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The Environmental Commitment of
Consumer Organizations in Denmark,
the United Kingdom, The Netherlands,
and Belgium

ABSTRACT. Consumer organizations have traditionally been concerned with protecting, informing, and educating the “weak” consumers. These policies were deemed necessary because of the unequal power balance and conflicts of interests between consumers and producers. Since there are also conflicts between the interests of nature on the one hand, and consumers and producers on the other, this article discusses the rationale of consumer organizations’ involvement in environmental issues while considering their original objectives. More specifically, it is aimed at identifying the commitment of several European consumer organizations with respect to environmental issues during the past two decades in order to assess whether and how environmental issues are internalized in consumer policy across time.

CONSUMPTION PATTERNS, ENVIRONMENTAL DETERIORATION, AND
CONSUMER POLICY

Environmentally acceptable consumption patterns are not a very widespread phenomenon as soon as one looks at actual sustainable buying behaviour rather than at the level of self-reported concern about the environment (e.g., Grunert, 1993). The reason for studying consumer organizations’ environmental commitment – i.e., activities based on the sustainability paradigm – is grounded in this paradox. It is often claimed that consumers are not willing to pay more for environmentally acceptable goods, though in fact it may be the combination of information failures and high prices which makes sustainable goods fail (cf. Cope & Winward, 1991). Consumers may think that producers are responsible for environmental deterioration, and vice versa.

However, the environmental deterioration is posing a threat to consumers and producers alike, and it seems rather obvious that the responsibility for action should be shared. The relentless consump-

Journal of Consumer Policy 20: 45–67, 1997.

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tion indicative of Western society may be ignorant consumption when environmentally unacceptable products and services are only created in response to expected consumer demand for convenience, greater availability, and lower prices. Such production and demand have fostered product proliferation, excessive packaging, pollution, and waste of natural resources (cf. Muller & Taylor, 1991). Thirty to forty per cent of the strain on the environment is directly caused by private households (Berger, 1991). One important task of consumer organizations could therefore be to assist consumers in understanding the consequences of different product choices in relation to the environmental strain caused by these choices.

Rationale for the Activities of Consumer Organizations

The general objectives of consumer organizations can be defined as informing, educating, and protecting consumers (Jensen, 1984). However, the large number of consumer organizations which exist weigh and interpret these objectives differently.

From a historic perspective, the idea of consumer organizations has been widely adopted as a result of the transformation of society. In this process the acts of production and consumption have gradually been separated. Societies, which formerly consisted of self-supplying households, were transformed into a barter economy, in which production in the households still existed but goods were exchanged between households.

Jensen (1984) argues that even though producers and consumers are mutually dependent, the latter are "weaker" in all respects. Firms are better organized than households, for example in terms of explicitly stated objectives and means. Firms have a number of parameters available for influencing consumers, whereas the consumer has only the disposable income as a parameter for influencing producers and their output.

The importance attached to the fact that consumers can simply decide not to buy specific products depends on one's view of the degree of consumer sovereignty. If one assumes that consumers are sovereign and that the market is fully transparent and comprehensible, then this parameter at her/his disposal would seem to be important and effective. The act of purchasing a product can then be regarded as a "vote" for a specific product and/or firm (cf. Hirschman, 1970). Hence, the free market economy would make sure that the interests of

consumers were taken care of (Smith, 1990). However, the shift from a barter society through a trading one to the industrial and post-industrial economy of today widened the gap between consumption and production considerably. Production has, to a very large extent, been removed from households, and the needs and wants of consumers are no longer necessarily clear to the producer (Lasch, 1984; Scherhorn, 1983). Hence, an imbalance of power between consumers and producers has developed which makes it increasingly difficult for consumers to exercise their power to vote for products – and, therefore, for or against producers and production methods. This is the main rationale for consumer organizations representing consumer interests, and one of the primary means (in addition to general consumer education and consumer protection) is to fill the consumers' knowledge gap with reliable, independent *information* about products and services. Overall, consumer policy commonly asks for better value for money (Krämer, 1993).

Conflicts Between Consumer and Environmental Policies?

In a similar sense, a biased distribution of power exists between the interests of the production system (i.e., producers and firms) and those of the natural environment. Environmental organizations have been lobbying the interests of the environment for several decades. Environmental policy is therefore also concerned with the consequences of consumption, limits to growth, concern for tomorrow, global problems, and so forth. More or less explicitly, it asks for a change in consuming habits and argues for voluntary simplicity in consumption choices: "How much is enough?" (Durning, 1992).

The different objectives of consumer and environmental policies indicate a discrepancy in the strategies pursued. Krämer (1993) argues that, at least at the European Community level, there is an almost complete lack of interrelation between these two policies. His analysis results in the following statement, among others: "Consumer policy does not represent, defend, and protect the environmental interests of the individual, his collective interests, or the general interest as regards individuals: It does not even endeavour to do so, but leaves the representation of individuals' interests to public interest groups, environmental groups, and other bodies" (p. 465).

In line with this criticism, we argue that consumer organizations, in their efforts to attend to the interests of the consumers, ought to

share the environmental organizations' view that it is of utmost importance to prevent environmental deterioration. In a long term perspective, protecting the environment is equivalent to attending to the interests of the consumers, who at the same time are also citizens whose individual and collective interests go far beyond consumption decisions (cf. Grunert, 1995). However, this requests a change in the type of information provided to consumers for their decisions concerning alternative products and services. If the sustainability paradigm is to be integrated in general consumer policy, then guiding consumers towards environmentally acceptable buying decisions would imply that consumer organizations have to take into account the environmental consequences of a specific product choice.

ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITMENT OF CONSUMER POLICY ORGANIZATIONS

In this study we are interested in exploring the existence and extent of interrelationships between consumer policy and environmental commitment of consumer organizations over the past two decades. Hence, a state-of-the-art assessment was aimed at by applying a specific form of content analysis that intends to assess indirectly societal trends as they are reflected in the publicly available work of market institutions (cf. Grunert & Grunert, 1989).

One of the tasks typically performed by consumer organizations in order to empower people to make informed consumer decisions, is the publication of a magazine which contains articles on general topics as well as reports of product tests. Hence, explaining environmental aspects related to products should help consumers, i.e., readers of the magazines, to overcome the knowledge deficit which exists with regard to environmental problems and their causes, and to gain information about environmentally acceptable product choice options (cf. Grunert, 1993; Muller & Taylor, 1991). Including environmental aspects on the basis of life-cycle assessments will assist consumers to find out if their product choice is a truly environmentally acceptable one, or at least the best possible alternative in terms of environmental consequences.

The focus was therefore set on a content analysis of the magazines published by consumer organizations in Denmark, the UK, the Netherlands, and Belgium. All other material, such as information

folders, special reports, and the like, was excluded due to difficulties in gathering this type of publication over two decades.

Several consumer organizations exist in Denmark, some of which are rooted in different sectors of the industry. In this study, however, we analyze the environmental commitment of two organizations which are independent of industrial interests, but financed through membership fees or governmental subsidies: Forbrugerrådet (Consumer Council; hereafter: CC; founded in 1947) and Forbrugerstyrelsen (The Danish Government Consumer Council; hereafter DGCC; founded in 1935). The CC's magazine *Tænk* and the DGCC's magazine *Råd & Resultater* are both published ten times a year.

For the United Kingdom, the Association for Consumer Research, commonly known as Consumers' Association (hereafter: CA; founded in 1957), was chosen, because it claims to be independent of all interests other than those of the consumer. This aim is achieved by refusing any subsidies from government or industry. No advertising appears in any of its publications. Throughout the years, CA has considerably diversified its publications, the most important one still being the monthly magazine *Which?*

In The Netherlands, the Consumentenbond (hereafter: CB; founded in 1953) is financed exclusively through the membership fees of its more than 500,000 members. Its monthly magazine, *Consumentengids*, was used for data collection.

The Belgian Consumer Association was founded in 1957 and operates bilingually: Verbruikersunie and Association des Consommateurs (hereafter: VU/AC) with the two monthly magazines *Test Aankoop* and *Test Achats*. VU/AC is financed exclusively through the membership fees paid by more than 300,000 members.

Operationalizing the Concept

In order to measure environmental commitment as reflected in consumer organizations' main publications two aspects were selected:

- the "breadth" of the environmental commitment
- the "depth" of the environmental commitment

In a broad interpretation, environmentally acceptable consumption is only a part of the concept of socially responsible consumption or ethical purchase behaviour (Smith, 1990). However, it is difficult to demarcate environmentally acceptable behaviour within the broader

category of ethical purchase behaviour. Hence, it seems reasonable to examine which kind of issues consumer organizations consider to be environmentally relevant consumer issues. The question to be answered is: *When using a broad interpretation of environmental issues, which issues do the organizations discuss?* Hence, in the broad interpretation of environmental issues, several issues related to the natural and physical environment will be looked for. An example could be a discussion of “pollution of the ground water” in an article about agricultural methods.

Any human activity has an impact on the natural environment, i.e., air, water, soil, animals, ecosystems, and so forth. With regard to the “depth” of environmental commitment, the question to be answered is: *Are impacts on the natural environment considered when consumer organizations evaluate and/or comment on products?* A topic meeting the relevant criteria could be a product test’s statement about the particularly low amount of electricity needed for using an electrical appliance, compared to the amounts consumed by alternative brands.

Sustainability is defined as “the use of resources at a rate which allows them to be replenished to ensure their long-term survival, and not exceeding the environment’s ability to absorb pollution” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This definition embraces the cradle-to-grave concept which refers to the choice of natural resources used, production of goods, their distribution, utilization, consumption, and final disposal, if any (Official Journal of the EC, 1992). Taking sustainability into consideration acknowledges the fact that there are many more environmental aspects of a product than, for example, the fact that packaging is biodegradable.

In March 1992, the European Council of Ministers passed a regulation on a common European eco-labeling scheme. This scheme is based on the cradle-to-grave concept, aimed at making consumers aware of a product’s impact on the environment through its entire lifecycle. The regulation stresses the fact that consumers should be properly informed about the purpose of the eco-labeling scheme (Official Journal of the EC, 1992). Thus, the use of the sustainability concept in connection with the evaluation of the environmental sustainability of a product is widely acknowledged. Informing consumers about this method of evaluating products, at least in general terms, will make it easier for consumers to accept the eco-label once it is widely applied.

It would be appropriate, then, to find out whether consumer organizations bear this principle in mind when evaluating products (at least after 1992). Hence, the other question referring to the “depth” aspect is: *When the impacts on the natural environment are considered, to which extent are they embedded in the concept of sustainability?*

Data Collection

As mentioned above, all five consumer organizations have weekly or monthly publications. A content analysis was performed for the magazines *Råd & Resultater* from DGCC, *Tænk* from CC, *Which?* from CA, *Consumentengids* from CB, and *Test Aankoop* from VU/AC. The analysis is based on yearly volumes in five-year intervals: 1971, 1976, 1981, 1986, and 1991, as well as 1992 and 1993.

Information was collected with respect to both general issue articles and product tests. The category system for the “breadth” dimension of environmental commitment included all information available (see below), while the category system for the “depth” dimension, which is more thorough, was limited to three product groups:

- (1) consumer durables (e.g., washing machines, vacuum cleaners),
- (2) small electrical appliances and appliances using batteries (e.g., sandwich toaster, coffee machine, walkman), and
- (3) detergents (e.g., washing powder, dish-washing liquids).

The first two groups were chosen because of their energy consuming properties since the consumption of non-renewable energy is often claimed to be one of the major environmental problems. The third group was included in order to examine one non-durable product which is frequently associated with adverse impact on the environment.

The Category System for the “Breadth” Aspect

The “breadth” aspect refers to general environment-related topics addressed by the magazines. “Breadth” covers all topics which deal with the environment in general, but which are not directly related to particular aspects of consumption, for instance because the environmental impact discussed may be global in nature or has broader social consequences, often on a long-term basis.

“Breadth” thus consists of two facets:

- the human environment:
health, employment, working environments, and the north/south gap
- the natural environment:
use of natural resources, ozone depletion, global warming, renewable/non-renewable energy (includes issues relating to energy-saving provisions), air pollution, deforestation and forest damage, soil pollution, water supplies and water quality (including pollution of water), chemicals, waste, habitat and eco-system destruction, extinction of species, and animal cruelty

“Health” pertains to products and/or services which are damaging to health in terms of lack of nutrients, contents of additives, and the like, but excluding dangerous product features such as hot oven fronts. “Employment” and “working conditions” are social issues, and “the north/south gap” is the frame of a very broad range of issues covering the relations between the Western world and less affluent societies. Examples of relevant issues would be the export of dangerous products from industrialized to developing countries, or the import of scarce natural resources from developing countries for consumption and use in the Western hemisphere.

These environmental issues can all be regarded as consequences of our consumption patterns (cf. Durning, 1992). Obviously, the topics are too complex in nature to suggest that an alteration of consumption patterns will put an immediate end to these problems. However, a greater understanding of the nature of the problems, and their various causes and interdependencies should assist in clarifying the role and responsibility of both consumers and producers in these matters.

The Category System for the “Depth” Aspect

The “depth” aspect is supposed to examine all issues related to a product which are fairly easy to comprehend as direct consequences of consumption patterns.

It is thus closely linked to the cradle-to-grave or lifecycle assessment concept, which is defined as “a study made to analyze and assess the environmental impact of a material, product or service throughout the entire lifecycle” (Nordic Council of Ministers, 1992). The extent to which a lifecycle assessment is applied depends on the purpose of a study. The range goes from, e.g., a detailed quantitative and

comparative study of all components of a product, including the way it is produced, for the purpose of product and process development, to, on a much smaller scale, a qualitative "screening method" to build up knowledge of problematic parts of any aspects of a product's lifecycle (Nordic Council of Ministers, 1992).

The reason for using the lifecycle concept for the examination of consumer organizations' commitment to the environment is the interest in finding out how these organizations inform consumers of different environmental aspects of a specific product. It is, of course, unrealistic to believe that it is possible for consumer organizations to undertake detailed analyses of products in all stages of their lifecycles. As long as this assessment is voluntary, information of, for instance, production methods and input materials would not necessarily be easily available, while the financial restraints of consumer organizations may be another barrier. However, some information will be possible to retrieve by a "screening" lifecycle assessment, especially information pertaining to the use and disposal of a product.

The environmental criteria for the cradle-to-grave evaluation of products, according to the EU regulation of 1992, are specific to product groups (Official Journal of the EC, 1992) because the impact on the environment in the stages of the lifecycle varies. The EC regulation contains, however, a general assessment matrix for the preproduction, production, distribution, use, and disposal stages of a product which addresses the following environmental aspects: waste, soil erosion/pollution, water pollution, air pollution, noise, energy use, resource use, and influence on ecosystems. This EU Assessment Matrix serves as our framework for the category system for the "depth" aspect.

However, our category system for measuring "depth" of environmental commitment omits the EU suggestion of a pre-production stage because both production and pre-production are very complex areas. At the present time, environment impact criteria exist for only a few product groups within the EU scheme. Hence, it is doubtful that producers, whose products cannot yet get the eco-label, or who are not contemplating to apply for the eco-label, have made independent analyses of the total impact of their products, as the regulation stipulates. For these products it may be very difficult for consumer organizations to get access to general, objective knowledge of environmental lifecycle stages, let alone the pre-production and production stages. However, as more firms become aware of the necessity to think

in terms of “cleaner” production technology, it may become easier for the organizations to get hold of production process information. Therefore, the production stage is included in the “depth” category.

The other categories of the “depth” aspect are distribution, use, and disposal of products. Each category is further specified in terms of environmentally relevant aspects. The environment aspects are kept fairly broad in their definitions, in order to include any relevant aspect mentioned in the articles and product tests.

The impact at the *production stage* is divided into three parts:

- pollution of soil, water, and/or air
- use of energy resources (type and amount used)
- use of natural and raw material resources (type and amount used)

The impact at the *distribution stage* is split into two main parts:

- transport; most obviously in terms of energy resources, but also covering, for instance, loss of material or disturbance of wild life (Nordic Council of Ministers, 1992)
- packaging; the EU regulation includes this aspect in the distribution category in order to assess the amount of packaging needed for product protection under transportation.

Another aspect is the safe disposal of the packaging (related to degradability and feasibility of reusing and/or recycling or non-pollution incineration), thereby subdividing packaging into:

- amount used
- safe disposal of packaging

The impact at the *use stage* consists of:

- pollution of soil, water and/or air
- energy consumption (type and amount)
- use of natural resources; this aspect is included, although only one of the product groups is likely to be represented here, namely consumer durables (for instance the amount of water used by washing machines and dish-washers)
- quality and durability; albeit subjective in its definition, this is an important property of a sustainable product, as less resources are used when the product’s lifetime is prolonged. Stead & Stead (1992) discuss quality as an instrumental value supporting sustainability, i.e., when quality develops from being a mental perception of a

product into an “objective” property of quality (for instance in terms of longer lasting products which are worth repairing)

The impact at the *disposal stage* is divided in two parts:

- reuse
- pollution of soil, water and/or air

Even though a lifecycle assessment should be adapted to different product groups, an identical lifecycle assessment matrix will be used here for all three product groups in order to derive an instrumental measure of the environmental commitment of consumer organizations.

RESULTS

In the following section, results of the content analysis are reported and commented upon by distinguishing between (a) “breadth” and “depth,” and (b) years in order to illustrate the development in the organizations’ informational strategies pertaining to environmental issues.

Results Concerning “Breadth”

In 1971, *Tænk* published a total of 16 articles on “breadth” aspects, covering a wide variety of both nature- and human-related environmental problems. Most of the articles focused on a single problem, but there were also a few articles explaining the interdependencies of environmental problems in relation to consumption (e.g., “The latent costs of welfare,” in *Tænk* No. 8). *Råd & Resultater* and *Which?* published five articles each, but whereas *Råd & Resultater* treated problems pertaining both to the human and natural environment, *Which?* almost exclusively focused on human health. The Dutch magazine *Consumentengids* in its eleven articles focused on various natural environment aspects, while *Test Aankoop* published seven articles, six of them dealing with human health and only one with habitat and ecosystem destruction. Two of the human health articles also mentioned air pollution and water quality.

In 1976, the nature of the articles in *Tænk* had not changed compared to 1971, as the magazine still included many articles on “breadth” aspects (a total of 18). *Tænk* covered almost all categories

of topics, and was still publishing articles on multiple “breadth” issues. *Råd & Resultater* and *Which?* did not rate “breadth” issues as highly as *Tænk*. In contrast to 1971, *Which?* treated problems pertaining to both the natural and human environment. Both *Consumentengids* and *Test Aankoop* had slightly increased the number of articles, but while the Dutch magazine was still more occupied with the natural environment, the majority of the Belgian articles were again concerned with human health issues, particularly those related to chemicals.

In 1981, *Tænk* was still engaged in “breadth” issues to a large extent (a total of 19 articles), although the articles did not touch upon as many different topics as previously. *Which?* had only one entry for the “breadth” aspect; an article on food poisoning. *Råd & Resultater* published a total of seven articles dealing with both human health and natural environment issues. *Consumentengids* had significantly increased the number of articles, with four out of 35 treating only “breadth” aspects, the remaining 31 addressing both “breadth” and “depth” issues. Again, the main focus was on the natural environment (25 out of 35 articles). All four articles published by *Test Aankoop* concerned human health, three of them in the context of additives to food.

In 1986, *Tænk* published a total of 14 relevant articles, but the number of “breadth” categories treated had decreased. The category containing most entries pertained to human health problems. The nature of the articles in *Råd & Resultater* was unchanged compared to the previous years. *Which?* featured considerably more articles, but only two of these referred to problems of a physical nature; the rest were (again) about human health aspects. It should be mentioned, though, that in the same year *Which?* published an article on ethical investments, which implicitly related to all of the aspects in the “breadth” category. *Consumentengids* published 12 articles on “breadth” only, and 24 combining “breadth” and “depth” – still more concerned with natural rather than human environment issues. With regard to *Test Aankoop*, once again all six articles referred to human health, two of them mentioning air pollution and one dealing with chemicals.

In 1991 in *Råd & Resultater*, the topic that most frequently appeared was that of human health related to the consumption of foods. Compared to 1986, the range of issues addressed in *Tænk* was much broader than that of *Råd & Resultater*. *Tænk* included health issues, topics relating to the north/south gap, energy saving provisions, waste,

and animal cruelty. *Which?* considerably increased its broad environmental commitment, publishing a total of 19 articles, and addressing almost all "breadth" categories. Thus, the *Which?* view of relevant consumer issues seems to have changed during this period. *Consumentengids* had again increased its number of articles, most of which dealt with both "breadth" and "depth" aspects. Within the "breadth" category, human health issues and chemicals were given high priority. *Test Aankoop* ran only three articles, discussing human health issues in relation to air pollution, chemicals, water quality, and global warming.

In 1992, the *Råd & Resultater* entries were still mainly concerned with human health, although one article on natural gas included several aspects pertaining to the natural environment. *Tænk* did not cover a wide range of "breadth" aspects, and they were almost exclusively concerned with human health issues. *Which?* repeated its pattern from the previous year, although there were fewer articles, and fewer categories were presented in the "breadth" aspect. The emphasis here was also on human health issues. For *Consumentengids*, fewer articles than the year before dealt with environmental issues, but the emphasis was again on chemicals. Although only publishing four articles, the focus of *Test Aankoop* had changed: While just one article treated human health aspects, the three others discussed problems in the natural environment.

In 1993, *Råd & Resultater* published four articles, one of them covering problems related to waste disposal, the other three concerning human health issues. *Tænk*, compared with the previous years, had a large number of articles and tests that considered a wide range of environmental issues relating to both human and natural environment. Two of these deserve a mention: one article commented on genetic engineering, the other featured a lifecycle approach towards evaluating the packaging of milk. Following the pattern of the previous two years, *Which?* now regularly addressed broad environmental issues. During the year a total of 15 articles were published, and all categories, except for three, were taken up. The Dutch magazine augmented the number of articles and tests dramatically, the majority of them treating both "breadth" and "depth" issues. Chemicals were still in focus, but pollution matters became quite prominent. *Test Aankoop* continued its pattern from 1992, covering both ozone depletion and human health issues twice, and water quality once.

A summary of the results concerning "breadth" is shown graphi-

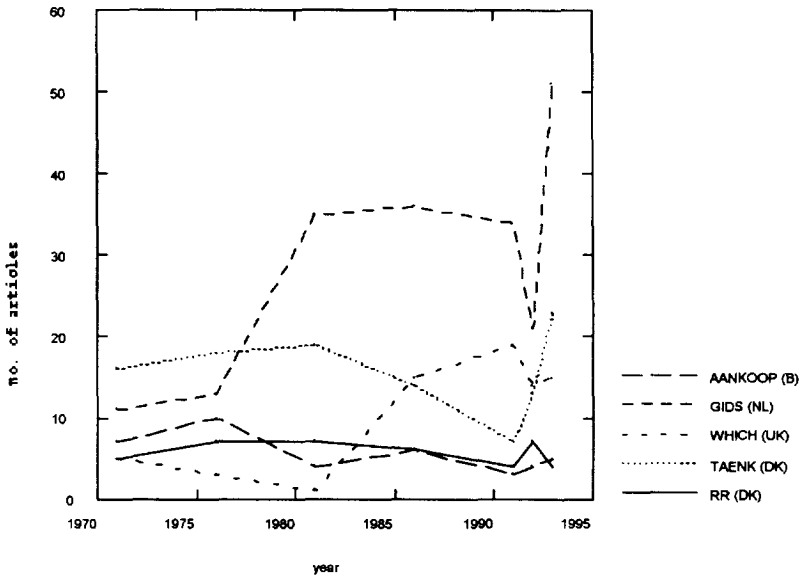


Fig. 1. Number of articles pertaining to the "breadth" category.

cally in Figure 1, where the total number of published articles which have mentioned "breadth" issues are presented. Since the periodicals appear with slightly different frequency and may in total contain different number of articles, comparisons should here be made over time rather than between magazines. Figure 2 presents the total number of "breadth" issues included in all these articles.

Results Concerning "Depth"

Since the "depth" aspects are more likely to be covered in reports on product tests than in other articles, *Råd & Resultater* and *Which?* as well as *Consumentengids* and *Test Aankoop* which all contain many product tests had considerably more entries of this kind than *Tænk* which focuses on general articles. A graphical summary of the results concerning "depth" can be found in Figure 3 which illustrates the number of "depth" aspects commented upon in all articles per year.

In 1971, *Tænk* published very few product tests and neither these nor general articles referred to any "depth" aspects within the three product groups examined. *Råd & Resultater* and *Which?* commented on "depth" issues in approximately one third of the product tests and

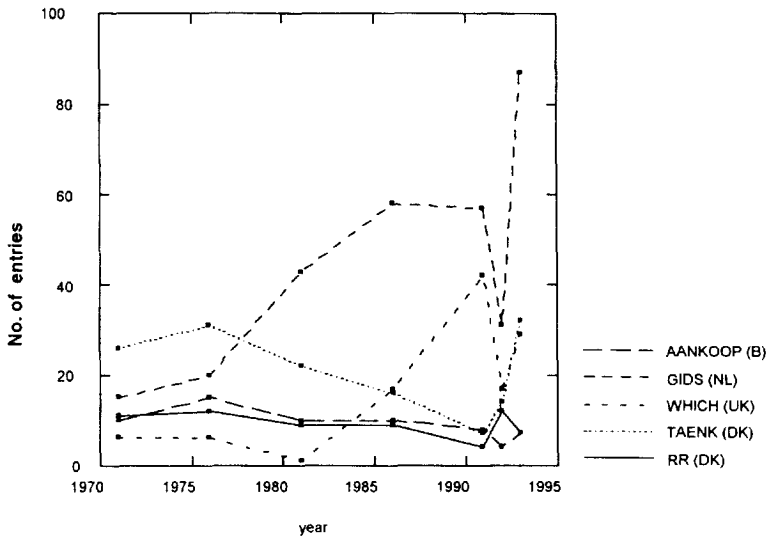


Fig. 2. Total number of "breadth" entries included in the articles.

articles published in the three product groups. They all concerned the use stage of the products related to energy consumption and durability/quality, and were thus very limited with respect to a cradle-to-grave evaluation. *Consumentengids* also focused on the use stage and its pollution consequences. Only one article published by *Test Aankoop* related to a "depth" aspect, mentioning air pollution caused by exhaust fumes, in a car test.

In 1976, *Tænk* had only one entry on "depth," concerning the energy consumption of an air ventilator. *Which?* and *Råd & Resultater* now tended to have more entries in the "depth" category, focusing on the use and disposal stages of the product lifecycle. No article in *Consumentengids* treated only "depth" aspects. Instead, both "breadth" and "depth" were addressed with an emphasis on the use stage. Three articles in *Test Aankoop* referred to "depth" aspects, two of them with regard to the use stage and one concerning pollution related to disposal.

In 1981, in *Tænk* the pattern from the previous years was still prevalent, and only one product entry was found which mentioned durability properties of a small electrical appliance. The energy consuming properties during use of consumer durables and electrical appliances were the most frequent entries in *Which?* and *Råd & Resultater* product tests; all of the entries pertaining exclusively to

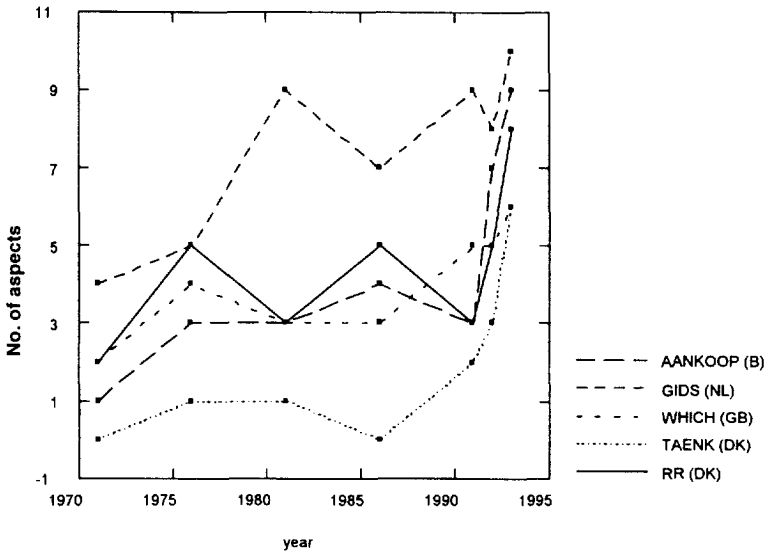


Fig. 3. "Depth" in terms of number of aspects addressed in the articles.

the use stage. Although the use stage was still a main concern, *Consumentengids* also published several articles/tests referring to disposal aspects. Again, *Test Aankoop* ran three articles about problems related to the use of products. However, one of these also discussed pollution problems at the production stage.

In 1986, *Tænk* had no product tests or articles in the relevant product groups. *Which?* contributed a total of 40 product tests and articles, but only 13 of these included comments on environmental issues. The comments all related to the use stage. Comparing *Råd & Resultater* with *Which?*, *Råd & Resultater* had a proportionately higher rate of entries qualifying for "depth:" Nine out of a total of 13 possible entries included comments relating primarily to the use stage, with a single comment on the environmental consequences of product disposal. *Consumentengids* had increased the number of articles concerned with the disposal stage, but the use stage was treated more extensively, with reference to both pollution and energy use aspects. A total of four articles was published in *Test Aankoop*; for the first time, two of them discussing the recycling of waste, while the other two addressed energy consumption during the use stage.

In 1991, it appears that energy consumption was still the main concern, although *Råd & Resultater* also carried remarks on durability

properties. Only product groups 1 and 2 (consumer durables and electrical appliances) were represented. *Råd & Resultater* had tests of detergents (group 3) in 1991, but none of these tests mentioned environmental aspects. Out of a total of 18 product tests of the relevant products, 11 addressed environmental aspects. *Tænk* presented only four tests of the products in the groups included in this study, articles which primarily concerned the prices of different brands. The environmental aspects were restricted to a discussion of which type of batteries can be used, and how long these last. *Which?* was still not very occupied with lifecycle aspects: out of 31 articles and product tests only 11 qualified for an entry of "depth." Within the use category, however, one aspect was now added, namely pollution of soil/water/air. *Consumentengids* now treated all four stages in their 31 articles belonging to the "depth" category (however, 25 of these also mention "breadth" aspects). The three articles in *Test Aankoop* referred exclusively to energy consumption and pollution related to the use of products.

In 1992, the *Råd & Resultater* entries in "depth" mainly related to the energy consumption of electrical appliances and consumer durables, not surprisingly since this is one of the few environmental features which can be tested unambiguously without much effort. In some cases, information about the disposal stage (televisions and refrigerators/deep freezers) was added. It should be noted, however, that *Råd & Resultater* in its comments on product tests now often gave the advice "to consider very carefully whether one *really* needs the actual product", especially in the case of small consumer durables. This point must be regarded as very relevant from an environmental perspective, although it is not included in our coding scheme. *Tænk* had three articles on environmental issues which were not possible to fit into the conceptualization of environmental commitment used in this paper. One article explained how an increasing number of Danish families endeavour to live as "green families" (Tænk, No. 1, 1992), another issue presented an article with the message that "consumption and environment" are interrelated (Tænk, No. 7, 1992), and the lifecycle concept was explained by referring to disposable versus non-disposable nappies (Tænk, No. 10, 1992). The nature of the environmental commitment of *Which?* in terms of "depth" issues was virtually unchanged. *Which?* commented on the use stage of products, and, in one instance, the disposal stage, but only a minority of the articles and product tests published mentioned environmental

aspects. Fewer articles were published by *Consumentengids*, and they were concerned with pollution issues at both the use and disposal stage. *Test Aankoop* published a total of seven articles concerning "depth" aspects. Five of these articles concerned products in all three product groups examined. For the first time, problems during the distribution stage were mentioned. One article covered a wide range of problems as it discussed the production, distribution and use stages. Most articles, however, concerned the use stage.

In 1993, the pattern of the previous year was repeated in *Råd & Resultater*. Articles discussed measures of energy consumption in connection with the utilization of consumer durables/electrical appliances, and disposal problems were included in the tests of television sets and in one of two tests of deep freezers. In *Råd & Resultater* No. 4 there was a comprehensive article on washing powders, including a test which, as something new, included a comparative analysis of the environmentally harmful contents in washing powder. *Tænk* now increased the number of product tests, which accounts for an augmented number of entries in "depth." The pattern of the previous years was unchanged as regards *Which?*: A rather small proportion of the published articles and product tests could actually qualify for an entry in "depth," and the relevant entries concentrated primarily on the use stage, while the disposal stage was dealt with to only a very limited extent. Quite to the contrary, *Consumentengids* and *Test Aankoop* considerably increased their number of publications on environmental consequences. *Consumentengids* emphasized pollution issues at the production and use stage, while *Test Aankoop* focused primarily on the re-use of waste. Another article extensively discussed the European environmental seal and the problems of conducting a full lifecycle analysis. Because of the ambiguity with respect to the "breadth" and "depth" categories, this article was not incorporated in the classification.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results show that all five consumer organizations do indeed discuss environmental issues related to both the "breadth" and the "depth" categories, though in varying degrees over time. In general, there are certain cross-national differences with regard to the number of articles/tests published and the number of aspects addressed. However,

all five organizations seem to lack a comprehensive strategy on how to deal with and communicate the sustainability paradigm in the sense that their publications are more issue-oriented: the shifts, for instance, between the different stages in the “depth” category mirror the changing interests of the societal debate on environmental consequences of consumption patterns – from energy use to pollution to recycling.

All five periodicals analyzed are inclined to emphasize issues which have direct consequences for human health, with the exception of the Dutch magazine *Consumentengids*. This seems to reflect the assumption that these personal issues are of higher relevance to most people, compared to issues related to the natural environment. All five periodicals also discuss other environmental aspects in the “breadth” category, and especially *Tænk* by CC touches upon quite a lot of topics. Hence, for the “breadth” aspect, CC’s commitment is quite high, while the commitment of DGCC’s *Råd & Resultater* and CA’s *Which?* is lower. With regard to DGCC, a government agency, one of the reasons may be the requirement of neutrality, which restricts it from commenting on controversial subjects such as, for instance, genetically engineered foods. CB’s *Consumentengids* is certainly the most committed magazine, since it outnumbers the other organizations in every respect. Concerning VU/AC’s *Test Aankoop*, it can be noted that the number of articles referring to “breadth” aspects slightly declined over the years, particularly because of fewer articles on human health issues in the early nineties.

The attempt to describe the environmental commitment in terms of the product lifecycle concept yielded only a limited number of “depth” entries. Concerning *Tænk*, the findings indicate a rather low commitment, contrary to the engagement in more general environmental problems, since only few problem areas connected to different stages of the product lifecycle were addressed in its articles. With regard to DGCC’s treatment of environmental issues in a life-cycle context in *Råd & Resultater*, this organization seems to make a greater effort, which is probably related to its higher number of product tests published. As far as CB is concerned, the attempt to treat as many “depth” issues as possible, and that within the highest number of articles, makes this organization the most consistent one over time. For VU/AC, the decline of entries within the “breadth” category was compensated for by a significant rise in articles discussing “depth” aspects. At the same time, the focus shifted: In 1992, the majority

of entries related to energy consumption and pollution issues, while the 1993 publications almost exclusively dealt with the disposal stage.

It should be noted, however, that information about all stages of the lifecycle are difficult to gather, since both production and transport are areas where the magazines have to rely on considerable co-operation with producers with respect to collecting relevant data.

Cooperating with producers to gain information about environmental consequences of their products, production processes, and distribution would be an obvious method for all five organizations to add more environmental aspects to their evaluation of products. Even though producers are often seen as the natural “enemy” of consumer organizations, co-operation on these issues could be potentially fruitful for both parties. Contacts with the business to whom the organizations could continually pose questions and make suggestions as to, e.g., product contents, could increase firms’ awareness and lead them to take account of these aspects in the design phase of products (Wiedmann, 1988).

None of the organizations with the exception of VU/AC seem to be reacting much to the fact that the new European eco-labeling scheme is on its way. This is rather unfortunate, as it cannot be expected that consumers are enlightened on the subject, and, even less, that they know what the eco-label means, and the reasons why the criteria for the label are important. In the light of this problem, aiding the scheme towards success by preparing consumers for thinking along a lifecycle approach when choosing products could be a major achievement for consumer organizations – if they wish to integrate traditional consumer policy tasks and environmental policy.

With regard to the national differences found, we would like to point out that these are most certainly influenced by differences in political culture, particularly in the power relationship between producers and consumer organizations as representing the “unrepresented” consumers. Additionally, the environmental discourse has been developed differently in the countries explored in this study (cf. Jamison, Eyerman & Cramer, 1990), and the results seem to indicate that this particular method of magazine content analysis is capable of reflecting discourses as they are historically displayed in the various cultures.

Overall, referring to Krämer’s (1993) statement above, we can conclude that consumer organizations increasingly attend to the environmental consequences of our consumption-oriented societies, albeit by adhering to a rather “soft” version of the sustainability paradigm.

Finally, a few remarks concerning the limitations of this study are in order. These relate to the methodology chosen.

First, the focus on a quantitative content analysis approach in assessing the environmental commitment level of consumer organizations restricts to a certain extent the interpretation of the results. One could imagine that not only the number of environmental aspects addressed in the publications changes over time, but also the manner in which they are discussed. It would certainly be interesting to investigate whether the organizations' understanding of the sustainability concept has deepened and how this understanding is communicated to consumers. For instance, the number of "depth" aspects could have decreased over time, while at the same time the organizations' knowledge about these aspects as well as their ability and willingness to impart the complexity of consumption-related environmental problems to consumers could have increased. Although such a discourse and/or semiotic analysis would permit a more accurate evaluation of consumer organizations' environmental commitment, it is deemed a task for the future.

Second, the interpretation of the findings is limited in the sense that only the main means of communication, namely the magazines of the five organizations, were analyzed, thus yielding a somewhat incomplete picture of their overall activities in the environmental area. Since these magazines are the major outlet vis-à-vis consumers, this limitation is assumed to be of less importance.

In addition, we were unable to determine the weight that the consumer organizations place on environmental issues in their product testing. Evidently, it is important whether an adverse environmental attribute of a product is just mentioned, or whether it leads to a significant drop in the overall product rating. The gathering of such information should be part of follow-up studies.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Das Umwelt engagement von Verbraucherorganisationen in Dänemark, England, Holland und Belgien. Verbraucherorganisationen haben sich traditionell mit Verbraucherschutz, -information und -bildung befasst. Diese Aufgabenbereiche hatten zum Ziel, das Machtungleichgewicht und die Interessenkonflikte zwischen VerbraucherInnen und Unternehmen zu mildern. Da es ebenfalls Ungleichgewichte zwischen den Interessen der Natur auf der einen und VerbraucherInnen und Unternehmen auf der anderen Seite gibt, wird in diesem Artikel der Frage nachgegangen, ob und inwieweit sich Verbraucherorganisation in vier Ländern in den vergangenen zwei Jahrzehnten mit Umweltfragen beschäftigt haben.

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Rik Pieters acknowledges the contribution of Mireille Courfreur and Ynte van Dam that of Irene Kort in collecting the Dutch and Belgian data, respectively. We appreciate the comments of Lars Thøger Christensen, Folke Ölander, and various representatives of the Nordic consumer organizations gathered at a meeting in Turku, Finland, in September 1996.