The impact of sustainable development initiatives on consumers' relationship with retailers:

An exploratory study of French food retailers

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Abstract

This article explores how young consumers perceive sustainable development (SD) initiatives of French food retailers and how these initiatives affect consumers' relationships with retailers. A qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews is used. Young consumers tend to link sustainable development mainly to ecology and less to social and economic issues. When the retailer's SD actions are perceived and valued, young consumers show an emotional connection that is translated into positive attitudes, purchase intentions and willingness to recommend the retailer. However, if young consumers are not sensitive to SD actions, they keep choosing their retailer on a geographical proximity basis.

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Introduction

Sustainable development initially appears in the scope of a worldwide creation of collective awareness about harmful consequences of human activity on the future of our planet. Unfortunately, many companies only started to feel concerned about SD when their reputation suffered from a non-performance or a negative rumor. As an illustration, the case of Nike's sales drop in 1998 when the whole world discovered that exploited Asian children made its famous sport shoes. Other brands, such as Coca Cola, Wal-Mart and Gap, have also been criticized for their commitment to social responsibility (www.marketingweek.co.uk, 2007).

This is a critical topic if we know that consumers seem to award an increasing importance to the responsible behavior of brands. Just in France, 65% of French citizens declare to prefer brands with an ethical engagement (Ethicity-Ademes, 2006). Consequently, communication on SD has become a strategic issue for many companies when it comes to emphasizing their sense of ethics and social responsibility. When these brands fail to do so, public opinion could penalize their irresponsible corporate misbehavior by deteriorating the relationships that brands have with their consumers.

In the case of Nike, the brand was only able to strengthen out the situation by revising the nature of its relocations and communicating its strategy changes to the media. These episodes could however create a non-reversible damage for the brand image or change consumers' perceptions and behaviors about the brand (Louppe, 2006).

Assessing how sustainable development (SD) activities could affect consumers' perceptions and relationships with retailers is nowadays an important area to consider in the retailing sector. Most research initiatives nevertheless tend to use a corporate perspective (Konrad, Steurer, Langer and Martinuzzi, 2006) and not a consumer perspective. Among the efforts done using a consumer perspective, Gupta and Pirsch (2008) have studied how effective are corporate social responsibility programs to influence store image. In their study,

Gupta and Pirsch conclude that: "*retailer's ability to offer up-to-date products and relevant selections in conjunction with their ability to do so in socially responsible way are both important in determining consumer's retail store image and contributing to the consumer's overall level of satisfaction and loyalty toward the store*".

The development hereafter is a first attempt for the authors to explore how the incorporation of SD in the retailer corporate strategy could affect the bonds between the consumer and the retailer's brand. Therefore, the objectives of this explorative research in the French market are:

- To explore how consumers perceive the notion of SD
- To understand how SD perceived actions could affect brand associations and relationships in the French food retailer sector

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is built around two main areas. The first area covers the literature on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and integrates Sustainable Development (SD) as one of its key aspects. The second area incorporates a framework on consumer-brand relationships, brand image and brand associations.

Corporate Social Responsibility

In 2001, the European Commission defined CRS as "*a concept whereby companies decide voluntary to contribute to a better society and a cleaner environment*" (cited in Hartman, Rubin and Dhanda, 2007). It implies that a company after identifying its stakeholder groups (ex. investors, employees, customers, suppliers, public organisations) should incorporate its needs and values within its strategic and operational decision-making process. Those supporting a CSR approach should consequently go beyond the only quest of profit maximization (economic goal) but also look at the corporate social performance (non-economic goal). Meeting both types of goals, economic and non-economic, will permit the survival and success of the corporation. In that perspective, SD is positioned as a key facet of CSR.

Sustainable Development

Although being the subject of economists since the 1950's, the SD concept definition is still changing according to the circumstances in management sciences (Binninger and Robert, 2005). Often reduced to the merely ecological dimension, SD actually refers to a global approach, which states that long-term development is only feasible if we reconcile the following three aspects:

1) Respect for the environment
2) Social equity
3) Economic profitability

Specifically speaking, SD lays down the need to maintain or improve the quality of the natural environment, to ensure permanence of resources, to reduce differences in terms of quality of life among the population of the world, to promote self-sufficiency among communities and to respect human rights, making it possible to transfer know-how and wealth (including natural resources) from one generation to the next. It is therefore the material representation of a tight correlation between what we might call the 3 P's: *People*, *Planet* and *Profits*.

The concept includes concerns of equity and social cohesion, as well as the need for avoiding the threats against the common goods of humanity (Gabriel, 2003). Transposed to the corporate view, it is based on the concept of overall quality at human level. It leads the management to ask itself questions about the foundations of the company, its values, the use given to the manufactured products in time and in space and the entire manufacturing process. The company therefore refocuses on its workers more than on its profits.

SD is seen as a development process that reconciles economic, ecological and social aspects, establishing a virtuous circle between the three poles. This is ecologically sustainable development that is socially equitable but also economically feasible. In others words, the main objective of a company remains minimizing risks and generating returns for its shareholders.

For example, the trading group Monoprix has undertaken a SD strategy that became a true priority since 1990. Among the 19,000 employees, there are 15 people carrying out SD projects. This is probably the only French trading group which not only has a mascot, "the penguin", to symbolise SD, but also has a true communication campaign aimed at the general public on the subject and claiming that "*the company thinks, buys and sells in a responsible way*".

In 2002, Monoprix began marketing *Alter Eco* brand fair-trade products, killing two birds with one stone, since this is what has saved the young company from bankruptcy. The firm also launched its own "*SD products*" such as Monoprix *Bio* (organic products) since 1994 and Monoprix *Vert* (products stemming from the vegetable chemistry) in 2005.

Two years before, in 2000, Monoprix, concerned with the environment, launched its transparent carrier bags, which use less ink and solvents and thus, are less polluting. The shops are also concerned with saving on their energy and water consumption, sorting their waste and recycling it and using, among others, recycled paper. Monoprix also selects its suppliers to appraise if they are environment-friendly.

Thus defined, SD is not only applied to one aspect of the company: it should be cross-functional. All the functions of the company are affected and contribute at their own level to an overall policy of social responsibility. Clearly, SD does not only involve companies, but also investors, consumers and other stakeholders. These players can find simultaneous satisfaction in a policy guided by SD. Their interaction could be heavily influenced by ethical issues that are profitable for everyone involved (novethic.fr, "*The basics of Sustainable Development*").

Retailing, SD and Brand Image

Past research has given evidence that the corporation's engagement on SD actions could enhance consumer's corporate image. However, Gupta and Pirsch (2008) point out that in the retailing literature the constructs of "store image" or "store personality", referring here to brand image or brand personality, do not take into account the role of CSR or SD actions, or at least not explicitly.

Retailer's brand image is defined taken into account only aspects like the geographical location, merchandising, customer service, prices, advertising, personal selling, sales incentives, loyalty programs and the affective inferences born from the store's attributes.

This gap in the evaluation of the retailer's brand image is astonishing because these companies spend a lot of money and time communicating about their SD engagements and therefore, they expect a capitalization in terms of consumers' attitudes and relational proximity.

Even though the notion of brand image is widely spread in the consumer research literature, the overuse and misuse of the construct have been the subject of some criticisms (Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990). According to Reynolds and Gutman (1984), the way in which the brand image is defined determines the nature of the research questions, the methodology and finally, how findings are translated. Based on this, it seems wise to clarify its conceptualization. Dobni and Zinkhan's brand image foundation analysis (1990) offers a clear picture of the meaning and structure of the construct:

- concept of the brand perceived by the consumer.
- subjective and perceptual phenomenon formed through consumer interpretation, whereas reasoned or emotional.
- not inherent in the technical, functional or physical concerns of the product but rather affected and shaped by marketing activities, by context variables and by the characteristics of the perceiver.
- perception of reality is more important than the reality itself.

Our literature review lets us keep some elements for the assessment of the retailer image that concern not only the physical attributes of the store (e.g. space, temperature, neatness) but also more affective attributes such as the "*fit with store personnel*" or even some kind of "*love for the retailer itself*". Therefore, evaluating the retailer image is in fact assessing what is the "attitude" that the consumer has toward the retailer, considering the three components of the attitude: cognitive, affective and behavioral.

Associations and Relationships

The associative network memory theory defines brand image as "*perceptions about a brand reflected by the cluster of associations that consumers connect to the brand name in memory*" (Del Rio, Vazquez and Iglesias, 2001). Brand associations are conceptualized here as multi-dimensional constructs including: brand image, perceived quality and brand attitudes (Low and Lamb, 2000). In this perspective, consumers develop stronger memory structures for familiar and well-known brands. The familiarity with the retailer appears through proximity and consumer's frequent shopping experience. Retailer knowledge will emerge as a result of this familiarity and will be reinforced by the retailer's communication efforts. This implies that retailers who succeed to communicate their SD engagement will benefit of stronger and more positive brand associations.

Another possible explanation is given by the brand relationship theory. This theory suggests that consumers develop ties with brands not only for utilitarian or functional motives (ex. geographical proximity, price, product quality, sales incentives) but also for more emotional and identity fostering reasons (ex. values matching like empathy, honesty, trust, solidarity) (Fournier, 1998 ; Cacho-Elizondo, 2006 ; Roberts, 2005 ; Thompson et al. 2006).

When the consumer identifies himself/herself with the values that the brand holds up, he or she will be more willing to establish stronger bonds. Previous research has found that positive brand attitudes, consumer satisfaction and purchase intentions increase as the congruence between self-image and brand image increases (Graeff, 1996; 1997 ; Park and Lee, 2005).

Study Context and Research Question

In France, food retailers are communicating more and more about their SD strategies through their corporate websites and other traditional medias. This trend emerges in the 1990s as a result of societal and government pressure and has continued to step forward in the last years.

The question that arises here is if SD initiatives are really perceived by consumers and if they are perceived, how they influence the way consumers interrelate with retailers. A first step in our research project was to look at consumers' associations of food retailers' brands based on perceived SD actions. A second step of the project was to analyze how these brand associations contribute to reinforcement of the consumer-brand link.

Methodology

For this research, we opted for a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is one of the two major approaches to research methodology in marketing. Qualitative research involves an in-depth understanding of human behavior and the reasons that govern it. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research relies on reasons behind various aspects of behavior. Simply put, it investigates the why and how of decision making, as compared to what, where, and when of quantitative research. Hence, the need is for smaller but focused samples rather than large random samples, which qualitative research categorizes data into patterns as the primary basis for organizing and reporting results.

Qualitative research methods are used primarily as a prelude to quantitative research. They are used to define a problem, generate hypotheses, identify determinants, and develop quantitative research designs. Because of the low number of respondents involved, these exploratory research methods cannot be used to generalize to the whole population. They are however very valuable for exploring an issue and are used by almost all researchers as a first step. They can be better than quantitative research at probing below the surface for affective drives and subconscious motivations.

Sample Profile

The target was composed of undergraduates, men and women, aged from 18 to 25 years old who voluntarily participated in the study without receiving any kind of financial compensation. Interviews were hold in Paris (France) during October-November 2007. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. All interviews took place in the respondents' business school and were recorded with the participant's permission. Two researchers conducted the interviews, one of them directing the interview and the other taking notes and questioning when necessary.

A total of eight deep interviews were conducted[1] in the university buildings. The sample used represents the number of respondents that were necessary to achieve a position whereby each of the emergent categories and relationships was saturated (Glaser, 1978). This form of theoretical sampling ensures that the emergent theory is not fully developed or lacking in density or precision (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The content analysis, done manually, is a classical one, with sorting, categorizing and naming themes.

Interview Guideline

The interview guideline is composed of three main topics (see Appendix 2). The first topic examines how consumers perceive or interpret the SD notion. The second covers the perceived SD actions implemented by French food retailers. The third focuses on specific retailers selected by the interviewee, analyzes brand associations linked to the SD perceived actions and its impact on the relationship with this specific retailer. These chosen retailers, one or more, are the most associated to SD for the interviewee.

Before the interview process, there was an analysis of the corporate websites of the main French food retailers' to identify the way they communicate about its SD actions and their corporate values. This was done to verify if their CSR commitment was translated in their corporate values.

Major Findings

SD and Corporate Values

Most retailing groups consider that their core values are indeed connected with their SD engagement. We have elaborated a recapitulative table (See Appendix 1 for the full table) with data collected in the corporate websites, showing the main French food retailer groups, the retailers brands associated and their core values.

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[1] Please note *verbatims* are available on request.

The values that seem to be more closely related to the retailer SD commitment are: responsibility (Carrefour), solidarity and equity (Casino), social utility (E. Leclerc), trust (Auchan and Les Mousquetaires) and respect (Cora). However, the words "social responsibility" or "sustainable development commitment" do not appear directly as part of their corporate values.

Table 1: Corporate Values of the Main French Food Retailers

Retailer	Corporate Values
Carrefour	Freedom / Responsibility / Sharing / Respect / Integrity / Solidarity / Progress
Auchan	Trust / Sharing / Progress
E.Leclerc	Independence / Social utility
Les Mousquetaires	Engagement / Trust / Proximity
Cora	Respect / Honesty / Cordiality / Trust
Casino	Quality / Proximity and Adaptability / Solidarity and Equity / Dialogue / Exchange and Listening

Consumers' Perceptions of the SD Notion

We have found a misunderstanding of the SD concept. The concept is mainly associated to ecology, environment, nature, pollution, energy and recycling. That is, the mental association that appears spontaneously is the ecological aspect of SD. The social and economic aspects only appear when additional information recall is requested (Loussaïef, 2007). The terms associated to the economic aspect do not make reference to SD profitability but to global development: *Long-term development, third-world countries, continuous development, new technologies* (see Table 2).

There is however a general concern for the future of the planet as the following participants' quotations testify: "*think of tomorrow*", "*put the efforts to leave a better life for the future generations*".

Table 2: Most Cited Perceptions of Sustainable Development

Ecology	*Social*	*Economic*
Environmental protection	Equality of opportunity	Long-term development
Worldwide focus	Harmony	Third-world countries
Energy economy	Workforce diversity	Continuous development
Pollution reduction	Better working conditions	Fair commerce
Recycling	Human factor oriented	Subcontracting
Energy companies (ex. EDF)	Equity among countries	New technologies
Water treatment	Sharing among generations	
Green political parties	Justice	
Planet, without frontiers	People respect	
New materials (ex. bio-ethanol)		
Waste sorting		
Biological products		

Linking Retailing and SD

The weaker accessibility of social and economic aspects of SD in young people's minds could be explained by the fact that they still have problems to think about SD at a corporate level. For them, SD is more easily understood outside the business world. Although some sectors are more naturally associated to SD, like industry and agriculture, the association is less clear for service sectors, like retailing. One explanation is that the relation retailing - SD is still doubtful.

Why do retailers should be concerned to engage in SD? As many participants quoted: "*just to make more money*" but they also mentioned: "*I don' think they do anything about SD but it would be a worthwhile thing if they do it*".

In the retailing sector, the only SD oriented action that interviewees recalled spontaneously is the suppression of plastic bags. When asked to think more deeply, they also mentioned other SD actions done by retailers: *help small producers in developing countries*, *provide better working conditions*, *offer low prices*, *encourage recycling*, *care about family* and *promote economies of energy*, *water and paper*. However, the identification of retailers' SD actions is not straightforward.

Even though some interviewees recognize that French retailers make an effort to communicate about their SD engagement, they complain about the lack of visibility of these efforts. Furthermore, interviewees hardly imagine other innovative SD projects that retailers could implement in the future, indicating a lack of knowledge on this topic. Another explanation could be that they do not easily establish the link retailing-SD or they do not feel concerned to take a more active role in proposing some SD actions to those companies.

Impact of SD Initiatives on Retailer's Associations

Although young consumers seem not fully aware of retailers' efforts on SD, when we ask them to describe retailers doing SD, the associations emerge effortlessly. The first associations usually come in the form of descriptive adjectives rather than action verbs or names. These associations have a positive connotation, which implies brand image reinforcement.

However, SD could also be associated to higher prices and therefore perceived paradoxically as jeopardizing low-income customers. Also, companies communicating about SD are perceived as caring about their brand image. Interviewees showing a low concern about SD are less prone to suggest brand associations (positive or negative) than those showing a higher concern about SD. Unexpectedly, trust does not come out related to SD.

Table 3: Main Brand Associations Mentioned to Describe Retailers Doing Sustainable Development

Adjectives	*Verbs*	*Names*
Citizen, socially aware	Think about employees	Proximity
Responsible	Give better working conditions	Affective proximity
Visionary	Select SD engaged suppliers	Sympathy
Innovative	Care about family wellness	Protection
Non-discriminative	Look at the future	Ambition for tomorrow
Different	Offer low prices	
Empathic	Have social conscience	
Pleasant	Get close to consumers	
Human	Belong to the SD companies world	
Provident	Pay attention to others	
Concerned	Leave a better world	
Dynamic	Help others being aware of SD	
Sharing	Look for a better image	
Building		
Protective		

Impact of SD Initiatives on Consumer's Relationship with Retailers

The impact of SD on consumer's relationship with retailers is identified through the three facets presented below.

1. *The development of an affective bond between the consumer and the retailer*

Two visions are noticed. On one hand, some consumers might feel an emotional connection with the company perceived efficiency in its SD actions. This link is more or less strong and can range from simple sympathy towards the retailer to a more fully identification. On the other hand, consumers can remain indifferent to SD efforts and argue that they feel no emotional connection with the retailer, only a functional one.

For these consumers, "*a supermarket is just a supermarket*". Although this affective bond could be associated to the different variables, we argue that one source of affection attachment could be related to the social-conscious profile of the individual. A clear example of this attachment is given by "*La vie claire*", a French upper-price retailer specialized on organic products ("produits biologiques"), and the identification that its "fans customers" have with the company. However, this retailer do not appear in our interviews. Students only talk about "bio" products in general terms.

2. *The willingness to go or to go more often to the retailer*

Consumer's perceptions are here moderated by their sensitivity to the SD issue. For those not sensitive to SD efforts, there is no reason to go or to go more often to retailers making SD efforts. For those who are more sensitive to SD actions, awareness of such actions becomes a motivation to do their shopping in these stores, whatever the constraints. Yet, willingness to go to SD engaged retailers could also be limited by some practical constraints, in particular by the geographical proximity, which remains a fundamental criterion for choosing a retailer.

3. *The desire to recommend the retailer*

Two possibilities are noticed: some consumers would be willing to encourage family and friends to go shopping in "SD retailers" while others would simply not do it claiming this is not relevant for a supermarket. One interpretation of these findings is how sensible and "educated" is the consumer to this SD approach. Some participants declared that this sensitivity was encouraged mainly at home and not at school.

For others, this sensitivity comes from previous internships working for a retailer. However, most participants agree that if they were more informed about SD actions they would be more willing to recommend these companies. Prices remain however a big drawback, specially for students. The preference for a specific retailer is based firstly on price, secondly on geographical proximity and probably thirdly on "image".

Limits and Future Research

Among the limits of this research, we can mention the qualitative and explorative nature of the study based on only eight interviews. However, this builds on previous research of the two authors, one on the SD concept and the other on consumer brand relationship. Another limit is that the research has not highlighted the potential effect of moderators such as the consumer sensitivity to SD actions, the awareness of SD communication campaigns, the specificities according to the communication instrument used and the level of visibility of communication actions.

The specificities coming from each type of French retailer were not fully taken into account neither. Further research should test more deeply (qualitatively and quantitatively) the proposed learnings generated from grounded theory as well as the impact of potential moderators formerly mentioned. It would also be relevant to apply these findings to a particular retailer using its own data base of loyal clients to see if the sensitivity to SD actions is correlated to the level of loyalty and satisfaction.

Conclusion

Retailers' corporate values should reflect more directly the CSR commitment of the corporation concerning the expectations of all types of stakeholders. Although some retailers seem more and more engaged to implement and promote SD actions, they fail to establish a clear association between retailing and SD. One reason of this is the lack or non-performing communication of CSR programs. Another reason is that the link retailing-SD is not easily accessible in the mind of consumer. For them, SD is more close related to other sectors like electricity production and distribution or agriculture.

If a retailer wants to be identified as a social responsible actor, it must create the "right" associations to reshape this new brand image. With this in mind, CSR efforts awareness must be a key attribute to systematically consider the measurement of retailer brand image. By developing a social responsibility facet in their image-building programs, retailers will better fit with the expectations of an increasing number of social-conscious

consumers. Our hypothesis is that a social responsible image could strengthen the relational bonds (utilitarian and symbolic) between the consumer and the retailer.

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www.mousquetaires.com

www.novethic.fr

Appendix 1: Corporate Values of Major French Food Retailers

Retailer group	Food Retailer brands	Corporate Values	Website
Carrefour	Carrefour Franprix Shopi Dia Ed Champion 8 à huit Ooshop (on line)	Freedom Responsibility Sharing Respect Integrity Solidarity Progress	Carrefour.com
Auchan	Auchan Les Halles d'Auchan Atac Simply Market Easymarché Fredy Eurobounta Auchandirect (on line)	Trust Sharing Progress	Groupe-auchan.com
E.Leclerc	E.Leclerc Système U	Independence Social utility	e-leclerc.com
Les Mousquetaires	Intermarché Ecomarché Netto	Engagement Trust Proximity	Mousquetaires.com
Cora	Cora Match Profi Houra.fr	Respect Honesty Cordiality Trust	Cora.fr
Casino	Géant Casino Super Casino Monoprix Monop' Inno Petit Casino Petit Casino 24h Vival Spar Leader Price	Quality Proximity and Adaptability Solidarity and Equity Dialogue, Exchange and Listening	Groupe-casino.fr

Appendix 2: Interview Guideline

Topic 1: SD perception

- What do you understand for SD?
- Could you please give some other words to which you link SD?
- If we need to transpose the SD notion at a corporate level, how could you translate / understand / define / describe it?
- More precisely, could you give us some examples of actions that a company could do in order to subscribe to SD?

Topic 2: Retailer – SD link

- Let's now talk about retailers. Do you think that there are retailers really engaged on SD actions? Which retailers? Which actions have they done?
- If we talk now about mass food distribution (if the interviewee has not mentioned food retailers), do you think that there are some food retailers to which you could link SD actions?
- Do you know these other food retailers? (Food retailers which have not been mentioned in the previous question). If yes, do you know if they have implemented SD actions?
- How have you heard about these SD actions of mass food retailers? (ex. website, journal, TV, booklet, school, friends, family, etc.)

Topic 3: SD effect on consumers' brand associations and relationships

- Is there a food retailer to which you specially think when we talk about SD? Why?
- If we take this food retailer, which words, verbs or adjectives could you associate to it?
- How SD actions have affected the relationship with the retailer?