

Chinese Business Students in France and “Green” Responsible Consumption

Carlos RABASSO and Javier RABASSO,

Abstract—The objective of this paper is to study Responsible Consumption (RC) behavior and practices in business students from China and Hong Kong studying in France. This research investigates young consumers’ Responsible Consumption (RC) pattern according to their Chinese nationality. A qualitative methodology using semi-directive interviews with 70 international young people aged 23-26 was conducted. Four themes emerged from the analysis. They refer to (1) Young consumers’ description of their host country model of consumption, (2) their perception of responsible consumption and the way they think RC can be improved (3) within their countries and (4) around the world. Results underlined similarities between consumers from a same country towards responsible consumption. The results describe student’s consumption models in their host country, their perception of RC, the way they think RC could be improved within their country and in the world. The research highlights a model of patterns of responsible consumption across cultures due to a global consumer class that has access to international brands, goods and services. The purpose of our study is to show how responsible consumption attitudes are emerging in younger generations. For our paper the international exchange Chinese students of the Rouen Business School in France have participated in a research project concerned about RC.

Index Terms—Responsible consumption, global consumer, business students, cross-cultural consumption patterns.

I. INTRODUCTION

Our present study will try to put forward the emergence of a new environment where the “millennials” are becoming responsible consumers whereas the common practices of our financial and business world have been totally irresponsible in the last few years. The “millennials” like to work for responsible companies that do something for the community (Beirne, 2008). Responsible Consumption is part of a larger systemic conceptual network which leads to sustainable development and, in a holistic scale, to global responsibility and green management. Responsible consumption in a “transcultural” Global Environment is a new topic which enlarges the issue of responsible actions among people belonging to an international consumer class. The global consumer class totalled some 1.7 billion people –more than a quarter of the world

population in 2002 (Gardner, Assadourian and Sarin, 2004). Today, in 2011, the consumer class surpasses 2 billion people and the population in developing countries is moving towards this trans-territorial identity. New consumer thinking about consumption can shift present power alliances, question the legitimacy of governments and speed up the process of change in corporations (Micheletti and Stolle, 2007).

II. GREEN MARKETING AND THE RESPONSIBLE CONSUMER

Green marketing has been developed with regards to the evolution of consumers’ needs. The post-war economic boom led to a massive consumption society where “having” is “being”. This means that overconsumption is for some consumers a way to show his/her identity. However, nowadays, consumers want to give a sense to their consumption: they develop more responsibility. A new consumer appeared, called “consumer-actor”, who is emancipated from products and brands and from imposed life style that the market created for him/her (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2011). Consumer is autonomous in his/her choices and he/she is aware that his/her product and service purchases can contribute to consumption society regulation. Green marketing redefines prosperity as a higher quality of life where individuals, communities and governments focus more on a collective responsible vision towards the environment (Kilbourne, 1998; Fisk, 1998). If a society focused on well-being might strive to minimise the consumption required to support a dignified and satisfying life (Gardner and Assadourian, 2004), the new responsible consumption habits of youth could set the pace for a better global village.

A socially responsible consumer can be defined as a person who purchases products and services which he or she perceives as having a positive (or a negative) impact on the environment and uses her/his purchasing power to express current concerns. Responsible consumption is an answer to over-consumption that harms sustainable development and humans’ dignity. Within this framework, green marketing emerged in response to individuals needs for a responsible consumption. Green marketing is characterised by “*design and production that is, in some sense, environmentally sensitive and/or responsible to the environment interests and concerns of consumers and other interest groups*” (Walker and Hanson, 1998, p. 623). Responsible consumers buy products and services that are ethical, mainly without the exploitation of animals, human dignity and, with no harm to the natural environment. For instance, a responsible consumer will choose fair-trade coffee that guarantees fair price and helps to improve the lives of farmer instead of coffee coming from multinational firms.

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Carlos RABASSO is with Department of Culture, Language & Society Rouen Business School, crb@rouenbs.fr

Javier RABASSO is with the Department of Culture, Language & Society, Rouen Business School, jrb@rouenbs.fr

There is a growing concern about Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Global Responsible issues as a result of the implementation and understanding of the 10 basic principles of the United Nations Global Compact. In parallel, a new global consumer class appeared like a collective and a responsible “digital citizenship” (Vreese, 2007). This global class is the XXIst century privileged elite that has various levels of wealth, whose members are users of televisions, telephones, and Internet, along with the culture and ideas that these products transmit. The global consumer class totalled some 1.7 billion people – more than a quarter of the world population in 2002 (Gardner and Assadourian, 2004). Today, the consumer class surpasses 2 billion people and developing countries are increasing their population towards this trans-territorial identity. New consumers thinking about consumption can shift present power alliances, question the legitimacy of governments and speed up the process of change in corporations (Micheletti and Stolle, 2007).

The financial crisis in 2008 set a bad example for a global responsible behaviour. As a result many people are reconsidering their consumption models and are consciously integrating RC into their buying behaviour (Chan & Lau, 2004). This is particularly true for young consumers. Today, responsible Consumption (RC) is one of the major topics related to sustainable development and the environment. Today, in our competitive world all types of organisations are aware of the importance of developing patterns of responsible behaviour for their managers and employees. Responsible management provides companies with the opportunity to create a collective vision with a new consciousness in a society characterised by less material resources, limited growth and an increasing aging population. In the early 1980s scientists (Bateson, 1979; Capra, 1982; Maturana, 1987) anticipated the importance of general systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1968) for an emerging global environment. Transportation, food, household needs, climate change, biodiversity, ecosystems, water, population, health, pollution, governance, security, biotechnology, the discovery of new sources of energy and sustainable branding practices are closely related to the sustainable use/consumption of goods and services (Ottomann, 2011). At the same time, from the early 1990s, marketing researchers stressed the need for a “Green Marketing” complementary to the traditional one as sustainable development is becoming an important issue in marketing strategies (Prothero, 1990, 1998; Kilbourne, 1998; Fisk, 1998; Shankar and Fitchett, 1998; Donagh, 1998).

The “McDonaldization of Society” (Ritzer, 1998), the “fast-food nation” (Schlosser, 2001), the increase of shopping mall centres, the globalised practices of young peoples’ consumption make it difficult for new generations to develop a critical alternative thinking towards irresponsible consumption environment practices (Aries, 2006). Young consumers are usually more oriented to the present and less to issues related to the long term or the future (e.g. sustainable development). It can be interesting to focus on this generation to see how young people behave towards responsible consumption.

If consumption is becoming the “new morality of our world” (Baudrillard, 1970), one interesting way to show

new generations’ relationships between “responsible happiness” and their “new branded world” is to develop a universal sustainable consciousness (Klein, 2001). Within this framework, Zerzan (2002) asked: is “property damage” a way to question our consumer habits? “Green marketing” (Prothero, 1990; 1998) - as a response to individuals’ need for responsibility while consuming - can provide responses. Today, consumers are considered as global citizens living in a global village with global rights (McLuhan, 1962). However, it seems that responsible consumption is not global yet.

Responsible Consumption is part of a larger systemic conceptual network which leads to sustainable development and, at a holistic scale, to global responsibility and green management. Responsible consumption in a “transcultural” Global Environment is a new topic which widens the issue of responsible actions among people belonging to an international consumer class which is developing a collective consciousness about a sustainable world. At the same time “Green Marketing” has to be integrated into the overall marketing approach: this means adapting marketing’s objectives and strategies in order to contribute to a sustainable society (Prothero, 1990, 1998; Kilbourne, 1998). The “millennials” or the “GenY”, the “Net Generation” (Thomson and Laing, 2003), the “iGeneration”, the “9/11 Generation”) like to work for responsible companies that do something for the community (Beirne, 2008).

Nevertheless, there is a research gap in the literature about young consumers’ responses towards responsible consumption. The interesting aspect of this research is the fact that it focuses at the same time on young consumers and on cross-cultural comparisons. This study is one of the first to investigate both aspects at the same time.

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In China there are more than 250 million people between the ages of 15 and 29 (China Statistical Yearbook, 2007). This young generation enjoys a staggering amount of purchasing power. Many of these young consumers are treated as “little emperors” (McNeal and Yeh, 1997) by their parents and grandparents as they grew up in a single child family policy country. If the Chinese X-Generation is easily influenced by advertising, fashion trends and brand symbolism (Zhang and Shavitt, 2003), there is an emerging group of young consumers concerned about responsible consumption and the environment (with local brands slowly taking over international brands). This new generation of younger consumers is forging transnational bonds of empathy and share interest to transform political alignments (Watson, 2000). The special issue of the journal *Young Consumers*, “The Chinese Little Emperors: marketing to Chinese young consumers”, published in 2009 by Cheng Lu Wang, tackled some of the issues we will be highlighting about Chinese young consumers and global responsibility. We will be going further in some of the findings about the behavior and attitudes of this new generation.

The consumption behavior of our students takes into account their responsible consumption patterns in their

country of origin and in their new international environment. The notion of Global Responsibility places the center of our enquiry in business educational institutions around the world and their physical encounter in Rouen Business School. In the future our business students will be corporate managers and entrepreneurs with a different perception of the world in relation to former generations. There is a growing concern about CSR and Global Responsible issues as a result of the implementation and understanding of the 10 basic principles of the United Nations Global Compact further developed in our educational business institutions as the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME). The goal of this study is to raise global consciousness which will contribute to the reduction of bad consumer practices, giving special attention to consumer decisions that limit environmental damage. Responsible consumption will be the answer for a good responsible behavior. For this purpose we study the daily student actions towards RC.

IV. METHODOLOGY

In relation to business students from other countries, the criteria we consider for the students of China and Hong Kong are the following: 1. High level of awareness for RC habits. 2. Low level of awareness for RC. 3. Developed countries. 4. Developing countries. 5. High level of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in their organizations (corporations, public and educational institutions, NGO's). 6. Low level of CSR in their organizations. 7. High level of consumption. 8. Low level of consumption. In China the criteria we have selected are 2, 4, 6, 7 and 8. In Hong Kong the criteria are 2, 3, 6 and 7. Hong Kong represents a model of a hybrid society with Western and Eastern values. 40 students from mainland China and 30 from Hong Kong were asked to talk in an interview about their own experience with responsible consumption behavior within their host country. The questions were related to (1) their consumption models in their country; (2) their beliefs about their own regarding responsible consumption; (3) The manner they think RC can be improved in their country; (4) and how RC can be improved in the world. We started our research taking into account the fact that the emerging global consumer class did not have a responsible behavior at the beginning of this new "class identity" (CwR or Consumer without Responsibility, question 1). Afterwards we considered the appearance of Responsible Behavior in the personal sphere of the individual in the last 10 years which coincides with the United Nations Global Compact principles (CWR, Consumption with Responsibility, questions 2; CWR Local, question 3; and CWR Global, question 4). The total interview had to be between 30 to 40 minutes (around 2000 words in the written transcription). Content analysis was taken from a total of 70 interviews. Data were analyzed by the researchers in a two steps. First, each researcher made his own analysis of all the respondents' answers and transcriptions. Second, the three material packages from each researcher were compared to check interpretation convergence. When differences were identified, the

transcribed interviews were read another time by the two authors together to find similar explanations and understanding. Through these two step analysis, we were able to reduce results' subjectivity. The age of the students was between 20 and 25. The majority of them were from a high social class. They were international exchange students doing a Masters Degree in Management in their home university. The students selected took several courses related to Global Responsibility: 1. "Critical thinking in Global Environments", and 2. "Cross Cultural Issues and Responsible Leadership".

V. RESULTS

They are related to (1) student's consumption model at home, (2) perception of one's consumption responsiveness, (3) the way of improving CR in host country and (4) in the world.

1) Consumption model: In mainland China, consumption models of elders and youngsters are different. Elders are used to saving money, they are very thrifty. Youngsters are very fortunate because they were born and live in peace time and the economy is improving their living standards. However, business students try not to consume more than their income because debt is seen as dangerous. In China globalization is slowly changing people's consumption models by consuming more and more products. In contrast, Hong-Kong is under heavy influence of globalization due to its free-trade policy and economic conditions. In Hong-Kong business students are especially fond of Japanese culture, with a huge demand for comics, clothing, accessories and video games. Regarding consumption, business students follow current trends (ex: fashion, technology): They do shopping at the beginning of each season to look fashionable. Business students in Hong-Kong will change their cell phone every three to four months. Technology consumption is a way of showing one's socioeconomic status.

2) Individual responsible consumption: If we compare Chinese (mainland) and Hong-Kong students, we noticed that in the two cases little attention is given to environmental issues while consuming products. In Hong-Kong, students use a lot of products and very regularly in order to follow fashion trends.

3) Improvement of Responsible Consumption in host country: In mainland China; students suggested two main methods aimed at making people consume more responsibly. One, defined as a moderate method, is related to green education, information and responsible advertisement to sensitize people for responsible consumption habits. The other method, the stringent one, would be to impose taxes and repressive measures in order to force people to comply with responsible consumption. The role of governments is crucial for the implementation of practical policies and the granting of extra funds to develop responsible consumption awareness among companies and consumers. The other suggestions are car pooling, the production of hybrid cars, the reduction of CO2 emission as well as environmental and consumption laws. Finally, in terms of policies, implementing environmental taxes would be a good way for

improving responsible consumption. Students think that governments should consider the applicability of Western Consumption Models in their country. In Hong Kong, students give a lot of importance to the role played by governments also. Students believe that Hong Kong is an irresponsible shopping paradise characterized by overconsumption where people focus on secondary needs rather than priorities (Payne, 2010). Furthermore, schools and parents need to cooperate to start teaching the values of responsible consumption among children at a very young age.

4) Improvement of Responsible Consumption in the world: For mainland Chinese students, governments and international organizations like the UN should create certain regulations to guarantee RC. The financial crisis in 2008 gave a bad example for a global responsible behavior. As a result many people are reconsidering their consumption models and consciousness (Chan & Lau, 2004). In developing countries RC requires a level of development which allows citizens to consume goods in a different way, taking into account the important role of the environment. NGO's and local organizations can help for the creation of global awareness about RC. Rethinking and changing consumption practices could encourage a new mindset (use of cash money and second hand goods, traditional ways of cooking, the use of new technologies like i-pad to read e-books for not using paper, digital global platforms like "facebook" participating in the creation of global awareness and so on). Hong Kong students blame the United States for its overconsumption behavior, setting a bad example as a world role model, with a double discourse about global and responsible practices. Increasing the price of certain goods could be also an alternative for consuming less. Governments should penalize irresponsible or greedy consumers (the accumulation of wealth has been severely punished years ago by the Chinese government and today is still in practice by Cuban communist authorities). The reduction of fish in their daily diet and less energy consumption is other important aspects for the preservation of the environment.

VI. DISCUSSION:

After a close study of the contributions given by our international business students, we can observe an increasing tension between a global consumption model that appeared in the last twenty years and different traditional and local models of consumption, many of them much closer to responsible consumption and social responsibility. RC encourages cultural awareness and local identities reemerge as alternative models in our global environment (Castells, 2010). Another important aspect is the role of education in creating new commitments towards RC. Business schools have to increase their courses on global responsibility, green management (McDonagh and Prothero, 1997) and critical marketing (Shankar, 2009). Students associations are progressively participating actively in this subject, bringing a new consciousness into the field. At the same time, family habits and behaviors serve as point of reference for many of our students. Are younger generations

contributing to create better attitudes towards RC in their families and social communities?

Our study is well aware of the importance of this new generation of consumers for the reshaping of a New World Order where consumption and citizenship will not go in the same direction unless something is done to create global awareness about social responsibility. The Nation-State identities have been replaced by branding and transnational identities that find in our branded world new cultural referents and symbolic values (Klein, 2001). Is Global Responsibility a positive alternative for the emergence of a collective mindset concerned about biodiversity, cultural diversity and a new global citizenship? Sustainable consumption (eco-consumption) could be another way of understanding responsible practices where "enoughness" will create a kind of downshifting attitude in consumption behavior (Myers and Kent, 2004, 125). In the last decade we have witnessed the emergence of a new trend of economic and social thinkers that are speeding up the consciousness of global consumers to become responsible global citizens (Brower and Leon, 1999). Our research work goes in this direction, trying to help future generations to develop social commitment towards RC.

The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has been recently replaced by new ideas, such as Global Responsibility and Responsible Consumption. Unfortunately, irresponsible practices are still deeply rooted in our students' behaviors, even while understanding the importance of relating systemic thinking to GR and RC (Shankar and Fitchett, 2002). We can deduct from it a conservative perception that relies on institutions and organizations to create the means and ideas towards RC. Paradoxically, individual practices are still perceived as not connected to our online global community. Our research urges us to question the perception of RC by the new business elites that will manage the companies and institutions of our global environment. We have seen how the different consumption models emerge interrelating with individual practices and how these are closely related to responsible consumption in two different ways: locally and globally. For transnational corporations and local companies this work presents the following advantages: 1. A better comprehension of Responsible Consumption patterns of behavior in developing countries and their relation to the Western World. 2. A study of how cultural diversity is reflected in the different behaviors of business students and young consumers so companies and governments could invest and plan new strategies to influence and shape the emergence of a new responsible world. 3. To create close links between global responsibility issues and responsible consumption.

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Carlos Antonio Rabassó, Associated Professor at the Rouen Business School, France. PhD in Human Sciences at the University of Paris VIII, France.

Francisco Javier Rabassó, Associated Professor, Faculty of Humanities, University of Rouen and Lecturer at the Rouen Business School, France. PhD at the University of Toronto, Canada, in Comparative Literature. Post doctoral thesis (HDR, Habilitation à Diriger de Recherches) at the University of Rouen.