habits* appears as the favoured means of action in favour of SD. These numerous practices belong to different areas of daily life: accommodation, transport, work, leisure, household chores, etc. These “small gestures”, **learned, invented or renewed are practices reducing the use of pollutant products, energy reduction practices** (“*I always switch the light off*” (Q)), **“do it yourself” practices** (“*We grow our own vegetables*” (R) and **giving or swapping practices**. The individuals claim to measure the impact of their gestures more directly and perceive them as being more effective.

⁶ R : Recount of typical day, Q : answer to a question

c) *The sphere of transmission/sharing* corresponds to expressing ethical concerns in front of an audience, unlike the two previous spheres. Two types of transmission can be observed: Silent transmission practices are very common among the interviewees and interact closely with the spheres of purchasing and habits. The second type of transmission relies on more explicit discourse and actions (e. g. involvement in an environmental association). These alternative, more militant forms of resistance are easy to identify and observe.

3.2. How are the three spheres of sustainable practices combined in everyday life?

Identifying 3 patterns of sustainable practices

The qualitative data and the detailed analysis of the frequency, diversity and intentionality of the practices in the quantitative phase allowed us to identify 3 patterns of adoption.

a) *Occasional adoption*: faced with a particular situation (advertising, promotion of ethical products), the individual adopts a sustainable practice in a given context (a specific place or moment) without subsequently incorporating it into everyday life. This individual is motivated by curiosity, the desire to try new experiences, a transient feeling of environmental or social responsibility. "*Last time I was on holiday at my parents' home in Morbihan. I had to go and buy some bread. It was a fine day, no rain for once... Car? Bike? Bike? Car? I said to myself, "go on, take your bike, it will be your contribution to the environment!"*" (man, 35, SNCF operative, in couple, 1 child, Q). This "intermittence" can be linked to a form of learning new behaviour, of failure, adjustment and stabilisation which occurs through experiencing the principles of sustainability.

b) *Integration*: the individuals incorporate the principles of sustainability into every aspect of their life (purchasing, household habits and transmission) and at every moment of their daily routine until they adopt "sustainable lifestyles". "*Once we commit to something... it becomes difficult to buy coke or mangos which have been transported by plane, to fill the pool every summer. You have to be consistent...*" (woman, 45, civil servant, in a couple with children, Q). Whether expressed or silent, their social and environmental concerns serve as reference points for their purchasing decisions, for using resources or for collective mobilisation.

c) *Compensation*: individuals can compensate for non-sustainable practices by other practices considered to be sustainable. They imagine that they are balancing the impact they have on their environment. This compensation mechanism essentially brings the practice of purchasing labelled products "*I buy organic eggs and then sometimes I buy something which isn't organic... but I tell myself that it evens out.*" (woman, 40, professor of art history, in a couple with

children, Q). We must nevertheless exercise caution in understanding this notion. Compensation could appear in the discourse as an *a posteriori* justification for non-sustainable and socially undesirable acts which are sometimes difficult to admit to.

3.3. Which sustainable practices form the framework for the everyday life of individuals?

We conducted a principal component analysis based on the scores for each practice (related to SD: environmental, social and more egocentric: economic, taste, convenience). The factor analysis reveals five components (53.4% of variance explained) : Green purchasing practices adopted for environmental motivations (27.3%), Green purchasing practices for taste and safety (10.4%), Fair Trade purchasing practices to support small-scale producers and fairer international trade (6.1%), Fair Trade purchasing practices for good taste and authenticity (5.1%), Daily habits adopted for both environmental and economic concerns (4.5%).

3.4. Can we characterise individuals according to their purchases and their sustainable habits? A *k*-means clustering

A *k*-means clustering resulted in 5 clusters characterized by the socio-demographic variables, the level of concern (social, environmental and economic) and the scores for the different practices. Among the individual characteristics, only the level of education and the levels of social and environmental concerns do significantly characterise the clusters.

Cluster 1: Uninvolved (52% of the sample), feel less concerned than the average person in the sample by environmental and social questions. They do not therefore show commitment to SD either through their purchases or their habits. They do not, for all that, reject sustainable practices and may adopt such practices occasionally in their daily life. This group includes individuals with a level of education below the average for the sample and represents the vast majority.

Cluster 2: Buyers of Fair Trade products for quality and taste and, committed to transmission practices (5%). Two motivations of Fair Trade purchases guide the decision of this group: the first, which weighs heaviest on their choice, is the desire for a quality product with a better taste and greater authenticity; the second, less dominant, motivation is the desire to purchase an “ethical” product guaranteeing Fair Trade between the North and the South. This group can be identified by an average level of education (2 or 3 years of further education) and a high

level of environmental, social and economic concerns. Their commitment is primarily private and discreet in nature, including donations, although there is also a collective dimension to their involvement through the signing of petitions.

Cluster 3: Individuals committed through non-purchase practices (23%) adopt environmentally-friendly habits, do not purchase, or only very rarely, organic and fair trade products. They do not differ from other groups in their socio-demographic characteristics. By combining collective interests (environmental) and private interests (economic), they favour action which can be seen directly in their daily life by limiting their consumption of water, electricity or oil.

Cluster 4: Individuals committed through transmission practices and Fair Trade products (12%) purchase labelled ethical products for a wide variety of reasons: they buy Fair Trade products for altruistic reasons (social justice) and organic products for personal reasons (taste and health). Although they demonstrate above-average environmental concerns compared to the sample as a whole, these people do not reflect these concerns either by purchasing organic products or adopting environmentally-friendly practices in everyday life. However, they do participate by other means such as environmental or social demonstrations and by signing petitions.

Cluster 5: Individuals committed through organic products purchase and sustainable practices (8%) adopt the widest range of sustainable practices in their daily life : by combining collective and private interests, they show their commitment by purchasing organic and Fair Trade products while also adopting collective transmission practices (demonstrations, signing petitions). These practices are linked to a high level of concern for social and environmental issues. The individuals in this group have a level of education higher than the average for the sample as a whole (5 years or more of further education).

Table 1 Main results

Phases	Results
Qualitative Phase	3 spheres of sustainable practices: purchases, non-purchase practices and transmission.
Qualitative and quantitative phase	<u>3 patterns :</u> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Occasional adoption: Adopting sustainable practices in a given context without subsequently incorporating it into everyday life 2. Integration: Incorporating principles of sustainability into every aspect and at every moment of their daily life until they adopt ‘sustainable lifestyles’ 3. Compensation: Compensating non-sustainable practices by other practices considered to be sustainable.
Quantitative phase : 5 consumer clusters	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Uninvolved (52% of the sample) 2. Buyers of Fair Trade products for quality and taste and committed to transmission practices (5%) 3. Individuals committed through non-purchase practices (23%) 4. Individuals committed through transmission practices and Fair Trade products (12%) 5. Individuals committed through organic products purchase and sustainable practices (8%)

4. Discussion and Conclusion

As mentioned before, there already is an extensive body of research on sustainable food choice but focusing on purchase and other behaviours. This study allowed us to identify three spheres of sustainable practices: purchases, habits and share/transmission. The transmission sphere has to be taken into account for sustainability policy interventions, since individuals committed to transmission practices may be opinion leaders towards sustainability.

We also identified three patterns concerning sustainability (occasional adoption, integration and compensation) contributing to characterize the different consumer clusters that appear. For example, in this study consumers in segments 2 and 4 buy Fair trade products for different reasons: in segment 2, Fair trade consumption is situated in the realm of ‘occasional adoption’: consumers adopt it in a particular context without incorporating it into their everyday life. For consumers in segment 4, fair trade consumption is more linked to a social

commitment⁷. Hence, Fair Trade associations need to communicate both on personal (taste) and social (producers) dimensions.

Contrary to the notion that sustainability will be only conducted by altruism and adopted by a responsible consumer who sacrificed his personal pleasure, our findings show the key role of self-interested motivations for individuals. Different groups of consumers may have similar consumption purchases or habits while having different values and pursuing different goals. These results confirm and broaden previous results of studies related to specific behaviours such as organic food consumption (e; g. Hughner et al., 2007 ; Hamzaoui et al., 2012 ; Pino et al., 2012) or eco-friendly products, highlighting the complexity of motivations, concerns and the lack of direct link with sustainable behaviours. For example Royne et al. (2011) show that only one dimension of environmental concern (concern for food waste) significantly influences consumers' willingness to pay for eco-friendly products. Henceforth, as previously recommended by Royne et al. (2011) for eco-friendly products or Pino et al. (2012) for organic food, regulatory bodies or consumer associations interested in supporting sustainable development should not deny the complexity of motivations but tailor their communication campaign according to this variety of consumers' motivations. A communication campaign only based on environmental and social concerns, could discourage the consumer by suggesting that sustainable life requires sacrificing personal pleasure (here, clusters 1 and 2). In addition to highlighting the altruistic concerns, the companies should also focus on taste, safety, health to promote a sustainable but also a desirable development. More, communicating high efforts when requesting consumer sustainable actions could backfire (White *et al.*, 2012) and lead to a state of contestation of sustainability, from scepticism to resistance.

Adopting a practice theory perspective allows a better comprehension of sustainable practices by a concurrent coverage of the individual and social level. This study did not focus on the individual attitudes but the practices situated in time and space and co-constructed with the structure (laws, rules, infrastructures...) (Giddens, 1984) and the habits and routines anchored

⁷ Herein lies the twofold problem faced by Fair Trade as highlighted by Gurviez and Sirieix (2013): "In its activist dimension, it involves and mobilizes consumers who find their identity by belonging to a network, but comes up against limited diffusion In its solidarity consumption dimension, making Fair Trade available in mass retail outlets brings it into competition with national or distributor brands which have a more powerful discourse of persuasion, and so it is once again marginalized" (Gurviez and Sirieix, 2013).

in the daily life. Therefore, this study emphasizes the difference between a commitment by purchase and a commitment by uses and the conceptual difference between anti-consumption and environmentally friendly consumption by purchase (Black and Cherrier, 2010). Most of the respondents commonly do not purchase sustainable products but would rather reject, reuse or reduce.

This work demonstrates certain limitations. First, the two phases call on convenient samples. Second, even if we endeavoured to vary the methods used in the qualitative analysis (interviews, observations), extending the observation phase and adopting ethno-marketing methods would enable us to observe potential variations in practices at different times in the individuals' lives (at work, on holiday, etc.). Finally, future research could focus on the question of consumer reflexivity which is crucial to understanding this possibility for change (Johnston and Szabo, 2011). For the companies and public policy, it is therefore essential that future studies examine the capacity of consumers to appraise their daily practices and to change them. Similarly, we might examine our own practices as researchers by using introspective methods which might provide innovative results (Banbury *et al.*, 2012)

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Appendix 1 : Samples Compositions

Methods	Samples description
22 Interviews	From 26 to 71 years old, 15 women and 7 men, different experiences with sustainable practices or not (sustainable purchases, waste sorting, travel by bike, etc.) and involvement or not in environmental or political associations
10 one week-end Observations	From 5 to 75 years old, 4 couples, 3 households with children, 3 singles, 6 have a postgraduate education, different experiences with sustainable practices or not
308 questionnaires	68% are women, the average of the standard of living is 25680 euros/year, 68 % have a postgraduate education; response rate : 89%.