

# Climate change: The dark side(s) of the consumer

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## Abstract

Is consumption the enemy of the climate and marketing the tempting serpent of the ACS (Adam and Eve Consumers)? It seems that, long before the apple, being virtuous in thought is not enough to reach the Garden of Eden of ecology. Even individuals who are aware of the environmental impact of their own consumption will not necessarily put in coherence behaviors and attitudes, following psychological brakes, often unconscious: insensitivity to the extent, social desirability, trap of empathy, strategy of the common and moral compensation. These brakes can have a negative effect not only on the adoption of virtuous behaviors but also on the formation of favorable attitudes and even on the awareness of one's own environmental responsibility. It is not with moralizing speeches, nor even less with punitive approaches (both of which are not in the primary mission of marketing) that we can influence consumer behavior; it is a matter of reconciling collective interest and personal satisfaction. At the managerial level, the idea is then to promote another marketing where consumption and environment can go hand to hand (Hanan et al, 2022).

**Keywords :** Controlling beliefs; Empathy trap; Scope neglect; Tragedy of the Commons.

## **Introduction - Controlling beliefs**

Consuming is destroying. This is the etymological origin of the word. This destruction can be immediate (food products for example) or deferred in time by the progressive use of the object (for durable goods), its oblivion or its disinterest.

This destruction is not a gratuitous act; it responds to a material, psychological or social need. As Bazot (2007) points out, whatever the need to be satisfied, "to build oneself, one must take the elements and the energy somewhere, outside" (p.19). This is true in the first degree for food... Since the beginning, Man - but not only him - is a predator of his environment. But is he aware of this? In collective terms, probably. The demographic explosion, the overexploitation of natural resources, the global media coverage of climatic accidents, demonstrate every day the impact of humanity on the earth. But what about our own behavior and in particular our consumer behavior? Does the individual think that his behavior significantly affects his environment or is he not really aware of it?

To answer this question, the social learning theory (Rotter, 1966), postulates that people can be distinguished according to "their degree of perceived control over the events and circumstances of their lives" (p.72). This perception of personal control and responsibility is conceptualized by the notion of "Locus Of Control orientation" (Busseri et al, 1998). The belief may be "internal" oriented (Internal Locus of Control), where the individual is convinced that he or she can influence the course of events; or "external" oriented, where the individual believes that the impact of his or her actions is very limited and depends on other factors (External Locus of Control). Internal control recognizes the perceived effectiveness of one's own behavior and has a positive influence on environmentally responsible behavior (Schwepker and Cornwell, 1991; McCarty and Shrum, 2001). In fact, the individual may consider "his contribution to the maintenance of the environment as effective" or, on the contrary, may not "recognize the effect of his own behavior" (Gierl and Stumpp, 1999, p.73). In the latter case, they may have a positive attitude towards the environment without affecting their consumption behavior. For these individuals, changing attitudes in the desired direction will not be enough to generate a different behavior as long as their control beliefs remain resolutely external. It is therefore necessary to play on these two parameters simultaneously to influence behaviors. The stakes are high because these consumers are particularly permeable to the causes of environmental indifference identified by psychosociologists (Arnestad, 2019): 1) scope neglect 2) social desirability, 3) the empathy trap, 4) the strategy of the commons, and 5) moral compensation. In turn, in a non-virtuous cycle, they can limit both the formation of a favorable environmental attitude and the awareness of one's own behavioral responsibility. As a result, they provide managerial opportunities to promote a different kind of marketing where consumption and environment can go hand in hand.

### **1. Scope neglect**

It results from a cognitive bias that occurs when the perceived importance of a problem is independent of its extent.

It is manifested, for example, in the well-known study by Desvovages et al. (1992) regarding the protection of migratory birds. Depending on whether people were informed that this concerned 2,000, 20,000, or 200,000 birds per year, participants proposed to donate an

average of \$80, \$78, and \$88 respectively. The link between the extent of the problem and the solution (through donation) was thus completely broken here. Thus, "mass numbing" occurs when individuals cannot properly conceptualize harms affecting a large number of people and give those harms less importance than the same harm to an identifiable individual (Slovic, 2007). In terms of food, the same reasoning applies. Global malnutrition figures will have less effect than a picture, possibly of a child, dying of starvation. The theory of affect heuristics, which states that decisions are more influenced by emotional state than by reasoned analysis, explains this.

The problem with climate change is that it is a slow and continuous phenomenon, not always very easy to perceive and to prototype with an image that can create an affective heuristic. The reality of the climatic cause being thus contestable in its extent, the link with consumption will be even more tenuous. Will showing an aerial view of miles of deforestation have a real impact on the consumption of products containing palm oil? And will the numerous reports filming the huge fires in California make people give up air travel or eat strawberries or kiwis from Morocco in the middle of winter?

More than any other, consumers who live in a world of images, including advertising, need "prototypical objects" to arouse emotion and gradually form their own judgement.

## 2. Social Desirability

Social desirability is regularly mentioned when it comes to socially responsible consumption (Mohr, Webb and Harris, 2001; Auger et al., 2003). It reflects the influence of social norms in consumption. The consumer seeks to appear not as he or she really is, but as society would like him or her to appear (Devellis, 1991). A large majority of consumers thus prefer conformity, to be liked and accepted by others. Consumption makes it possible to affirm one's identity and to reinforce social ties.

This mechanism would allow them not to limit their immediate personal pleasure for the future collective good, but on the contrary, to use responsible consumption to improve their social ties.

Positive at first sight, since it leads in fine to more sustainable behaviors, it also has its limits. Only socially visible behaviors will be favored by the consumer. These are therefore very superficial changes. The problem is that a large part of consumption, especially food consumption, is often part of the private sphere and therefore not very visible from the outside. Other consumers can also feel annoyed by these dominant fashion effects and end up disconnecting themselves from the movement.

On the other hand, since humanity is not always virtuous, appealing to one's own self-interest can be a good way to find morality.

## 3. The empathy trap

In the eyes of consumers, not all environmental causes are equal. No matter how important they really are, they do not have the same resonance. While the things we care about should

be done with our heads, the reality is quite different. An unconscious mechanism that we call "the empathy trap".

Far from an ethical or logical point of view, environmental problems will make us react, while others, just as dramatic, will be put on the back burner. Generally speaking, "baby seals with their big brown eyes" will make people react more, and the same goes for pandas, dolphins and polar bears.

While empathy can foster joint efforts, it can be a trap for more impersonal or abstract global problems. For example, the melting of millions of tons of ice is a mere statistic. People's infatuation with perceived "cute" causes distracts consumers from other equally pressing issues. This is evidenced by the urgent environmental situations that have no real support: the death of coral reefs, declining bird, and fish populations, falling insect biomass, ocean deoxygenation, etc. Unfortunately for these causes, there is no real motivation to support them. Without empathetic motivations, it is complex to gain support or change behavior.

#### 4. The Tragedy of the Commons

By definition, we are all living beings competing for access to common goods, to limited resources. Open access natural resources, such as water, are specific examples. It is then often a question of a conflict between individual interest and the common good concerning the exploitation of this resource. We are all responsible for the "destruction" of our resources.

The theory called "tragedy of the commons" has been developed to explain this idea that in a world where individualism is the rule, we are heading towards the ruin of the commons.

As Aristotle already pointed out, "what is common to all is the object of less care, because men are more interested in what is theirs than in what they possess in common with their fellow men".

If we take the example of sustainable consumption, we all know that it is essential to sort our waste, to turn off the tap when we brush our teeth, to take a shower rather than a bath, etc., in order to limit the use of resources (beyond saving money). However, we often rely on others to do this rather than ourselves. The more we think we need to change our behavior, the less we do it individually. This is the diffusion of responsibility. The more of us are held accountable, the more individual responsibility seems to diminish. The climate crisis therefore relies on the shoulders of the billions of the inhabitants of the the planet, and thus on each of us.

#### 5. Moral compensation

It seems that a "good action" can contribute to less good actions later on.

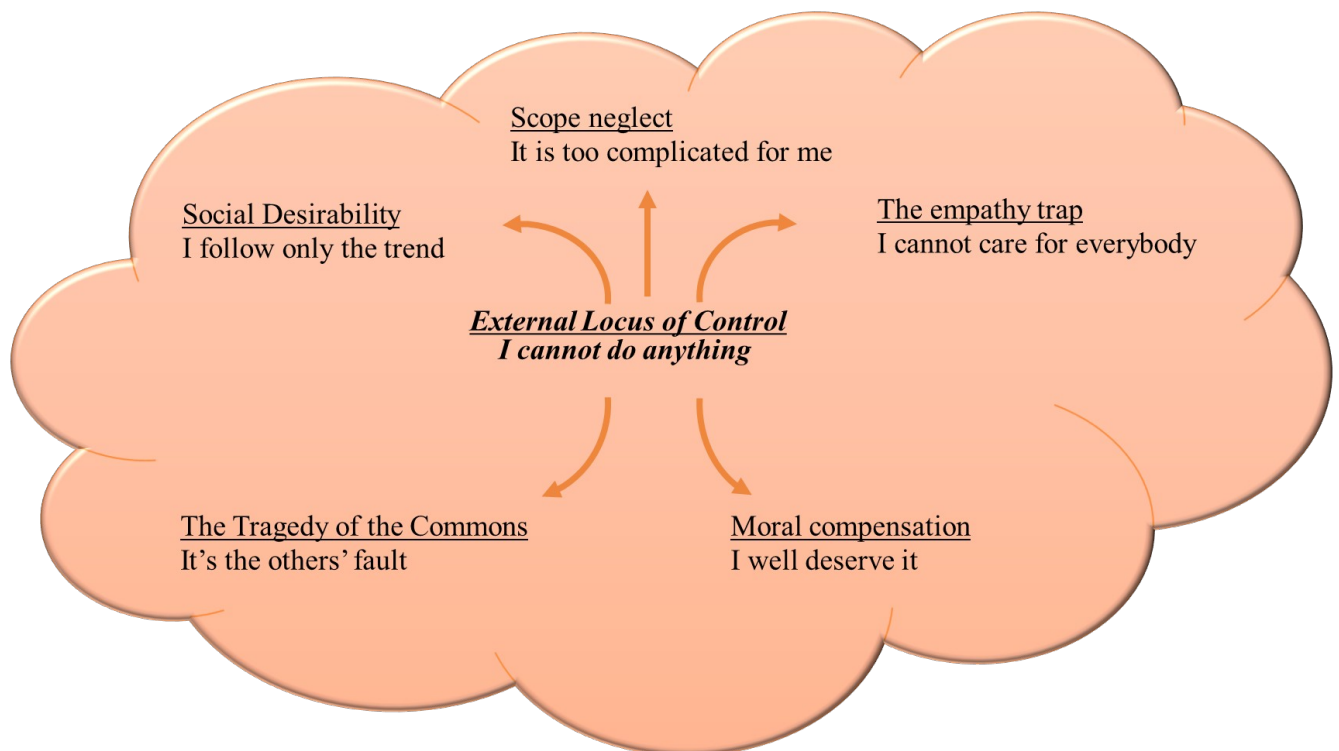
Wilcox et al. (2009) show that the choice of a salad (a healthy food) as an appetizer could legitimize the choice of a desert that is too fatty and too sweet. Miller (2001) also shows that once an individual has demonstrated his moral values, either to himself or to society, he will be more inclined to violate them later. Khan and Dhar (2006) indicate that when an individual

performs a positive moral act such as a good deed, a gift, etc., this could influence preferences for objects that are deemed unnecessary later.

It is therefore likely that small environmental acts performed will be able to "justify" large unsustainable purchases. This moral compensation is also particularly well illustrated by Khan et al (2010). They show that the purchase of carbon credits would have had a positive impact on air traffic by decreasing travelers' feelings of guilt.

This cognitive bias is a non-conscious effect that affects consumers' decisions and is likely to call into question the effectiveness of certain policies. It could sometimes explain its counterproductive effects.

**Figure 1: The black cloud of ecological unawareness (irresponsibility)**



### **What about marketing?**

Given the importance and the multiplicity of the brakes contributing to the abandonment of virtuous behaviors towards the environment, it is very difficult to directly address the climate problems in terms of consumption. Some actions can be taken to reduce the impact of a particular brake. For example, to limit insensitivity to the environment, it seems essential to reduce the psychological distance between the problem and the solution to be brought

individually. However, these actions will only have a limited effect, especially since the identified obstacles may be cumulative.

It is therefore necessary to approach this problem differently and to return to the fundamentals of marketing and in particular to its cornerstone: consumer satisfaction. For a long time now, some psychosociologists have been challenging this notion and opposing it to consumer interest. Marketing satisfaction would be a purely egocentric and very short-term achievement (for example, eating Israeli kiwis or Chilean asparagus in winter) whereas consumer interest considers the environment and medium and long-term issues.

For us, satisfaction and interest are linked. If the consumer is satisfied, it is because the product or service proposed corresponds to the interest he perceives. This is not a simple semantic or political quarrel, but a fundamental point for taking climate into account in consumer behavior. All the studies show that satisfaction has a high impact on the consumer's subsequent behavior; this is not the case for the notion of interest.

Opposing satisfaction and interest is therefore managerial nonsense. Farewell to punitive ecology which not only leads to not satisfying the consumer but also to making him feel guilty. What is the interest for him not only to give up a desire in a forced way and at the same time to feel ashamed to have had it!

From this same point of view, another obstacle can result from the psychological distance between consumption and the potential effect on the environment. Satisfaction is often immediate, especially in the case of food, whereas the effect is diffuse and distended in time and space. Discretion should not be limited to purchase vs. non-purchase but should also influence the process of creating and making the product available. Recent research points out that in individualistic societies, valuing creativity seems to be the most appropriate response to immoral consumption behaviors of adolescents (Maille et al., 2021). Some companies are beginning to integrate consumers into the environmental design of their products, notably through living labs.

The climate and environmental causes are also struggling to find the image, the symbol, that could create the affective heuristic capable of diminishing the scope neglect mentioned above. To create this heuristic, it is imperative to bring the product of the image closer to the environmental cause defended. If this cause is diffuse, too general, the trap of scope neglect will close mercilessly. The perception of degradation is not immediate enough for the consumer to link it to the act of consumption he is about to make or plans to make. The temptation is great to stage exceptional climatic phenomena whose visual impact will be great. Certainly, the images of a hurricane or a gigantic tornado will have a strong impact but, by their excess, will have difficulty being linked to the small pot of chocolate cream that one is tasting in front of his TV set.

The dramatic image of a white bear and her cub lost on a piece of ice floe, because of their more personal nature, will certainly have a more significant emotional impact on climate awareness. The quick images of a young Koala bear, lost in the middle of the furnace, have moved the whole planet much more than the long reports of overflights of the gigantic bush fires of the Australian winter of 2020.

It is therefore through the typicality of the image that the discourse must pass and not through the appeal to moral considerations or general factual advice. The former adds little to current

awareness, as opinion polls show that climate sceptics are largely in the minority in Western populations. The latter are too disconnected from the reality of the product to have a significant effect on its consumption. Government campaigns on nutrition (for example, the "eat five fruits and vegetables a day" inlays) are an illustration of this. The creation of the image must generate a strong positive emotional link, not fear, or guilt, be as immediate as possible with the product or service concerned and, in the greatest tradition of marketing, show how the latter satisfies the consumer. Typicality, proximity, satisfaction ... in short, nothing new under the increasingly hot marketing sun!

It is therefore necessary to stop systematically opposing immediate satisfaction and long-term well-being, individual interest, and collective interest. Such an opposition is more of an ideological posture than a real practical efficiency. The punitive approach to climate change, apart from the negative impact on its image, cannot create support, no matter how just the cause is.

It is then up to the entrepreneurs to use their imagination. We can only advise them to involve consumers in this quest and not just call on their usual consulting firms. In many areas, the "experts" have largely shown their limits... It is more than time to give up the "without" products, without palm oil, without sweeteners, ... and to come back to the "with" products, the only ones that consumers want to buy.

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