

Consumer engagement in ethical purchasing groups

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Abstract

Consumer engagement is a key concept that has already been addressed in marketing literature. While several studies have focused on brand engagement little has been done to investigate engagement when considering ethical consumption. The aim of the research was in particular to explore the different forms of engagement that ethically-minded consumers may adopt especially when they collectivize their behaviours, by adhering a GAS (Gruppo d'Acquisto Solidale – Ethical purchasing group). Given the exploratory nature of the study, we decided to adopt a multi-method research approach in investigating the GASs operating in Italy. Two key types of engagement were identified: engagement within the group and engagement towards the producers. Both have implications on how ethical consumption may impact on and transform mainstream market mechanisms. The present study provides also managerial implications about how to engage with ethical consumers, by highlighting the differences with mainstream ones.

Keywords: Ethical consumption, engagement, GAS (Gruppo d'acquisto solidale – ethical purchasing group)

Introduction

Ethical consumption is recognized to be a multifaceted concept which has been unfolding over the past twenty-five years (Devinney et al., 2010). In our perspective ethical consumption refers to the behaviour of ethically-minded consumers that feel responsible towards the environment and society (Newholm, Shaw, 2007). Mainstream consumption models have been analyzed for long in literature for their potentially negative impacts, implicitly entailing a criticism towards phenomena such as capitalism and materialism and their effects (Barnett et al., 2005).

Ethical consumption stems from a multiplicity of instances (Carrington et al., 2010) concerning both social and environmental issues. As a result, we may observe different forms through which it is shaped within the marketplace: from the Consumption addressing fair trade issues as well as environmental and no harming product buying.

The ethical consumer expresses his consciousness by means of his behaviours, prioritizing on ethical concerns while choosing products and services. In the last few years, studies on this topic have underscored a proliferation of consumption patterns connected to ethical issues (Newholm, Shaw, 2007), such as consumer resistance (Kozinets, Handelman, 2004), voluntary simplicity (Ballantine, Creery, 2010; Cherrier, 2009), slow living (Parkins, Craig, 2006), anti-consumption (Kozinets et al., 2010) and boycott–buycott behaviours (Neilson, 2010). In several cases, ethically-minded consumers exceed the individual dimension of consumption to pursue a ‘renewed cooperative engagement’ (Moraes et al., 2010) and forms of collective action (Harrison, 2005; Lang, Gabriel, 2005), such as community supported agriculture. In this sense, researchers have highlighted the heterogeneity and complexity of ethical consumers and ethical concerns (Ozcaglar-Toulouse et al., 2009): ‘the one thing they have in common is that they are concerned with the effects that the purchasing choice has, not only on themselves, but also on the external world around them’ (Harrison et al., 2005).

In this regards, ethical consumption has been observed not only at the individual level but also in its social dimension (Shaw et al., 2006) as it gave birth to collectives and social movements (Moraes et al., 2010). The latter is very important in order to understand the opportunities for consumer empowerment and actual market transformation (Newholm, Shaw, 2007). From this perspective, it is through social and collective action that ethical stances may effectively lead to actual outcomes in terms of market transformation (Gendron et al., 2009).

In this process of collectivization, ethically-minded consumers show increasing levels of engagement not only towards people sharing their very same concerns but also towards the

heterogeneous actors in the supply chain aiming at driving the market towards environmental and social compatibility.

Engagement may assume different forms with regards to the engagement objects and impact in several ways on market mechanisms. In this regards, while brand engagement has been addressed in literature, engagement in ethical consumption still remains under investigated. In this framework, our empirical research stems from the call for future research expressed by Brodie et al. (2011).

Given the exploratory nature of the study, the aim of this paper is to gain an insight of the broad concept of the consumer engagement within the ethical consumption framework. Specifically, we want to explore the relationship lying beneath ethical consumers and producers, stressing if differences exist in the engagement of mainstream consumers. In order to achieve this objective we focus on a particular type of Italian ethical purchasing group, named Gruppo di Acquisto Solidale (hereinafter referred to as its better known acronym GAS).

Ethical purchasing groups are set up by a number of consumers who cooperate in order to collectively buy food and other commonly used goods directly from producers at a price that is fair to both parties. Solidarity, referring both to environmental and social issues, is the main principle which drives their purchasing choices, as well as a key issue guiding the choice to adhere to a GAS (retegas.org, July 2012).

Ethical consumers gather together for different reasons among which socialization is one of the most prominent (Brunetti et al., 2007; Montagnini et al., 2011) as well as fiduciary and direct relationship with the producers (Montagnini, Reggiani, 2010), sharing the producers' business problems (Bernelli, Marini, 2010) and aiming at transforming the market. The GASs stress the importance of a relationship of equals in which the predominance of a party's power is not envisaged (Bernelli, Marini, 2010; Montagnini et al., 2011). But there is also an implicit aim embedded in the GAS's quest for small and local producers: establishing a connection with the authentic root against the modernism (Bernelli, Marini, 2010).

Considering the relationship between GASs' members and their suppliers, we will deepen our understanding of the role assumed by ethically-minded consumers as alternative counterparts of the producers and of the mechanisms that eventually may lead to new opportunities to transform the market through their social and collective action (Gendron et al. 2009). The overall result is an enhancement of their direct engagement with the suppliers, through an iterative interaction consumers-producers. Furthermore, according to S-D Logic proposed by Vargo (2009), we will identify if GASs are engaged in a co-creative role in the

value creation processes, through their direct involvement in the distribution processes of products and services.

The ethically-minded consumer: beyond the appearances

Different concerns guide the behaviours of ethically-minded consumers. In the modern society a key concern in ethical consumption is about the respect of people's dignity and the social consequences of their purchases (Kim et al., 1999), such as exploitation of workers or undeveloped populations, as in the case of pattern of consumption focused on social value creation processes and/or consumers who support Fair Trade.

A further (and more fashionable) type of concerns expressed by consumers regards the environmental issues. They use their purchases as a mean to avoid environmental damages and harm caused by the production of goods and services (Choi, Ng, 2011; Leonidaset al., 2010). Murphy et al. (1978) describe this segment of consumer as 'Environmentally concerned consumers', while Roberts (1996) refers to them as the 'Green consumers. D'Souza et al. (2007) examine the green purchase behaviour and how price and quality are considered as factors influencing purchase intention. A further development of this stream of research regards the 'Ecologically conscious consumers' (Straughan, Roberts, 1999), underlining the meaningfulness for consumer of being effective through their purchase choices while preserving the natural environment.

The voluntary simplicity is one of the possible responses that ethical consumers may adopt as a consequence of the two concerns above mentioned (Ballantine, Creery, 2010; Bekin et al., 2005). Voluntary simplicity is described as "the choice out of free will rather than by being coerced by poverty, government austerity programs, or being imprisoned to limit expenditures on consumer goods and services, and to cultivate non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning." (Etzioni, 1998: 620). Different levels of intensity at approaching voluntary simplicity exist, from downshiffters to strong simplifiers (Oates et al., 2008), that are reflected in consumption choices as well as reusing behaviours.

Ethical consumers' behaviour is led by the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) modified with 'ethical obligation' (the latest "represents an individual's internalized ethical rules which reflect their personal beliefs about right and wrong") and 'self-identity' ("as an issue becomes central to an individual's self- identity, then behavioral intentions is accordingly adjusted") as tested by Shaw et al. (2000: 882).

Among other things, a distinctive feature of ethical consumers is, given the power they perceive to have in transforming the market (Shaw et al., 2006), their iterative quest for information (Sonnenberg et al., 2012). Ethically-minded consumers are actively searching for information provided by organizations thus impacting on their purchasing behaviour (Auger et al., 2003). In doing so they follow a path that starts with the need of information and lead to a conscious behaviour which may even imply a willingness to pay a premium price for products incorporating ethical features (Carter, 2009).

Differences in information seeking can be related to the different levels of ethicality which are approached by consumers, such as in the case of the voluntary simplifiers investigated by Oates et al. (2008).

A crucial source of information for consumers is the label. Labels are established in order to distinguish among damaging and not damaging products, thus increasing the consumers' sensitivity about the difference in sustainability quality of the product compared to the unlabeled one (Brécard et al., 2009) thus influencing consumers' preferences (Grankvist et al., 2004) and determining a mediation effect of purchase intention activated by brand attitude (Hartmann, Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2012).

Different types of ethical labels may have different importance in the consumer perception: fair trade label is meant to be the most appreciated label, as well as European and non-governmental labels (De Pelsmaker et al., 2005). Consumers interested in environmental issues pay attention to the product label, specifically they are concerned about both positive and negative labels (Grankvist et al., 2004).

Another aspect which has to be taken into consideration when discussing about ethical consumption is the willingness to pay a higher price for ethical products. With regards to fair trade, some researchers investigated consumers' acceptance to pay a premium for fair trade labeled coffee or shade grown (Loureiro, Lotade, 2005).

Ethical consumption raises new questions about the effects that it may have on mainstreaming market and on society at large. The individual attitude and behaviour of ethical consumers have a limited impact on the marketplace. Thus, the individual perspective has been complemented by research on the social dimension of ethical consumption (Newholm, Shaw, 2007). In this perspective, it is viewed as a collective project (Barnett et al., 2005), where social integration plays a crucial role in the continuous process of (re)negotiation of the consumers' subjective view on ethics (Cherrier, 2005). Several of these ethical stances have been recently interpreted and collectivized by new social movements and their organizations in order to translate individual behaviour into collective action (Holzer, 2006).

Despite the extensive literature investigating the phenomenon which has been carried on over the last decades, some interesting issues about ethical consumption still remain under investigated. Among them we decided to focus on the engagement of ethically-minded consumers when they express their attitudes in their purchasing processes. Engagement, in addition to being a relevant and mostly unexplored topic in ethical consumption, is also one of the 2010-2012 Research Priorities by the Marketing Science Institute (MSI- Marketing Science Institute, 2012). Because of the above mentioned reasons an analysis of engagement in ethical consumption practices appears to be both timely and necessary.

The multifaceted concept of engagement

Marketing literature has not hitherto addressed in depth the concept of engagement (Gambetti, Graffigna, 2010).

The term “engagement” may assume different nuances. Some researchers associate the term engagement with the loyalty concept. Ashley et al. (2011) pointed out that detecting the possible factors which have a negative impact on consumer engagement in relationship marketing programs should be a constant concern for marketing managers.

Moving from this perspective, Goldsmith et al. (2011) shed light on consumer engagement stemming from consumers’ values, testing that when brands are perceived as a means of expressing self-concept (thus underpinning materialistic urges) consumers are more well-disposed at shopping.

In general, relationship marketing could be interpreted as the umbrella construct under which the consumer engagement concept is construed; in fact Vivek et al. (2012: 127) defined consumer engagement as the following concept: “Consumer engagement is the intensity of an individual’s participation in and connection with an organization’s offerings or organizational activities, which either the customer or the organization initiates. The individuals may be current or potential customers. Consumer engagement may be manifested cognitively, affectively, behaviourally, or socially”. The statement also identifies the multiple levels through which consumer engagement is conveyed.

Underlying the concept of relationship marketing the S-D Logic perspective takes place: relationships are meant as “mutual value-creation through mutual service provision” (Vargo, 2009). As a matter of fact consumer engagement, when co-production is enabled, is perceived as a rewarding experience for the consumer (Füller, 2006). Consumers exercise their

sovereignty within the marketplace and articulating “their consumption as “voting”” (Shaw et al., 2006: 1061). They assess their power through purchase thus enhancing an explicit form of engagement with the organization, deciding “what goods and services are and will be offered (produced) and/or created in the economic sphere of society” (Dickinson, Carsky, 2005: 29). Consumers are meant to be as *vox populi* (Devinney et al., 2010).

Marketing literature also nears the concept of consumer engagement to activation. Activation is considered in Etgar (2008) as the fourth step of consumer engagement in co-production of activities with the organization and the level of participation in the production-consumption. The consumer engagement view of Etgar refers to the relationship existing between consumer and organization.

A further development of analysis within the consumer engagement literature was carried out by Gambetti and Graffigna (2010). They identified four conceptual clusters related to the engagement construct: two relate to customer (alliance, co- production) and two to employees (interaction employees-top management and top management efforts toward employees). As a matter of fact, Roberts and Alpert (2010) drove attention to the need of a total consumer engagement, which acquires relevance only when the whole company is aligned towards transferring values for the consumers in order to gain their engagement.

A consistent stream of researches on consumer engagement focuses on online engagement, due to the widespread increase of the use of internet and consequently the interactivity exercised by consumers during the interaction with the organization. Online engagement is consequently gaining momentum, since its wide applications and uses in contemporary society and its booming in media and digital marketing . Mollen and Wilson (2010: 923) provide a definition of online engagement as” a cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value. It is characterized by the dimensions of dynamic and sustained cognitive processing and the satisfying of instrumental value (utility and relevance) and experiential value (emotional congruence with the narrative schema encountered in computer-mediated entities)”. Consumer engagement in this context emerged as a multifaceted concept. In previous researches two states of engagement were identified: personal engagement and social-interactive engagement. The first refers to experiences which can be recreated with other sources of information and media, the second to experiences which can be lead only online (Calder et al., 2009). Furthermore, new research developments on online consumer engagement are driving attention to the processes underpinning consumer engagement in online brand communities. In particular, consumer engagement in online brand

community was disclosed to be an experiential process, initiated because of the lack of information, toward objects or people adhering the same community thus stressing the dependency on the context and on the intensity of engagement (Brodie et al., 2011).

Moving on the field of consumer behaviour, consumer engagement behaviour was identified, stressing notably the different form of activities which could be undertaken by consumers and the frequency of activities in order to distinguish between activity and passivity (Gummerus et al., 2012).

A further development of online engagement is led by a newly formed concept: the willingness to participate (WTP- instead of willingness to pay), referring to the consumers' wish of being better engaged with the company, giving it not only money but also their time, thus leveraging the community's power (Parent et al., 2011).

A model of customer engagement cycle has recently been proposed by Sashi, 2012. The model was established in order to identify the dimensions which enhance value for customers through the creation of a strong relationship between buyers and sellers. The dimensions were named: connection, interaction, satisfaction, retention, loyalty, advocacy, and engagement. Different relational exchange and emotional bond with the organization are associated to customers being at different level of the customer engagement cycle. This is reflected in the difference in the use of both digital and non-digital methods applied at the different stages of the consumer engagement cycle.

Notwithstanding the recent interest of marketing researchers towards engagement, some areas of research could be deepened. In particular, Brodie et al (2011) drew attention for a further research development focusing on "different engagement objects", such as people, organizations and institutions.

Responding to Brodie et al. (2011) call for research, in this paper we will explore how consumer engagement occurs in ethical consumption and in particular the consumer engagement of the members of the Italian ethical purchasing groups.

Methodology

In order to address the complexity of the phenomenon and the multiplicity of instances which are carried on by these groups, a multi-method approach was needed.

The research has been conducted between October 2010 and June 2012 through participant observations at the scheduled meetings of two GASs, in-depth interviews to twenty two

members of other GASs established in the northern Italy, tracking of the GAS's blogs (if any) and the participation at the exhibition of critical consumption and sustainable lifestyle 'Fà la Cosa Giusta' ('Do the Right Thing') both in Trento and Milan in 2010 and 2011.

The first GAS, hereafter called GAS C., is a large group of ethical consumers (about eighty members) located in a rural area of a northern region of Italy constituted in the form of association. The second group, hereafter GAS G., is a small (twenty-five members) and informally constituted group located in a city in Lombardy.

In-depth interviews were aimed at deepening insights, values and motivations in adhering to an ethical purchasing group, the reasons behind the willingness to interact with the producers and to be informed about the production processes, the types and levels of engagement which GAS's members reveal towards ethically-minded consumers and the actors along the supply chain, mainly the producers, both as individuals and as members of an ethical purchasing group.

The participation at the fair 'Fà la Cosa Giusta!' allowed us to explore the different kinds of engagement that producers establish or are willing to establish towards consumers. Through producers' informal interviews we could triangulate the evidences we gathered through the attendance at the GASs' meetings, concerning the levels and the different types of engagement between producers and consumers.

Findings and discussion

As a result of the field research, two levels of engagement can be outlined when considering GASs: consumer engagement within group's members of the ethical purchasing group and consumer engagement towards the producers.

Peer-to-peer engagement among GAS's members occurs through a multiplicity of forms, such as meetings, e-mails, blogs and communal activities. This forms of engagement are possible because most of the GASs have a limited number of members, so communication flows are eased, as some groups have explicitly highlighted. For example, a GAS coordinator has specified during the in-depth interview:

"With regards to new membership we limited it for convenience reasons: easier operations and communication, interpersonal relationship facilitated" [Coordinator GAS R.]

The most common type of contact among the ethical purchasing group members, aimed at enabling a strong and personal engagement, is represented by the group's meetings. The face-to-face propensity of these ethical consumers engages them in a personal and intimate linkage with the other members of the group. This represents a form of engagement not yet well explored in literature. Meetings make possible to use less technological filters in communications among the group's members, thus going against the trend of using internet or social media as communication means, as already observed and studied in online engagement studies (Brodie et al, 2011). Personal interaction is not recognized by the members to be a form of reaction against the alienation created by the mainstream market mechanisms but a quest to recover their roots, an effective way to reconstruct their self-identities as highlighted by Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007).

ICTs are used mainly to support GAS's ordinary practices. In particular, e-mails are specifically used for communications concerning the orders management. Their use establishes and maintains a strong connection between the ordinary members and the member in charge of the collection of orders, thus giving the chance to engage each member in the core activities of the group:

“You don't have to decide now[at the meeting] if you like this supplier and want to buy its product. Just collect more information and share them with your friends. When you have decided, send me an e-mail and I will manage your order” [Valentino, GAS C.]

Besides, the person in charge of collecting the orders can also allow the latest to be delivered at his/her own place. Personal logistic management of products distribution, while reversing the market logic distribution principles sought by GASs, underlies further implications for people adhering the GAS such as creating a personal bond between members not based only on utilitarian means (collective buying) thus concretely translating the solidarity purpose of the group in everyday life:

“I can have our order delivered at my place. So you all can come to my home to get the things and we can have a nice cup of coffee and a chat!” [Raffaella, GAS C.]

In other GASs, a communal warehouse is used for orders delivery. The warehouse acts as logistic point for the products distribution. Orders are then delivered by the producers at the collection point agreed. Through this means the engagement of the group's members is less expanded but it gives the group the chance to reverse the traditional market mechanisms: it is no longer the mass distribution to choose which products are to be sold and selling them, but it's the group itself which chooses the products and finds out an effective way to distribute them among all the members.

At the same time the warehouse symbolizes a place where the group asserts its values of solidarity in accordance with its main aims, subtending a second meaning, as stated below:

“As always the order will be delivered at the warehouse. Anyway, we should keep it tidier because it was a bit messy last time I got in and differentiate better the waste.” [Elena, GAS S.]

Discussions about the products to be bought are carried on also on blogs which some groups nourish. The blogs establishes a file rouge among all groups' members which extends beyond the meetings, giving space to debates over products and producers and thus designing a more solid and iterative form of engagement among members. Blogs satisfy consumers' expressed need to gain more information to support their purchasing. Blogs heighten online consumer engagement between group members, not towards a specific company or brand.

Blogs represent a quicker way for members to get in touch with each other, enhancing a continuous involvement in the group's activities apart from the physical presence at the scheduled meetings. In some cases blogs are used as a sort of “meeting's extensions”, organizing the orders' management:

“Hi everybody! I am posting here an e-mail which I received from the producer concerning products on offer. If you are interested please add the order to the comments.”[Antonella, GAS G.]

“Kamut flour is becoming hard to find, so I do not think this week kamut bread will be available. The supplier is trying some other flours this week and he offers us durum wheat bread.”[Vitto, GAS M.]

Through the blogs, members also exchange information and ideas about news from the ethical market and organizations approaching sustainability. Reinforcement of values and principles which contributed to their aggregation occurs, thus enabling a strong connection one another as it happens in brand communities described by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001). As a matter of fact, in certain circumstances blogs are used in order to share ideals, values, points’ of view which enhance the GAS’s membership. The members share the same desire to change the rules of the marketplace which they do not perceive as fair (Shaw et al., 2006). The group’s members are not just mere consumers gathering in order to obtain discounted products but they perceive themselves as more complex and informed actors: they gather information in order to act as conscious consumers.

“I don’t know whether we are naïve or not. In any case we should be careful.” [Daria, GAS G.]

“When you come in contact with this type of news gathered from friends, producers or whoever tells you, share the news, spread the knowledge, please!” [Elena, GAS P.]

The need for sharing acts as a social ‘glue’ for GAS’s members, generating a common sense of belonging, as it can be observed from the iterative use of the pronoun “we”:

“I think we are naïve [...]. We should think about this aptitude which seems to be a bit uncritical, as if we are part of a GAS and moving from production to consumption should be in itself a warrant.” [Giacomo, GAS G.]

Collective activities carried out by the group not necessary for supporting ethical consumption (the main GAS’s purpose) contribute at generating greater cohesion among group’s members as it was observed by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) in brand communities. Engagement in this activities has its maximum form of expression: it encompasses not only peer-to-peer engagement but also group’s members engagement toward the organization/owner. In fact the GAS, being a purchasing group, has buying as a main

objective: other initiatives jointly carried out by the members constitute only a marginal activity, if put into place. Notwithstanding that, when other activities occur they are considered to be an effective, though secondary, way to assert the principles GASs put into practice in their everyday life choices, such as solidarity both directed toward the environment and the society. Social consciousness among group's members arises.

“I suggest to organize a group cleaning up of the river in that area. I was horrified at looking how dirty it is: there were empty bottles, papers and... why don't we gather some people of us and ask the municipality to participate, or some other organizations which can be interested? It won't take a lot of time and we will do a good thing for the town!”[Valentina, GAS C.]

Secondary activities contribute at generating a more integrated group: group's members are not connected together uniquely for collective ethical purchasing but they established a broader connection becoming in some cases friends, thus reinforcing their engagement.

Secondary activities can also be lead jointly with the producers. This implies not only the consumers engagement within the group but also the group's engagement toward the producer determining the consumer activation (Etgar, 2008). Some producers organize specific occasions for consumers' participation in the production process in order to let them feel part of it, verify the production process phases, expertise the authenticity of production. The consumers perceive to be involved and not detached from the products they are going to buy, giving them a soul, not interpreting them as a mere alienated object necessary for common usages. They bind in an active role, generating value jointly with the producer through a mutual service provision (Vargo, 2009).

“The producer needs to know how much tomato sauce we want to produce during the weekend with him, because he needs to collect the proper amount of tomatoes to allow us for our extraordinary production performance.”[Sandra, GAS G.]

“We can go in that beautiful farm we went last year for preparing the tomato sauce all together. It was so funny! And the sauce was delicious at the end. I had it finished in two months!”[Chiara, GAS

F.]

Farmers, for example, can also try to make the GAS's members feeling involved in the production process, allowing them to choose what seeds to be planted and so engaging the consumers as mentioned in a GAS's meeting. Addressing which products to be offered is a direct consequence of consumer empowerment (Dickinson, Carsky, 2005). In such a way, farmers make the consumers responsible of strategic production decisions and active actors within the marketplace, thus answering to their willingness to participate. The barrier generally established between production and consumption falls, creating a more genuine and direct connection between producers and consumers. The principle beneath the action is the same as Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007: 150) highlighted with regards to CSA (Community Supported Agriculture): "CSA also affords consumers with reaffirming experiences of emotional immediacy, confidence in outcomes, direct participatory involvement, and personal engagement that are difficult to replicate in a disembodied, polit-brand community, whose relational networks and realpolitik consequences are diffused across the vast expanse of the globalized economy".

"I was driving in the countryside on Sunday and I approached a charming farmer. I explained to him what we do. He told me that if we want he could plant the seeds we like in a corner of his land, we should say a sort of land rent. That would be great cause he produces organic food and I already know him. I think we can trust him, even if he has no certification or ecolabel. Sometimes the certification is useless because it is costly for the small farmer even if he does in fact produce organic food. Just let me know if the idea is interesting for you and we can manage to set things up."[Claudio, GAS M.]

Other effective ways producers use in order to engage with this ethical consumer groups were observed to be carried out during the participation at the meetings. An apparel producer proposed to bring his apparel sample at the GAS's meeting in order to show the product and let the members try on and chose if they want to buy his products or not. GAS can talk directly to the producer, establishing a direct connection with him, not mediated by mass distribution. Consumers can sort out every doubt or question about the production process, the

potential harm created through the production. On the one hand, GAS's members can touch the products, feel them, having a not mediated contact with the product. On the other hand the face-to-face encounter with the producer is a way for him to show his transparency toward the consumers, laying himself bare and increase consumers' trust on him. This reflects, in a way, what Parent et al. (2011) states as the "need for continuous engagement" and maintain the willingness to participate when analyzing consumer interacting with social media.

"He said he can come to our next meeting to bring the clothes here so that we don't have to go to the production place. We can try the sizes and see the products, if we like them or not. But we are not forced at buying if we don't like the clothes! Once we have tried them we can continue to order or not, but we know the products."[Valentino, GAS C.]

Transparency is important for ethical purchasing groups. Transparency is a value requested by the groups because it symbolizes the solidarity behind the production; a production made not only for profit but also for helping people and the environment. Transparency can be considered a synonym of no cheating. According to that and to the values at the base of GASs, transparent producers engage more easily with GASs because they are meant to be trustworthy partners in the marketplace.

"He sent us all prices in detailed. I received the email, photocopied it so you all can see. His mark up is fair enough."[Matteo, GAS C.]

Transparency as well as solidarity are values sought by these consumers groups. Producers who share the same ideals and values can take an advantage in engaging with a GAS because both producers and consumers very ultimate objective is solidarity.

"It is a good rehab activity. And they are good at it; honestly the t-shirts are pretty nice."[Federico, GAS C.]

The communality of the vision shared helps producers at establishing a closer bond with the consumers, facilitated also by the common language used (the producers himself act as a consumer in the marketplace).

Conclusions and further researches

By investigating consumer engagement in collective ethical consumption, differently from extant literature focused mainly on brand engagement, two levels of ethically-minded consumer engagement were identified.

The first level of engagement observed refers to the peer-to-peer engagement taking place among members of the GAS. The second is related to the consumers-producers bidirectional proactive interaction that may impact on traditional market mechanisms.

The former takes place with multiplicity of forms, mainly not mediated by a technological filter in the consumers' quest for authenticity, which enables a collective construction of their self-identity. Moreover engaged consumers heightens their empowerment: they feel part of a collectivity that has the power to transform the market by sharing not only values but also information and practices. By attending the GAS meetings and during the in-depth interviews we were able to investigate in detail the mechanisms which underlie the GASs functioning: values that drive their supplier choices and types of contact (through word-of-mouth with other GASs' members or through weekend trips outdoor to local farms).

The heterogeneous activities performed in the Ethical purchasing groups embed a distinctive social dimension of engagement which extends beyond the scheduled and more formal meetings. Through the face-to-face encounters members enhance the strength of their relationships: they do not only share the same ideals and values but they can create as well a more familiar and intimate linkage, while sharing "a nice cup of coffee". Social interaction is an essential aspect of these ethical consumption communities: it depicts the communal experience sought by empowered consumers. Consumption's value originates before consumption itself, in the peer-to-peer relationships of the community members. GASs as well as CSA consumption communities "provide their members with a reassuring feeling of participating in an intimate and human-scaled market structure, whose benefits and consequences can be directly gauged and which does not seem destined to engender a vast series of unintended consequences" (Thompson, Coskuner-Balli, 2007: 150).

Indeed a parallelism between GASs and CSA can be found: a GAS enables a social consensus based on proactive engagement generated by the same “common ideological outlook and goal system” through which “members develop an enduring sense of commitment toward the community and its core values” (Thompson, Coskuner-Balli, 2007: 148).

The implications for the GASs management are several: the aim of socializing ethical issues through these forms of market transformation may be better pursued by enhancing the opportunities for members’ engagement not only between the members themselves but also between the GAS members and the producers. The increased use of heterogeneous (not traditional) forms of communication has been proved as one of the best way to support engagement. In this regards, the use of ICTs deserve more attention by the GAS organizer that at the moment tend to privilege forms of direct contact as scheduled meetings. These forms, although represent one of the distinctive traits of the GASs, should be combined with new and more effective ways of social interaction aimed at supporting consumer engagement. Moreover, GASs could strengthen mutual relationships in order to reinforce the global net and increase their transformative power within the mainstream markets. The emerging “Distretti di Economia Solidale” that gather groups of GASs belonging to the same area are examples of the increasing consciousness of the importance of the collective power induced by a “collective” consumer engagement.

The second level of engagement aims at inducing an engagement towards the producers focused on value co-creation and guided by the feeling of not being detached from them. Producers’ transparency, direct contact and use of the same “language” are fundamental aspects of the engagement of ethically-minded consumers towards the producers.

At the base of this type of engagement there is the need to share values and reciprocal trust both affecting the way through which they co-create value in the production and distribution processes (choosing, for example, which vegetables to grow or supporting the production processes and then delivering them to the GAS members).

The complexity of forms through which the engagement with the producers is performed parallels the multifaceted aspects involved in peer-to-peer engagement within the ethical purchasing groups. This complexity implies a difficulty for the producers of getting involved with the group considered as whole entity. In fact, the group homogenizes and synthesizes ideals and values carried on singularly by the members. The engagement between producers and consumers entails for producers an implicit engagement with the single members, thus determining plural levels of engagement that have to be harmonized.

In this regards, producers may develop new forms of interaction with GASs both at an individual level and a collective level. Initiatives specifically targeted to the GAS members aimed at share information, values, evolutionary paths more in depth and in a direct relationship as well as communication through new media in order to improve the interaction's efficiency represent noteworthy areas of intervention also for PMI, at the individual level.

Opportunities for GASs to intervene in the decision making of the producers are considered positively, at the collective level, in order to strengthen the relationships between the two parties and support the GAS (as a whole) engagement.

The research presented in this paper answers, although partially, to the call for future research suggested by Brodie et al. (2011). It encompasses a deeper understanding of "different engagement objects", as peer-to-peer engagement and consumer engagement towards organizations. Furthermore, this very same form of engagement broaden Vivek et al. (2012: 127) definition of consumer engagement, being "intensity of an individual's participation", by extending the boundaries of individual participation to collective action aimed at transforming the market.

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