ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE AND THE FUTURE OF CONSUMPTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSUMER IDENTITY

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Since present levels and types of consumption are not environmentally sustainable, consumers need to become more sensitive to environmental issues and to the political implications of their behavior. This paper traces factors affecting green consumerism in several areas: clothing, transportation, food and management of household waste. Green consumerism is a complex phenomenon that is influenced on the collective level by social movements, boycotts, and government legislation and on the individual level by social class, income, education and life style. Most studies which examine the relationship between specific attitudes toward green consumption and behavior reveal discrepancies between attitudes and behavior. The attitude/behavior gap can be explained by the fact that green consumerism is most strongly associated with a specific, middle class life style and is not a widespread phenomenon.

Keywords: responsible consumption; green consumerism; life style; environment.

Puesto que los actuales niveles y modos de consumo no son ambientalmente sostenibles, los consumidores necesitan concienciarse de las cuestiones medioambientales y de las implicaciones políticas de sus prácticas. Este artículo rastrea algunos elementos que afectan al denominado "consumo verde" en varias áreas: vestido, transporte, alimento y gestión doméstica. El consumo ecológico es un fenómeno complejo, con influencias en el ámbito societal de movimientos sociales, boicots o legislación gubernamental, y en el plano individual presenta influencias de la clase social, los ingresos, la educación o el estilo de vida. La mayoría de los estudios que han examinado la relación entre actitudes específicas ante este tipo de consumo y el comportamiento real de los consumidores, revelan inconsistencias entre tales actitudes y las conductas. Esta discrepancia entre actitud y comportamiento puede explicarse por el hecho de que el consumo verde está fuertemente asociado a un específico estilo de vida, el de las clases medias, más que tratarse de un fenómeno de difusión generalizada.

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In the past fifty years, many advanced societies have gradually become "consumer societies" in which consumption performs a major role in the stimulation of economic growth. Scientists, social scientists, journalists, and politicians who are concerned about the future of the environment argue that continuation of the level and types of consumption that prevail at the present time is not sustainable. According to this perspective, economies should be stable rather than oriented toward maximizing growth. Consumption should cease to be a major engine for economic growth. Indiscriminate production of consumer goods contributes to climate change, to shortages of basic commodities, and to the waste and exhaustion of many types of resources[1].

By contrast, contemporary economic theory, based on neo-liberal economics, is focused on the importance of economic growth. The viability of national economies is measured in terms of economic growth; lack of economic growth or insufficient growth is considered to be an indication that an economy is not functioning adequately. The ideology of economic growth has permeated the entire economic system. Corporations are expected to substantially increase production and sales each year. They are rewarded or sanctioned by the stock market depending upon their success in doing so. Steadily increasing production of goods and services requires large numbers of consumers dedicated to

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1. Among many expressions of this point of view, see Y. GABRIEL and T. LANG, *New faces and new masks of today's consumer,* "Journal of Consumer Culture" 8 (2008), pp. 321-340; A. MARCHAND, P. De CONINCK, and S. WALKER, *La consommation responsable: perspectives nouvelles dans les domaines de la conceptions de produit,* «Nouvelles pratiques sociales» 18 (2005), pp. 39-56.

consumption. According to Fournier[2], "the main culprit is not growth itself but the ideology of growth, a system of representation that translates everything into a reified and autonomous economic reality inhabited by self-interested consumers". She also points out that major measures of economic growth such as the Gross National Product (GNP) incorporate production and sale of commodified goods and services while ignoring any negative economic and social effects of these goods[3].

Environmentalists argue that a major change in the nature of consumption is necessary, one in which goods are produced in ways that safeguard the environment and in which conservation of resources rather than obsolescence of consumer goods is a major target in the production and consumption of goods. Economists who have considered how to deal with climate change have concluded that it will be necessary to reconceptualize the nature of economic growth[4]. Some economists and other social scientists are advocating a policy of 'degrowth' that would be based on "a reconceptualisation of economic relations and identities away from 'capitalocentric' thinking"[5]. The urgency of meeting these goals is indicated by the United Nations Global Compact which attempts to elicit the cooperation of businesses in protecting the environment by publicly committing their companies to sustainability and responsible business practices. In this endeavor, the United Nations provides them with advice, information, and expertise as well as participation in Global Compact Local Networks in over 80 countries that provide companies with support in the process of implementing the goals of the Global Compact, such as encouragement for the development and diffusion of environmentally

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2. V. FOURNIER, *Escaping from the economy: the politics of degrowth*, "International Journal of sociology and Social Policy" 28 (2008) p. 529.

3. *Ibidem* p. 531.

4. G. MONTBIOT, *Environmental feedback,* "New Left Review" 45 (2007) pp. 105-113.

5. FOURNIER, *op.cit.,* p. 534.

friendly technologies and the promotion of environmental responsibility[6].

In response to these arguments, social scientists have begun to analyze the nature of responsible or 'green' consumption and to study the extent to which the attitudes and behavior of consumers are changing in this direction. If a permanent commitment to responsible consumption is to occur, the meaning of consumption for the consumer must change radically. The basis on which the consumer constructs her social identity through consumption must be reassessed. Is there any evidence that the relationship between consumption and identity is changing in such a way as to increase the level of responsible consumption? What are the factors that inhibit these types of changes in consumers' attitudes and behavior? I will examine three types of consumer goods and activities that consumers use to express their identities in order to show how consumers respond to opportunities for responsible consumption: (1) clothing and the movement toward ethical fashion; (2) food, animal welfare and household waste disposal; and (3) transportation and the development of alternative forms of transport. All three of these types of consumption are susceptible to a crisis of sustainability that is being brought about by environmental change and global warming. In various but different ways, each of these forms of consumption contributes to pollution of the environment and to the exhaustion of natural resources. These three types of consumption also represent major items of expenditure for most consumers.

I will begin with a brief history of the social science literature on consumption.

1. EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH ON CONSUMPTION

Because of its importance for understanding the nature of contemporary societies, consumption as a field of study has steadily expanded in recent decades. In the postwar period, the study of

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6. See www.unglobalcompact.org/ (accessed 4/5/2010).

consumption was dominated by theories of mass culture associated with the Frankfurt School that viewed consumption as a negative influence on the population. Consumers were conceptualized as passive actors, whose choices were manipulated by mass culture. Beginning in the 1980s, a 'new' sociology of consumption took a more positive view of the subject[7]. Consumption was reinterpreted as a significant cultural and social practice. Consumers were perceived as autonomous rather than passive actors whose behavior and agency were shaped by social dynamics. Giddens' emphasis on the role of life-style choices in the construction of self-identity was an important influence on this literature[8]. Another major influence was Bourdieu's theory of distinction[9] in which the consumer's selections of goods were seen to be motivated by her desire to make use of the symbolic meanings of goods in order to demonstrate her aesthetic taste and to distinguish herself from others. Interest in consumption and consumer goods culminated in the emergence of a social science speciality devoted to material culture, which is partially preoccupied with the study of consumer behavior and the acquisition and use of various types of material culture[10]. Daniel Miller's theory of shopping as a ritual speaks to some of the central issues in this literature[11].

Recently this line of research has begun to be viewed as insufficiently critical of consumer practices and even 'celebratory'[12].

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7. S. RIEF, *Outlines of a critical sociology of consumption: beyond moralism and celebration,* "Social Compass" 2 (2008) pp. 560-576.

8. A. GIDDENS, *Modernity and Self-identity* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991).

9. P. BOURDIEU, *Distinction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

10. For a review of this field, see D. MILLER, *Material Culture,* pp. 271-290 in T. BENNETT and J. FROW (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Cultural Analysis* (London, UK, Sage, 2008).

11. D. MILLER, *The Dialectics of Shopping* (Chicago, ILL, University of Chicago Press, 2001).

12. A. WARDE, *Setting the scene. Changing conceptions of consumption,* pp. 10-24; S. MILES, A. ANDERSON and K. MEETHAN (eds.) in *The Changing Consumer: Markets and Meanings* (London, UK, Routledge, 2002).

This in turn has led to a third and more critical perspective on consumption, that of the politics of consumption. In place of the passive consumer and the autonomous consumer, there is now an attempt to identify the political consumer. For the political consumer, consumption of some types of products rather than others makes a statement about her political beliefs and choices. The political consumer has emerged in a context in which the production and consumption of many types of consumer goods have begun to be viewed as wasteful and harmful to the environment and to animals.

2. The political consumer as citizen

The notion of a political consumer appears contradictory because, in the past, consumption tended to be viewed as the antithesis of political activity[13]. Consumption has been framed as a private and apolitical activity while citizenship is seen as comprising a set of activities oriented toward the common good and the advancement of civil society. As Reif points out[14], with "the growth of consumer movements and of political, green, ethical, critical or anti-consumerism", the roles of consumer and citizen are becoming increasingly blurred: "consumers are increasingly called on to acknowledge that their choices are not private but have social and environmental consequences".

Several types of political consumerism can be identified. The goals of political consumerism are to bring about or engage in: (1) *ethical consumption*, in which goods are produced in an ethical manner that does not cause harm to people or animals; (2) *fair trade consumption,* in which goods are purchased from producers in less developed countries at prices that permit them to live decently and to make a reasonable profit; and (3) *green consumption,* in which consumers attempt to select goods that have been

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13. REIF, *op. cit.*, p. 565.

14. *Ibidem,* pp. 566, 567. See also K. SOPER, *Rethinking the 'good life': the citizenship dimension of consumer disaffection with consumerism,* "Journal of Consumer Culture" 7 (2007) pp. 205-229.

produced in ways that respect the environment and dispose of those goods in a similar fashion through recycling and other types of environmentally-friendly waste disposal.

These goals can be sought on the collective or on the individual level. On the collective level, social movements have organized boycotts and other types of sanctions against producers of goods that violate ethical or fair trade standards or that produce goods in ways that damage the environment. On a smaller scale, in so-called culture jamming, counter-cultural groups, such as Adbusters, a global network of artists, activists, writers, educators and entrepreneurs[15], attempt to disrupt the dissemination of information about certain types of products that do not meet ethical or environmental standards. Culture jamming refers to: "the appropriation of a brand identity or advertising for subversive, often political intent", including alteration of corporate advertisements, parody of corporate and nongovernmental organization (NGO) websites, and appropriation of consumer goods through shoplifting and rebranding[16]. Carducci[17] suggests that: "culture jammers may in fact be the avant-garde of the evolution of consumer society, encouraging producers to conform to new consumer expectations in order to garner sales".

On the individual level, the goal is to attempt to implement ethical, fair trade, and environmental standards in all types of purchases and in the ways in which goods are used and disposed of. An alternative type of individual resistance is 'voluntary simplicity,' which has been identified as "a new frugality composed of temperance and simplicity in a research for quality; the key word…can be summarized as 'less but better'[18]. The idea is to

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15. See www.adbuster.org

16. V. CARDUCCI, *Culture jamming: a sociological perspective*, "Journal of Consumer Culture" 6 (2006) 116-138. See also S. DUBUISSON-QUELLIER and J. BARRIER, *Protesting against the market : from individual practices to collective action. The case of anti-advertising groups in France*, "Revue française de science politique*"* 57 (2007) pp. 209-237.

17. *Ibidem,* p. 123.

18. A. MARCHAND et al., *op. cit.*, p. 47.

restrict and control consumption using a set of guidelines that represent environmental correctness and 'responsible' consumption rather than engaging in consumption solely in order to satisfy personal needs or whims. The goal of the responsible consumer is the creation of a more humane and durable society, based on the values of equality, solidarity and frugality[19].

An important issue in political consumerism is that of the power of the consumer. How much influence upon the market and the economy do consumers have? Two Finnish authors[20] phrase the question as follows: "Can individual consumers use their purchasing power to bring about social change by taking into account the environmental consequences of their private consumption?" Consumers may exercise power over the production of goods in two ways: first, when they act collectively as members of social movements and in association with NGOs; and second, when they act individually in the process of making individualized shopping decisions. As we will see below, grassroots activities against global brands and multinationals have succeeded in altering the meanings of certain types of products and, consequently, these products have been de-legitimized in their markets. However, this type of collective action has affected only a tiny fraction of the enormous quantity of goods on the market today.

To what extent, do consumers exercise power through their individual economic decisions?[21] One argument is that the consumer exercises power in the marketplace through her capacity to choose among a variety of similar products available for sale. Alternatively, as Holzer points out[22], "Consumers…only have a 'secondary relationship' to the services and goods they buy. They depend

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19. *Ibidem.*

20. M. AUTIO and V. HEINONEN, *To consume or not to consume? Young people's environmentalism in the affluent Finnish society,* "Young: Nordic Journal of Youth Research" 12 (2004) pp. 137-153.

21. B. HOLZER, *Political consumerism between individual choice and collective action: social movements, role mobilization and signaling,* "International Journal of Consumer Studies" 30 (2006) pp. 405-415.

22. *Ibidem,* p. 405.

on others to produce commodities for them—and thus on the choices made by those consumers".

Holzer argues against the idea that that individual consumers are able to bring about meaningful change in the marketplace as a result of their decisions. Instead social movements are able "to transform individual choices into a collective statement"[23] that in turn has an impact in the marketplace. Social movements influence the decisions of consumers and use their power over consumers to boycott or otherwise sanction businesses. He states: "Political consumerism means doing politics *through* the market. It does not eliminate individual economic choice but utilizes it to achieve political objectives"[24].

These issues are most appropriately examined in the context of specific types of consumption and consumer decisions, a task which we will undertake in the following sections. To what extent is collective action directed toward these issues? Are there indications that consumers are beginning to engage in 'responsible consumption'? Alternatively, can responsible consumption be legislated by governments?

3. SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND COLLECTIVE ACTION: CONSUMER BOYCOTTS AND ETHICAL CONSUMER NICHES

Consumer boycott campaigns have increased in the past two decades[25]. In 1999, the World Values Survey showed that 15 percent of its sample had participated in various types of boycotts in that year, approximately four times the percentage of people participating in this type of activity in 1974[26]. Consumer boycotts of specific products tend to be directed toward the policies and

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23. *Ibidem,* p. 407.

24. *Ibidem,* p. 406.

25. D. STOLLE; M. HOOGHE, and M. MICHELETTI, *Politics in the supermarket: political consumerism as a form of participation,* "International Political Science Review", 26 (2005) p. 246.

26. *Ibidem,* p. 247.

practices of corporations. In the clothing industry, certain firms such as Nike have been targeted for their use of child labor and sweatshop working conditions in developing countries. Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti state:

> "Watchdog groups have forced Nike to follow Indonesian law and raise its wage levels, change its sourcing of soccer balls to avoid child labor, increase the minimum age of its factory workers abroad, and insist that all outsourced footwear suppliers adopt US occupational safety and health standards of indoor air quality"[27].

Boycotts require enormous efforts by non-governmental organizations at the national and international level. According to Rock[28], the American anti-sweatshop movement began in the 1990s. In 1992, the American Department of Labor brought suits against prominent garment retailers for violating US labor laws. By the late 1990s, 43 American NGOs and numerous international organizations were involved in the movement. A similar movement developed in Europe at about the same time. Activities by anti-sweatshop activists included "demonstrations against retailers, organizing stockholders to introduce no sweat labor codes at annual stockholders meetings, demanding disclosure of developing country suppliers and exposing workplace abuses"[29]. Other activists developed third party monitoring programs. Surveys revealed that consumers were willing to pay more for products produced under ethical conditions. Rock found that disclosures about sweatshop practices of multinational garment and shoe firms operating in developing countries led to a decline in the market value of these firms as indicated by the prices of their stocks.

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27. *Ibidem,* p. 249.

28. M. T. ROCK, *Public disclosure of the sweatshop practices of American multinational garment/shoe makers/retailers: impacts on their stock prices,* "Competition and Change" 7 (2003) pp. 23-38.

29. *Ibidem,* p. 24.

An indirect goal of this movement was to change consumers' habits by removing unethical products from the market rather than relying on changes in their purchasing habits.

The opposite of a boycott is a campaign to encourage consumers to buy certain types of products that conform to ethical or environmental standards, such as organic food, fair trade products, and other environmentally friendly products. The concept of fair trade, which began in the Netherlands in 1988, is based on the idea that paying Third World producers a fair price for their products is a more efficient way of encouraging sustainable development than foreign aid[30]. Fair trade requires a substantial level of organization which is usually performed by NGOs. The Fair Trade movement is a nonprofit transnational advocacy network whose goal is to change social values. According to Levi and Linton, "what they are essentially trying to sell is the norm that people in prosperous countries should factor global social justice into their buying decisions"[31]. A market for the fair trade product has to be created by lobbying organizations and consumers have to be persuaded to purchase it. The Fair Trade coffee movement provides an example of the strengths and weaknesses of this activity[32].

The Fair Trade coffee movement has attempted to raise the wages of small-scale coffee farmers in Latin America. In order to do so, it has had to create consumer demand for Fair Trade coffee in the US and Europe. This has necessitated persuading major retail outlets to sell Fair Trade coffee and educating consumers to buy it. Secondarily, they have pressured organizations such as churches, government agencies, and schools to purchase it. In spite of these efforts, the market share of Fair Trade coffee remains very small partly because the Fair Trade movement has had no impact on giant corporations that produce most of the relatively inexpensive coffee sold in the U.S. Levi and Linton[33] conclude that sub-

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30. M. LEVI and A. LINTON, *Fair trade: a cup at a time?,* "Politics and Society" 31 (2003) p. 415.

31. *Ibidem,* p. 419.

32. *Ibidem,* pp. 407-432.

33. *Ibidem,* p. 429.

stantial change in the welfare of small coffee farmers and landless coffee laborers will only occur as a result of "government or INGO enforcement of labor and environmental standards imposed on all companies worldwide".

In the area of transportation, it appears that local and national governments can perform important roles by making rented bicycles and auto-sharing more readily available to the consumer. Recent experiments in France suggest that it is possible to increase the use of bicycles in large cities, such as Paris, by making them available for rent throughout the city and that the public is receptive to the idea of renting automobiles for brief periods during the day that do not have to be returned to their point of origin. In many cities, particularly in the US, adequate public transportation systems in the form of buses or local trains are nonexistent. In other words, environmentally correct transportation behavior will be most likely to occur on a large scale if governments make resources and facilities for such behavior readily available to the consumer.

Government legislation may have a considerable impact on attitudes. In the EU, many local governments have mandated recycling. As a result, substantial proportions of citizens in most EU countries expect their fellow citizens to sort and recycle their waste[34].

A different type of collective action is represented by the eco fashion movement, which is emerging on the margins of the fashion industry in a few Western countries[35]. The movement is broadly defined and incorporates several related themes. According to

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34. European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer. Attitudes of European Citizens towards the Environment* (Brussels: European Commission, DG Environment, 2008), p. 26.

35. For a critique of this movement, see E. TSEËLON, *The fallacy of ethical fashion,* Paper presented at the Conference on Fashions: Business Practices in Historical Perspective, Joint Annual Meeting of the Business History Conference and the European Business History Association, Università Commerciale Luigi Bocconi, Milan, june 11, 2009.

Woods[36], it includes: (1) second-hand and vintage or retro clothes; (2) recycled and reworked clothes, sometimes referred to as 'slow' fashion; (3) new clothes made in sustainable ways that are less exploitative of people, animals or the environment; and (4) fair trade labeled clothes[37].

Firms seeking to produce clothes in an ethical manner have two major goals. The first goal is to eliminate sweatshops and exploitation of labor in the production of clothing in developing countries. This goal is achieved by paying reasonable wages and by manufacturing clothing in factories that constitute healthy environments. The second goal is to use materials and production procedures that protect rather than destroy the environment. Certain materials such as wool and cotton require enormous quantities of water in order to transform them into clothing. This type of production will not be sustainable in the future as the availability of water decreases everywhere. The goal of ethical fashion is not to reduce or eliminate consumption of clothing but to replace consumer goods with products that are less harmful to the environment, both socially and materially.

Most of the firms producing eco or ethical fashion are small and relatively new. Beard claims that the years, 2006 to 2008, were a watershed for the movement in Britain: "eco fashion changed from being a philanthropic niche to becoming a commercial reality"[38]. There is now a significant niche market in Britain for these products. Major clothing firms such as Marks and Spencer are participating in the movement. London's Fashion Week has added an exhibition space for these firms called Esthetica. There are now eco fashion magazines. Sales of eco and ethical fashion and

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36. V. WOODS, *Moral fibre*, "Vogue" (UK), 172, pt. 10, n° 2499, October (2006) pp. 318-323.

37. See also H. CLARK, *SLOW + FASHION – an Oxymoron – or a promise for the future…?,* "Fashion Theory" 12 (2008) pp. 427-446.

38. N. BEARD, *The branding of ethical fashion and the consumer: a luxury niche or mass market reality?,* "Fashion Theory" 12 (2008) pp. 447-467.

clothing boycotts are increasing rapidly in Britain although they still represent a small fraction of total clothing expenditures[39].

Even luxury fashion firms are beginning to join the movement. In the mid-nineties, a few avant-garde designers in Paris were experimenting with the use of second-hand clothes for their collections, as a way of making a statement about luxury. In the current decade, French luxury fashion firms are beginning to reduce energy consumption in the production of their goods and to insist upon the use of fair labor practices by their suppliers and subcontractors[40]. They are promoting the concept of 'ethical luxury', products that define their owners or wearers as people with human and ecological consciences[41].

Consumer resistance to consumption of fashion trends is most likely to occur as part of small social movements that engage in boycotts of specific products and in the phenomenon of culture jamming. The clothing style associated with punk music in the nineteen-seventies could be interpreted as an early example of culture jamming but it is significant that the fashion industry successfully absorbed this practice. Motifs from punk still influence fashion trends and "the street". New forms of culture jamming are also amenable to cooptation by their targets.

4. RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION: ATTITUDES, IDENTITY, AND LIFE STYLE

A wide variety of factors influence the behavior of consumers[42]. Subjective factors include values, attitudes, identity, and

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39   ETHICAL CONSUMERISM REPORT, 2008. http://goddwithmoney.co.uk/ethical-consumerism-report-88

40.   J. KAHN, *Luxury sector revamps its message*, "International Herald Tribune" March 27 (2009) p. 11.

41.   A. SMALE, *At luxury conference, ethics are in vogue*, "International Herald Tribune" november 29, p. 2007.

42.   J. ANABLE et al., *An evidence based review of public attitudes to climate change and transport behavior,* Final Report (London: The Department of Transport, 2006).

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social status. Objective factors include knowledge or awareness of consequences and resource constraints. Consumer behavior is also influenced by group culture, shared norms, and social controversies. The consumer is exposed to a variety of political and moral discourses that exhort her to engage in critical consumerism. Sassatelli[43] suggests that in these discourses,

> "the consumer is posited as active, productive and political. As a political actor, he or she is seen as directly responsible not only for him or herself but also for the world. Blame, far from being just externalized and placed on companies and authorities, is internalized and placed on the self as consumer. As a consequence, the dominant attitude is that of a reevaluation of how to consume and what place consumption should take up in daily life".

The concepts of habitus and life style are ways of interpreting the interrelationships among these factors and variations among consumers in the ways in which they combine different levels of these attributes. Most studies that have examined the relationships between attitudes toward specific types of green consumption have found a discrepancy between attitudes and behavior. Favorable attitudes do not necessarily lead to comparable behavior. A recent study by Eurobarometer[44] in all twenty-seven member countries of the European Union found that "while 75% of respondents of the poll say they are ready to buy environmentally friendly products even if they are more expensive, only 17% have actually done so in the month before the survey".

4.1. *Fashion and responsible consumption*

Among consumers of all types of products, fashion consumers have the most unfavorable image. They tend to be characterized as

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43. R. SASSATELLI, *Virtue, responsibility and consumer choice: framing critical consumerism,* pp. 219-250 in *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives,* edited by John Brewer and Frank Trentmann (Oxford, UK, Berg, 2006).

44. EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *op. cit.*

"victims" who are unable to control their spending habits and who are unable to resist the urge to buy ridiculous or outrageous costumes. In fact, in the few surveys that have been done, the majority of women deny that they have an interest in fashion which may explain why many trends promoted by the fashion industry fail to generate substantial sales[45]. Women who are interested in fashion are likely to belong to a social group or subculture whose members share the same interest. According to Kawamura[46], "Fashion is a collective activity that arises out of particular social relationships among the members of a subculture".

Demographic factors are gradually reducing the consumption of clothing in the West, while clothing consumption is beginning to increase in emerging economies. Consumption of fashionable clothing is heavily dependent on the availability of disposable income. In emerging economies, such as Western Europe and the United States in the late nineteenth century and in Asian and Latin American countries today, young women who are employed for the first time are likely to be avid consumers of fashionable clothing, particularly if it is cheap. Over time, as consumers shift their spending to other types of products, the percentage of their incomes that is allocated to clothing declines, as has been the case in France since 1960[47]. When disposable income declines sharply, as has recently occurred due to the economic crisis in Western Europe and the United States, consumption of fashionable clothing decreases immediately. This is the case among consumers of cheap, so-called fast fashion (H&M, Zara) as well as among consumers of luxury brands. However, in developing countries, the only area where consumption has continued to expand since the

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45. D. CRANE, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender and Identity in Clothing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

46. Y. KAWAMURA, *Japanese teens as producers of street fashion*, "Current Sociology" 54 (2006) pp. 784-801.

47. C. LACROIX, Les dépenses de consommation des ménages en biens et services culturels et telecommunications, 2009, http://www.culture.gouv.fr./nav/index-stat.html

recent economic crisis is that of clothing. Spending on clothes per inhabitant is still increasing.

Little is known about the eco and ethical fashion consumer. A small study of young consumers in their early twenties in Britain and Germany[48] suggests that young women are somewhat aware of ethical and environmental issues surrounding the production of clothing but they are more concerned with brand image, style, and price in their actual purchases. News in the media about unethical corporate behavior in developing countries does not seem to discourage young women from purchasing products manufactured under those conditions. Other studies of green consumers suggest that young people may understand the importance of ethical fashion but are unlikely to concentrate their purchases in that direction. The market for eco and ethical fashion may consist of older women who are less likely to follow the latest fashion trends. A study of young women's knowledge of the importance of textile reuse and recycling found that respondents' understanding of the importance of these types of behaviors was limited[49].

4.2. *Food, waste management, and responsible consumption*

Holzer reminds us that "the staggering variety of brands and commodities" existed even in the mid-nineteenth century when Marx referred to the "immense accumulation of commodities"[50]. The epitome of this accumulation is found in the modern supermarket. A major category of consumer purchases consists of food items and products for the home. Both types of goods enter the home in packages that require recycling and other types of waste disposal if new environmental norms are to be respected. In this area, several studies of consumers provide information about

48. C. JOERGENS, C., *Ethical fashion: myth or future trend?,* "Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*"* 10 (2006) p. 360.

49. L. R. MORGAN and G. BIRTWISTLE, *An investigation of young fashion consumers' disposal habits,* "International Journal of Consumer Studies" 33 (2009) pp. 190-198.

50.   HOLZER, *op.cit.,* p. 405.

the characteristics and attitudes of the 'green consumer'. Green consumerism, which emerged as a movement in the 1980s[51], is generally defined as "'a multi-faceted concept' which includes: preservation of the environment, minimization of pollution, responsible use of non-renewable resources, and animal welfare and species preservation…a purchasing process based on environmental or social criteria"[52].

One aspect of green consumerism is the purchase of organic foods. Although the market for organic food is expanding rapidly, sales of organic foods represent a very small proportion of all sales of food products (an average of 1.4% in ten Western European countries in 2000)[53]. This situation has been attributed to the fact that the public is insufficiently informed about this type of food and does not trust the information provided by the food industry. Consumers are either 'super-informed' or 'ignorant'[54]. Motives for organic food purchases are primarily health and food safety; ethical concerns about animal welfare are secondary[55].

The authors of a study of organic food consumption in Australia stress that, in the process of translating concerns about industrialized food into purchases of organic food, consumers are faced with a plethora of conflicting discourses:

> "Consumers are not faced with a simple choice between right and wrong—between good, healthy, environmentally friendly organic food and bad, unhealthy, environmentally

51. G. C. HARPER and A. MAKATOUNI, *Consumer perception of organic food production and farm animal welfare,* "British Food Journal" 104 (2002) p. 289.

52. M. G. MCEACHERN and P. MCCLEAN, *Organic purchasing motivations and attitudes: are they ethical?,* "International Journal of Consumer Studies" 26 (2002) p. 86.

53. SYNERGIE CONSULTANTS FOR THE ORGANIC MARKET, *The specialized trade for organic products in Europe,* www.synergie-online.com. In 2009, the proportion of food products sold in France that were organic was 1.7%. L. CLAVREUL, *La filière bio commence à être victime de son succès,* 'Le Monde' September 1, 2009, p. 13.

54. MCEACHERN and MCCLEAN, *op. cit.,* p. 86.

55. HARPER and MAKATOUNI, *op. cit.,* p. 287.

destructive conventional food. Rather they are faced with a dazzling array of competing discourses on food, nutrition, environment, etc., together with an equally dazzling array of competing desires, preferences, anxieties and beliefs, as well as the rather practical issues of availability, convenience and cost. As our focus groups showed, acting on an issue of concern can become a highly complicated affair"[56].

Empirical studies are highly consistent in finding a relationship between green consumerism and both education and social class[57]. This type of finding occurs in a variety of studies, including tendencies to purchase organic foods, concern about animal welfare, and engaging in recycling and environmentally friendly waste disposal. Other studies have shown that people who are well informed about the environmental consequences of their behavior are not more likely to purchase green products.

Are green consumers young? Like fashion consumers (who are also likely to be relatively young), youthful consumers in general have a reputation for "careless spending and obsession with short-term gratification"[58]. They have been described as "pleasure-seeking hedonists" whose concern is mainly for their own immediate satisfaction rather than for the future of the planet. A study of green consumerism among young consumers in Finland[59] found that their attitudes and behavior were often contradictory. They were both materialistic and environmentally aware but only a small minority had developed a genuinely green life style.

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56. S. LOCKIE; K. LYONS; G. LAWRENCE and K. MUMMERY, *Eating 'green': motivations behind organic food consumption in Australia,* "Sociologia Ruralis*"* 42 (2002) pp. 23-40.

57. *Ibidem,* p. 91; I. TILIKIDOU and A. DELISTAVROU, *Types and influential factors of consumers' non-purchasing ecological behaviors,* "Business Strategy and the Environment" 18 (2008) pp. 61-76.

58. M. AUTIO and V. HEINONEN, *To consume or not to consume? Young people's environmentalism in the affluent Finnish society,* "Young: Nordic Journal of Youth Research" 12 (2004) pp. 137-153.

59. *Ibidem.*

4.3. *Automobiles and responsible consumption*

Automobiles are a major source of environmental pollution as well as an important form of conspicuous consumption and waste of commodities. Every year, millions of cars that are still usable or easily repairable are scrapped[60]. There is some evidence that consumers are becoming more critical of the effects of automobiles on the environment but, as in other types of consumption, there is an important discrepancy between attitudes and behavior. A study by the European Commission[61] found that 80% of European citizens agree that the type of car and the way people use their cars has important impacts on the environment. A later study[62] found that only 17% are likely to change their lifestyle and consumption habits, such as using their cars less often and purchasing green products.

A recent study[63] in the Netherlands attempted to assess factors related to the purchase of an environmentally friendly car. The questionnaire included questions about respondents' attitudes toward cars and about the characteristics of the car they most recently purchased. While two-thirds of the sample indicated that the effects of a car on the environment, such as greenhouse gas emissions and emissions of polluting chemicals, were important, only 11.5% purchased cars that minimized negative environmental effects. Those who purchased environmentally-friendly cars were people who considered cars to be very important possessions and who consequently sought information about them. In other words, favorable attitudes toward protecting the environment were not

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60. P. NIEUWENHUIS, *From banger to classic—a model for sustainable car consumption?*, "International Journal of Consumer Studies" 32 (2009) pp. 648-655.

61. EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *Flash Eurobarometer. Attitudes on issues related to EU Transport Policy* (Brussels: European Commission, DG Energy and Transport, 2007).

62. EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2008, *op. cit.*

63. F. VAN RIJNSOEVER; J. FARLA, and M. J. DIJST, *Consumer car preferences and information search channels,* "Transportation Research Part D", 14 (2009) pp. 334-343.

directly related to relevant behavior but were mediated by other variables, such as involvement in a particular type of activity which led to information-seeking and indirectly to an environmentally friendly purchase[64].

Britain appears to be exceptional in that the car is "the most highly contested object of contemporary material culture"[65]. British green activism includes doing without a car and protests against the use of cars and construction of roads.

4.4. *Green consumerism as an upper middle class life style*

While social class is associated with green consumption, variations occur within social classes that can best be explained using the concepts of life style and habitus. Green consumption is not a unitary, undifferentiated class behavior but consists of several distinct behavioral clusters. Both green consumption and other types of activities associated with life styles are affected by values and attitudes that vary in levels of commitment. Haanpää states: "Green consumerism can be regarded as a life-style-based expression of an individual consumer's concern about the state of the environment, and therefore, different lifestyle-based elements are expected to affect consumers' green attitudes and consumer behavior"[66]. Green consumption can be seen as an expression of ideological commitments, particularly postmaterialist or postmodern values, such as an emphasis on the quality of life, self-expression and freedom of choice. There is also evidence that certain groups within the middle class have a particular affinity toward the envi-

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64. See also P. DE HAAN; A. PETERS, and M. MUELLER, *Comparison of buyers of hybrid and conventional internal combustion engine automobiles: characteristics, preferences, and previously owned vehicles,* "Journal of the Transportation Research Board" no. 1983 (May 30, 2007) pp. 106-113.

65. D. HORTON, *Green distinctions: the performance of identity among environmental activists,* "The Sociological Review" 51, Issue s2 (2003) p. 76.

66. L. HAANPÄÄ, *Consumers' green commitment: indication of a postmodern life style?,* "International Journal of Consumer Studies" 31 (2007) pp. 478-486.

ronmental movement, specifically highly-educated groups whose members work in public services and teaching.

Horton[67] describes the life style of British environmental activists who are highly committed to environmental values and performance of a green identity. He states that performance of a green identity refers to: "the ongoing, repeated and routinized enactment of the green cultural codes promoted by the discourses of contemporary environmentalism, which brings forth a distinctive way of life. The green identities of environmental activists are…performed throughout everyday life"[68]. These people belong to the middle class but are committed to values rather than to class interests. Their green consumerism is part of a distinctive life style. Even within this group, there are different levels of commitment represented by 'reformists' who work within existing political structures and 'radicals' who prefer to work outside these structures through 'direct action.' A high level of commitment to environmentalism and green consumerism is facilitated through participation in social networks of like-minded people, an urban environment in which liberal political parties have thrived, and the availability of shops where green food products are readily available and of green 'meeting and eating' places.

It is significant that, as Horton states, "Food is hugely important to the performance of green identity among environmental activists…food is a significant ingredient of green distinction"[69]. Another distinctive practice of this group is the absence of car ownership which restricts their activities to a specific local area which in turn promotes the performance of green cultural codes. Horton concludes that green consumerism is not solely the product of information and education but also depends on the existence of "materials, times and spaces" where green identities can be performed. He says: "The wider adoption of green lifestyles de-

67. HORTON, *op. cit.*

68. *Ibidem,* p. 64.

69. *Ibidem,* p. 70.

pends on the extension of green architecture on which the green performances of environmental activists currently depend"[70].

Networks of environmental activists may not be very accessible to lower or working class people. Following findings from research in Norway that showed that young people from the humanistic-social fraction of the middle class were overrepresented in environmental organizations, Strandbu and Krange[71] attempted to identify cultural orientations and attitudes among members of these organizations that acted as symbolic barriers that made it difficult for young, working class people who did not share the same habitus to join these organizations although there was no intention on the part of members to exclude them. Middle class members of these organizations had a more abstract, philosophical view of environmental issues compared to a more practical, common sense orientation toward the environment on the part of working class youth. Certain types of contacts, personal resources, and skills were expected of members that produced an aura of social exclusiveness. Middle class members appeared to have acquired the requisite attitudes and behavior as a result of their upbringing in keeping with Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital.

5. DISCUSSION

Many studies of responsible consumption on the individual level have shown that attitudes toward the environment explain environmentally-friendly behavior to a very limited extent. Most consumers are unlikely to engage in responsible consumption in conformity with their attitudes. The assumption that, if consumers were informed about the environmental implications of their behavior, they would engage in behavior that protects the environment does not appear to be true. Concern about the environment in a very general sense does not necessarily lead to specific behav-

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70. *Ibidem,* p. 75.
71. A. STRANDBU and O. KRANGE, *Youth and the environment movement-symbolic inclusions and exclusions,* "The Sociological Review" 51 (2003) pp. 177-198.

iors, such as recycling, that protect the environment. The average consumer is more likely to act in accordance with her beliefs in the context of boycotts or fair trade movements organized by social or political movements than when making individual decisions to purchase products. In some cases, governments are beginning to legislate green consumer behavior, as in the recent directive by the European Union, phasing out incandescent frosted glass light bulbs and replacing them with fluorescent bulbs[72].

A number of explanations have been proposed for these findings. First, since products that meet environmental or ethical standards are often more expensive than other products, low income consumers may face budgetary constraints in making such purchases. Income and social class are related to responsible consumption.

Second, consumers have difficulty implementing their beliefs because the appropriate course of action may not be clear. Deciding which products meet environmental or ethical standards is difficult. The criteria for making such a decision are often ambiguous and difficult to apply in specific cases[73]. Consequently, a consumer boycott which targets a particular product or products produced by a specific company relieves the consumer of the task of evaluating products herself.

Thirdly, many consumers may not be convinced by the arguments being made by environmentalists. Macnaghten[74] argues that these arguments are often couched in very general terms that are not sufficiently relevant to the day-to-day behavior and practices of many members of the population. In order to understand how people respond to information about environmental deterioration, one has to take into consideration how people relate to the environment in their daily lives. Macnaghten argues that the ways

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72. J. KANTER, *Europe sees the light and it's fluorescente,* "International Herald Tribune" September 1, 2009, pp. 1, 15.

73. F. POTET, *J'ai testé pour vous l'écologie au quotidian,* 'Le Monde 2' July 18, 2009, pp. 10-17.

74. P. MACNAGHTEN, *Embodying the environment in everyday life practices,* "The Sociological Review" 51 (2003) pp. 64-84.

in which environmental issues are framed by government, media and NGO discourses are not sufficiently meaningful in terms of the ways in which the general public experiences and values the environment in their everyday lives[75]. These frames present dangers to the environment in very general terms, such as 'saving the planet', whereas the general public experiences the environment in a highly personal manner as a source of pleasure and relief from the stresses of everyday life. The public is faced with controversies over the future of the planet in which experts and public officials take different sides but at the same time, their trust in public institutions has steadily diminished. Macnaghten concludes that there is a need "to engage with people *in their own terms,* as responsible and capable individuals, resonating with different lifeworlds through lived particulars"[76]. In his research, he finds that perceptions of environmental issues vary depending on the ways in which people interact with the environment, such as anglers, beekeepers, outdoor sports enthusiasts, local community activists, and national and international aid or pressure group members.

Fourth, most studies of consumers focus on attitudes toward the environment or toward ethical issues related to the production of certain products. Stets and Biga[77] argue that consumers' attitudes can only be understood in relation to their conceptions of their identities. Identities are clusters of attitudes that the individual develops as a result of her specific social environment. Stets and Biga state:

> "Attitude theory, rooted in psychology, focuses on how individuals make choices or decisions regarding a specific object or situation. Identity theory, rooted in sociology, focuses not simply on individuals' choices but on how persons who are multifaceted and are embedded in the social structure guide

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75. *Ibidem,* p. 64.

76. *Ibidem,* p. 82.

77. J. E. STETS and C. F. BIGA, *Bringing identity theory into environmental sociology,* "Sociological Theory" 21 (2003) pp. 398-423.

those choices…Identity theory…links individuals to the larger social structure in ways that attitude theory neglects"[78].

In other words, attitudes toward the environment can only be understood in relation to other types of attitudes. Stets and Biga argue that individuals have multiple identities. They define the environment identity as "the set of meanings attached to the self as the person interacts with the natural environment"[79]. The effect of environment identity on behavior depends on competing demands from other identities that the individual holds[80]. A particular type of behavior is not chosen on the basis of discrete, personal decisions but depends on the actor's participation in the broader social structure and on their social networks. Another way of expressing this idea is through the concept of life style. At the same time, certain types of attitudes play greater roles in some types of decisions compared to others. A study in Germany found that economic and cognitive factors, such as level of information, were more important with respect to decisions regarding environmentally-friendly technology while consumption patterns of members of the individual's reference groups were more influential in decisions to purchase organic food[81].

Finally, it is difficult to assess the influence on consumer behavior of the enormous variety of discourses to which the consumer is exposed. Recent analyses of these forms of rhetoric reveal their complexity and their inconsistency as well as the diverse motives of the actors, political, economic, and social, who are perpetrating them[82].

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78. *Ibidem,* p. 399.

79. *Ibidem,* p. 409.

80. *Ibidem,* p. 420.

81. H. WELSCH and J. KUEHLING, *Determinants of pro-environmental consumption: the role of reference groups and routine behavior,* "Ecological Economics" 69 (2009) pp. 166-176.

82. S. SASSATELLI, *op. cit.* and J. LITTLER, *Radical Consumption: Shopping for Change in Contemporary Culture* (Maidenhead, Berkshire, UK: Open University Press, 2009).

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the issues associated with changes in consumer behavior and identity that are necessitated by deterioration of the environment and problems of sustainable consumption. The public's attitudes toward green consumerism are generally favorable but green consumer behavior remains a minority activity. Rather than examining specific attitudes and their relationship to specific behaviors, it is more useful to examine these issues using alternative approaches. On the one hand, research on the effects of collective behavior on green consumerism, such as social movements, boycotts, fair trade initiatives, and government legislation, has shown that these activities affect green consumerism in important ways. On the level of the individual, it is important to recognize that green consumer behavior constitutes a constellation of behaviors that are most likely to be enacted as part of a specific life style in which the individual is supported by social networks and appropriate facilities in her environment. Gabriel and Lang[83] are concerned by the 'intransigence of governments, industry, and consumers to change policy and behavior'. Ultimately, the goal is to alter consumer behavior but inducing changes in life styles that would facilitate widespread green consumerism would be a formidable endeavor.

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83. GABRIEL and LANG, *op. cit.,* p. 337.