

Socially Responsible Consumers: Profile and Implications for Marketing Strategy

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Recognizing the practical and theoretical necessity of understanding the mechanisms governing the penetration of socially responsible consumption in the minds of consumers, the authors of this article have devised a behaviour-based scale for measuring socially responsible consumption, while providing a detailed description of consumer profiles from most to least socially responsible. Using a sample of 752 respondents representative of the province of Québec (Canada), this study identifies six profiles of consumers that vary in terms of socially responsible consciousness. Findings presented will help businesses operating in this booming market sector to enhance marketing strategies accordingly.

Field of Research: Contemporary Issues in Marketing and Marketing Strategy

1. Introduction

The economic crisis, which has continued to impact markets the world over since 2008, has had the effect of accelerating a societal shift towards sustainable development, thereby unexpectedly boosting socially responsible consumption (SRC). Citizens are becoming increasingly selective, wasting less and favouring goods and services which use fewer natural resources (Filipo & Seidel 2010; Durif, Boivin & Julien 2010). In fact, a 'responsible' market has blossomed which is organized around 'responsible' producers and distributors and in which large multinational firms are also more and more involved (Olson 2008; Hartmann & Ibanez 2006). As consumers are major stakeholders in this market, it is essential for businesses seeking to tap into this market to understand the breadth of consumer concerns and how the latter translate into new forms of behaviour (Binninger & Robert 2008).

According to meta-analysis work conducted by Filipo and Seidel (2010), consumer behaviour has proven the most frequently studied aspect of ethical marketing research in the past twenty years: twenty-two per cent (22%) of all French-language research and six per cent (6%) of all English-language research. Although research continues to progress in the field of socially responsible consumption, uncertainty subsists respecting purchase determinants and consumer profiles given the

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heterogeneity of measurement techniques and the lack of concordance from one study to the next (Binninger & Robert 2008; Webb, Mohr & Harris 2008). However, it is important, from both the practical and theoretical standpoints, to identify those consumers most likely to consume responsibly (Bray, Johns & Kilburn 2011). All businesses active in sustainable development or contemplating entering this particular niche need to know who they are targeting.

The objective of this study is to provide a typology of social responsible consumers and identifies the leading characteristics of each profile thus obtained based on a comprehensive measurement of SRC. Contrary to many previous studies, this study is based on a measurement of SRC which includes different modalities such as purchase, non-purchase and post-purchase behaviour (recycling, re-use and gifting), various responsible consumer concerns such as the environment, protection of animals, local buying, deconsumption and citizen consumption and, finally, uses consumer declarations respecting past behaviour, thereby minimizing the risk of social desirability in relation to the measurement of attitudes and preferences.

A literature review on socially responsible consumption is provided in section 2. The methodology employed is presented in section 3. Section 4 contains a discussion of findings. Section 5 concludes.

2. Literature Review: Socially Responsible Consumption (SRC)

The definition of SRC behaviour is not easy since *'assessments and distinctions tend to be subjective and complicated by circumstances'* (Bray, Johns & Kilburn 2011, p. 597). The concept can capture a variety of consumer activities (Paek & Nelson 2009). Roberts (1993) defines the socially responsible consumer as *'one who purchases products and services perceived to have a positive (or less negative) influence on the environment or who patronizes that attempt to effect related positive social change'* (p.140). Based on the foregoing, SRC comprises two distinct aspects: the environmental aspect and the social aspect. Other authors, such as Webb, Mohr and Harris (2008, p.47), define responsible behaviour based on Kotler's (1992) social marketing concept: *'a person basing his or her acquisition, usage and disposition of products on a desire to minimize or eliminate any harmful effects and maximize the long-run beneficial impact on society'*. Thus, the new multidimensional SRPD scale proposed by Webb, Mohr and Harris (2008) identifies three aspects: the influence of firms' SRC performance on consumer purchase behaviour; consumer recycling behaviour; and, consumer avoidance and usage reduction of products harmful to the environment.

Several scales of measurement designed to track or estimate population trends regarding SRC have been developed. These scales nonetheless suffer from many shortcomings and do not allow for exhaustive, consistent measurements of responsible consumption behaviour. One of the leading shortcomings of existing scales of measurement is that these scales do not make allowance for the multidimensional aspect of the concept. Certain measurements based solely upon attitudes and purchase intentions tend to skew social desirability, leading to over-estimation of the level of responsible consumption (Walker et al. 2010; François-Lecompte & Valette-Florence 2009). These measurement problems of the SRC phenomenon clearly impact the quality of consumers' typologies that may emerge from them.

Basing oneself on available literature, it is impossible to identify convergent findings respecting responsible consumer profiles given the variety of definitions and measurement mechanisms employed (Bray, Johns & Kilburn 2011). Many questions remain unanswered when it comes to the factors associated with SRC (Paek & Nelson 2009). One of the key questions relates to demographic factors. A portion of topical literature reveals that the most responsible consumers are generally older (François-Lecompte & Valette-Florence 2006; Hines & Ames 2000) and exclusively female (François-Lecompte & Valette-Florence 2006; Parker 2002). Additionally, they are well educated (Dickson 2005) and hail from distinct socio-professional categories (François-Lecompte & Valette-Florence 2006). In contrast, yet another tranche of topical literature finds no significant relation between demographic factors and SRC behaviour (De Pelsmacker, Driesen & Rayp 2005; O'Fallon & Butterfield 2005). Then who exactly are the socially responsible consumers of today's industrialized societies?

3. Methodology

The SRC construct was measured and validated based on Churchill's paradigm for the development of scales of measurement (1979). A pre-test was conducted, using a self-administered Web questionnaire, with a random panel of 170 persons. Fifty-eight (58) items were used (Likert-type scales from 1 to 10: "totally disagree" to "totally agree"). Contrary to other scales of measurement which assess consumer preferences and attitudes, our scale was based on past declared behaviour. The final survey, which employed the same data collection procedure, was conducted with a sample of 752 persons ranging in age from 18 to 79 years and representative of the population of one Canadian province, namely Québec. After fine-tuning the instrument of measure, 49 items were short-listed.

The scale of 49 items was then subjected to a principal component analysis. Eight (8) factors were derived from the analysis (following the rule of eigenvalues greater than 1one) which explained 72.99% of the total variance: (1) citizen behaviour (behaviour in support of organizations with social convictions) (i.e. statements such as: *I have made sure that I was purchasing goods made by companies that do not use child labour*); (2) behaviour focusing on protection of the environment; (i.e. *I have avoided purchasing goods that are potentially harmful to the environment*); (3) recycling behaviour; (i.e. *I have purchased goods that may be recycled*); (4) composting behaviour (i.e. *I have composted my household waste*); (5) local consumption behaviour; (i.e. *When given the choice between a local product and another product, I choose the local one*); (6) behaviour taking into account animal protection; (i.e. *I have avoided purchasing goods made from endangered animal species*); (7) deconsumption behaviour (i.e. *In general, I have tried not to overconsume*); (8) sustainable transport behaviour; (i.e. *I have walked, biked, carpooled or taken public transit*).

To identify groups of responsible consumers, a two-step clustering analysis was conducted using SPSS 18.0. Employed successfully in numerous marketing studies, this form of analysis was chosen for three reasons: 1) it is appropriate, contrary to traditional cluster analyses — *K-Means* or hierarchical analysis — when the sample size is large (Hsu & Kang 2009); 2) it can determine the optimal number of clusters (Chiu et al. 2001); 3) it makes it possible to use continuous and categorical variables simultaneously to define groups by employing log-likelihood distance measure

(Ayanso & Yoogalingam 2009). To render consumer groups readily identifiable and operational, the typology was based on eight (8) variables associated with responsible behaviour (continuous variables) derived from the principal component analysis, as well as three common socio-demographic variables to segment the markets: age of respondent (continuous variable), sex and type of dwelling (categorical variables).

4. Discussion of Findings

Two-step clustering analysis results are presented in Table 1. Six consumer groups emerged as a result.

Table 1: Results of the two-step clustering analysis (n=752)

	(n=162) Pro SRC	Cluster 2 (n=73) Average - SRC	Cluster 3 (n=172) Average+ SRC	Cluster 4 (n=115) Average SRC	Cluster 5 (n=117) Pro + SRC	Cluster 6 (n=113) Anti-SRC	Average
Citizen	6,60*	6,13	6,20	6,16	7,58	3,23	6,04
Environment	7,71	6,81	6,87	6,93	8,15	3,65	6,77
Recycling	9,51	8,89	8,74	8,39	9,28	6,71	8,65
Composting	5,87	3,40	5,45	3,78	3,52	2,81	4,39
Local	7,78	7,11	7,04	7,09	8,09	3,90	6,91
Animals	7,63	6,65	6,52	6,76	8,34	3,39	6,62
Deconsumption	7,40	6,96	6,80	6,85	7,97	4,02	6,72
Sustainable transport	4,24	5,05	4,27	5,42	5,68	3,05	4,55
Age	49,52	42,92	47,98	45,83	50,64	41,22	
Sex (%)							
Men	0	9,7	47,8	31,9	0	10,6	100
Women	41,3	9,7	0	0	29,8	19,1	100
Types of dwellings (%)							
Single dwelling	41,5	0	44,1	0	0	14,4	100
Semi-detached dwelling	0	0	0	50,0	28,6	21,4	100
Townhouse	0	0	0	31,6	31,6	36,8	100
Apartment, duplex	0	80,2	0	0	16,5	3,3	100
Apartment, >5 storeys	0	0	0	50,0	30,4	19,6	100
Apartment, <5 storeys	0	0	0	40,8	43,3	15,9	100
Mobile home	0	0	0	38,1	28,6	33,3	100

* Average out of 10 for the 8 variables (semantic differential scale where 1=Never and 10= Always)

Two groups can be deemed to be proponents of responsible consumption:

- Group 5, representing 15.56% of the sample and dubbed 'Pro+ SRC'. Individuals in this group had the highest average score of all eight aspects of SRC. This group was made up exclusively of women of an average age of 50.64 years. Their responsible consumption score was the highest of all groups except for composting and recycling.
- Group 1, representing 21.54% of the sample and dubbed 'Pro SRC'. This group was made up uniquely of women of an average age of 49.52 years and living in single family dwellings. The importance they attached to recycling and composting was high; however, their sustainable transport score was lower.

A group representing 15.03% of individuals surveyed nonetheless presented a profile far removed from SRC: Group 6, which was logically dubbed 'Anti-SRC'. This group was made up of more women than men (19.1% all women combined vs 10.6% of all men combined), with an average age of 41.22 years, and living in a townhouse or mobile home. Their SRC score was the lowest with respect to the eight aspects presented. They demonstrated a marked disinterest in social and environmental concerns.

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Occupying the middle of the spectrum, three groups can be considered to demonstrate average SRC awareness, with levels which varied as follows:

- Group 2, representing 9.57% of the sample, was found to be 'Average –'. This group was made up of women and men of an average age of 42.92 years, and living in an apartment or duplex. They readily recycled but were not proponents of composting.
- Group 3, representing 22.87% of the sample, was found to be 'Average +'. This group was made up men of an average age of 47.98 years and living in single family dwellings. They attached middling importance to SCR. They scored higher than 4 out of the 5 groups with respect to composting, but lower when it came to sustainable transport.
- Group 4, representing 15.29% of the sample, was found to be 'Average': This group was made up men of an average age of 45.83 years. They attached middling importance to SRC but scored higher than 4 out of the 5 groups with respect to sustainable transport.

Having obtained six groups of responsible consumers, further analyses (variance and cross-tabulation analyses) were conducted with a view to fleshing out group descriptions (Please see Table 2). The profiles of the six groups were compared based on the following variables: owner/tenant; marital status: single, common-law, married, separated, divorced, widowed; income level; overall SRC score; motivations: personal image, health benefits, environmental benefits; impediments: information, time, efficacy, cost.

Table 2: Characteristics of socially responsible consumer profiles

	Pro SRC 21.54%	Average – SRC 9.57%	Average + SRC 22.87%	Average SRC 15.29%	Pro + SRC 15.56%	Anti SRC 15.03%
As for home, you are ($\chi^2 = 226,29$; $p = 0,00$; $V = 0,54$):						
<i>Owner</i>	86,4%	24,7%	87,8%	35,7%	25,6%	61,9%
<i>Tenant</i>	13,6%	75,3%	12,2%	64,3%	74,4%	31,8%
Marital status ($\chi^2 = 113, 91$; $p = 0,00$; $V = 0,17$):						
<i>Single</i>	13%	28,8%	18,6%	35,7%	21,4%	29,2%
<i>Common-law married</i>	32,7%	27,4%	25%	35,7%	22,2%	32,7%
<i>Married</i>	40,1%	27,4	49,4%	20,9%	19,7%	28,3%
<i>Separated</i>	1,9%	5,5%	1,7%	1,7%	6,0%	0,0%
<i>Divorced</i>	7,4%	9,6%	3,5%	5,2%	20,5%	7,1%
<i>Widowed</i>	4,9%	1,4%	1,7%	0,9%	10,3%	2,7%
Income ($\chi^2 = 102, 63$; $p = 0,00$; $V = 0,16$):						
<i>\$19 999 and under</i>	9,3%	15,1%	5,2%	13,9%	28,2%	14,2%
<i>\$20 000 - \$39 999</i>	27,8%	37,0%	17,4%	33,9%	40,2%	20,4%
<i>\$40 000 - \$59 999</i>	21,6%	28,8%	30,2%	21,7%	19,7%	29,2%
<i>\$60 000 - \$79 999</i>	22,8%	9,6%	18,0%	15,7%	5,1%	23,0%
<i>\$80 000 - \$99 999</i>	11,7%	5,5%	13,4%	7,8%	4,3%	8,0%
<i>\$100 000 and over</i>	6,8%	4,1%	15,7%	7,0%	2,6%	5,3%
Overall SRC score ($F = 134,76$; $p = 0,00$) ¹	7,17	6,44	6,55	6,49	7,56	3,71
'Image' motivation ($F = 16,75$; $p = 0,00$)	5,43	5,21	5,46	5,59	5,79	3,38
'Health' motivation ($F = 25,36$; $p = 0,00$)	6,91	6,48	6,03	6,11	7,25	4,28
'Environment' motivation ($F = 39,59$; $p = 0,00$)	7,37	6,91	6,58	6,97	7,88	4,54
'Information' impediment ($F = 8,60$; $p = 0,00$)	6,15	5,96	6,12	6,16	6,12	4,78
'Time' impediment ($F = 3,30$; $p = 0,01$)	4,35	4,75	5,17	4,85	4,17	4,59
'Efficacy' impediment ($F = 5,33$; $p = 0,00$)	4,58	5,02	5,47	5,52	4,36	5,29
'Price' impediment ($F = 0,76$; $p = 0,58$)	6,29	6,26	6,29	6,43	5,86	6,26

One will note that groups 1, 3 and 6 tend to be homeowners, whereas the majority of individuals in groups 2, 4 and 5 tend to be tenants ($p = 0,00$; Cramer's V indicates a moderate association of 0.54). Respecting marital status, a large proportion of consumers in groups 1 (40.1%) and 3 (49.4%) was found to be married. Consumers in groups 2, 4 and 6 were mostly single or lived with a non-marital spouse. It is interesting to observe the 30.8% of divorcees or widowed individuals in group 5 ($p = 0,00$; Cramer's V indicates a low association of 0.17). The majority of consumers in groups 2, 4 and 5 reported incomes of between C\$20 000 and C\$39 999. Groups 1, 3 and 6 comprises consumers boasting higher levels of income (>C\$40 000) ($p = 0,00$; Cramer's V indicates a low intensity resonance of 0.16)

Regarding responsible consumption **motivations**, those impacting an individual's personal image (i.e. statements: *They give me the feeling of being a good person*) were found to be of significantly lesser importance for respondents in group 6. Health-related motivations (i.e. *I put my health at a lower risk when using these goods/services*) were found to be of lesser importance for individuals in groups 3, 4

and 6. Environmental motivations (i.e. *They are better for the environment*) proved of lesser importance for individuals in groups 3 and 6.

Regarding **impediments** to responsible consumption, information impediments (i.e. statements: *There is not enough information pertaining to product origin*) proved of lesser importance to individuals in group 6. Time impediments (i.e. *I do not want to waste time choosing these goods/services, as one must search several stores before finding them*) were found to be of greater importance to individuals in group 3. Efficacy impediments (i.e. *I do not trust the performance of these goods/services*) proved of lesser importance to individuals in groups 1 and 5. However, in the instance of price-related impediments, there appeared to be no significant difference from one group to the next (i.e. *These goods/services are too high-priced versus comparable items*). The most significant discrepancy from one group to the next related to the information impediment. Moreover, the most responsible consumers, and not their most sceptic counterparts as one might imagine, were found to be the individuals most concerned about the lack of information regarding responsible goods and services.

It is important to point up that discrepancies in scores from one group to the next respecting motivations were greater than discrepancies in scores respecting impediments. The most responsible individuals therefore appeared to be significantly more motivated than their more sceptical counterparts, whereas the differences between the impediment factors were found to be of lesser importance.

It is interesting to note that the 'Pro+ SRC' and 'Anti-SRC' scored respectively higher and lower on all aspects of SRC. This substantiates that SRC is a multidimensional concept which nonetheless generates homogenous practices. Accordingly, consumers are more or less responsible or more or less sceptical, and no consumer profile is highly concerned about one specific factor without being concerned about the others. This leads one to presuppose that there probably exist determinants which are common to the eight aspects of SRC measured based on behaviour, notably individuals' personalities and values.

Our study therefore confirms a real interest in SRC. As the study by Binninger and Robert (2008) demonstrated, SRC would appear to be engrained in the consumer mindset. More than 37% of sample respondents could be said to be proponents of SRC. The individuals concerned were exclusively women. It is indeed women who were found to be the most familiar with the concept of SRC and it is they who were also found to be the most responsible (François-Lecompte and Valette-Florence, 2006; Roberts, 1996; and Webster, 1975). It therefore only normal that their SRC scores were higher. These women were of an average age of 50 years, a result which bears out the findings of François-Lecompte and Valette-Florence (2006) and Carrigan, Szmigin and Wright (2004), it being important to underscore that the level of SRC tended to increase with age. It is important to note that the most responsible consumers were well engaged in the responsible consumption process and perceived few impediments linked to efficacy (performance) when compared with other groups of consumers.

5. Conclusion

SRC has become an important marketing issue deserving of meaningful consideration. As Carrigan, Szmigin and Wright (2004, p. 401) pointed up, "*The term ethical consumer carries various meanings and can be a subjective term for both companies and consumers.*" As a result, businesses would be well advised to engage in strategic interaction with and marketing initiatives aimed at these segments of so-called responsible consumers. For Brinkmann and Peattie (2008), identifying consumer segments based on their understanding of SRC and their SRC behaviour would appear to be the most important step in ensuring that the phenomenon evolves and develops.

Given the theoretical and managerial importance of the issue, the object of this study was to propose a typology of SRC consumers and identify the leading characteristics of each profile obtained. The strength of our study resides principally in the following: (1) The use of a measure of past SRC behaviour and not attitudinal behaviour as one finds in the majority literature on the topic at hand; (2) The large size (n=752) and nature of the sample (probabilistic and representative of the population of a Canadian province); and, (3) Allowance for all manner of responsible behaviour, which is to say purchase, post-purchase and non-purchase.

Our findings, which are based on six distinct consumer profiles and varying degrees of responsible consumption, have proven particularly interesting from the theoretical and managerial standpoints. Indeed, they provide for an enhanced understanding of responsible consumer behaviour and make available to organizations and public authorities a wealth of relevant information for implementing strategies designed to enhance the marketing of responsible goods and foster the adoption of SRC, allowance being made for the noticeably different behaviours and attitudes of the six consumer groups.

It is therefore of crucial for organizations, given the level of differentiation between the various segments of consumers and values/motivations/impediments regarding responsible consumption, to target advertising initiatives more appropriately, the object being to enhance advertising effectiveness and developing information and education programs focusing on the benefits of responsible goods. The lack of information would appear to be one of the major impediments to embracing more responsible consumption habits. The message conveyed must therefore be more tangible (Paek & Nelson 2008). Providing more information would appear to be critical to inciting the most responsible consumers to enhance their already responsible ways. However, in the case of less responsible consumers, organizations and businesses would be well advised to validate the performance of their goods (major impediment for 'Anti SRC' group) through product testing and sampling or official certification acknowledging product performance.

Also, it would be of the utmost importance to make discreet use of 'responsible' arguments to avoid generating negative reactions by the least responsibly aware consumers, namely those in the 'Anti-SRC' group (Binninger & Robert 2008). Businesses would also benefit from polishing the image of their responsible goods and building an emotional attachment to them with a view to enhancing the level of prestige associated with them and rendering differences in price more acceptable (D'Astous & Legendre 2009). Given the presence of a large proportion of consumers

with an average level of SRC awareness, the hope of enhancing the size of the 'responsible' market is more than conceivable. One thing is for certain, the environmental aspect is the key driver of responsible consumption for both proponents and sceptics alike.

In sum, this innovative study, by considering behavioural variables when forming groups of responsible consumers, opens the door to comparative research. Indeed, to be able to situate study findings against a broader backdrop, it would be relevant to conduct the same type of study in other countries to ascertain whether or not cultural differences (collectivistic vs individualistic) have a significant impact upon SRC advocacy.

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