Why art thou resisting?

Consumer resistance to the 'citizen argument' of retailers

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Recent studies on corporate social responsibility (CSR) illustrate the positive consumer reaction to the socially responsible practices of retailers, and outline the upside for retailers to engage in these practices. However, little is known about the downside of these practices: consumer negative reaction due to the ambiguous and complex nature of consumer reaction, and consumers' resistance to the 'citizen argument' put forth by retailers. This research, through 17 interviews, fills this gap to explore the complex nature of consumer reaction to CSR practices, and investigates motivations and manifestations of consumer resistance to the 'citizen argument' of mass-market retailers. The findings reveal consumer responses to CSR practices (their resistant behaviour), their causes, and classify them in two forms – resistance to the consumerist practice attributed to retailing, and resistance to an 'insidious' commitment to sustainable development where sincerity is claimed by the mass-market retailers.

Introduction

Mass retail today shows more and more interest in the concept of sustainable development (Capron & Quairel-Lanoizelée 2004).[1] In assuming the role of responsible mega-companies, retailers must meet the growing social and ecological sensitivity of consumers. Hence, organic and fair trade products, even from private labels, are all out there on the shelves of supermarkets.

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[1] Sustainable development is defined as development 'which responds to present needs without compromising capacities of future generations to respond to theirs' (Capron & Quairel-Lanoizelée 2004, p. 22).

These practices respond to the alternative form of consumption, also known as socially responsible consumption (Francois-Lecompte & Valette-Florence 2004).[2] Earlier academic studies demonstrate numerous benefits for retailers to engage in socially responsible practices (Pava & Krause 1996; MacGuire *et al.* 1998; Stanwick & Stanwick 1998; Levy 1999; Lamine & Dubuisson-Quellier 2003). However, very few studies have tried to understand the ambiguous and complex nature of consumer reaction, and even fewer have explored consumer resistance to the socially responsible practices or 'citizen argument' put forth by retailers. Can a 'no response'/'negative response' scenario exist towards the 'citizen argument' of the retailers? Little is known about the consumers in this context. Does the consumer resist, boycott or ignore the citizen argument of the retailers? Or does he continue consuming the brand? If he does resist, how does the resistance manifest itself? Many questions in this context remain unanswered. As mass retailers intend to integrate the 'citizen argument' in their marketing strategies (mix), they undoubtedly have an augmented need to better understand their consumers' reactions and motivations in this regard. This paper is an answer to this need of retailers to understand the ambiguous and complex nature of consumer reaction and comprehend the manifestation of consumer resistance to retailers' 'citizen argument'. It hence examines the opposite behaviour of consumers, especially their unfavourable reaction to the citizen argument and the ways in which consumers manifest their resistance to the same. According to this objective, the article is organised in four main sections. The first outlines the theoretical background of this study and puts forth the relevant literature encompassing two major themes – consumer reaction to CSR practices and consumers' resistant behaviour. The next section explains the adopted methodology, followed by the research findings. Towards the end, the implications of the research are presented in the discussion section, which also elucidates the limitations of this study and opens up avenues for future research studies on the same topic.

Theoretical background

This section elucidates the following major themes relevant for this study through a literature review touching upon the concept of consumer

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[2] The retained definition of socially responsible consumption is the one proposed by François-Lecomte and Valette-Florence (2004), who define it as 'the consumption/purchase of products perceived to have a positive impact (or less harmful) on the physical environment or on the society and/or as the demonstration of the buying power to express social or environmental concerns.'

response to CSR practices, followed by resistance to the 'citizen argument' of retailers, sources of resistance to the 'citizen argument' of retailers and dissonance in the CSR as the cause of variable resistance.

Lipovetsky (1992) proclaimed that association with sustainable development actions can make a difference in the 'competitive world where trade battles are won on the field of image'. This is indeed the scenario in the French retail sector, where retail chains have adopted some CSR practices and made them visible to all, as a means to improve their image among their stakeholders, especially consumers. Even if the social and environmental commitment of retailers has no interest for them, they seem to engage in it because they are aware of the effect of the communication of their actions on the responses of their consumers. It is here, on two large themes, where the majority of earlier studies have focused so far, i.e. (1) the relationship between CSR practices and its benefits for the firm that engages in them, notably through positive consumer reaction to these practices (Pava & Krause 1996; MacGuire et al. 1998; Stanwick & Stanwick 1998; Levy 1999) and (2) the interactions between the CSR practices of companies and certain elements of their marketing mix (Creyer & Ross 1997; Murry & Vogel 1997; Folkes & Kamins 1999; Ellen et al. 2000; Sen & Bhattacharya 2001). While most studies have focused on the advantage of CSR practices for firms, very few researchers have pointed out their complex nature (Brown & Dacin 1997; Sen & Bhattacharya 2001). Even fewer have pondered upon consumer responses vis-à-vis the CSR efforts of retailers. As a result, we increasingly witness new criteria related to CSR, such as ethics, organic (bio), fair trade, and the social responsibility integrated in the selection and evaluation of companies, brands and products on the market.

Companies understand that they 'are no longer judged solely on their financial performance, but also on their ethical performance in a careful and critical manner' (Lavarota 2008). A point to illustrate: the American brand of shoes, Camper, has even gone so far as to write on its shopping baskets 'If you don't need it, don't buy it' (Sansaloni 2006). This commitment to ethical values, respect for the environment and the reduction in consumption for a more 'responsible' world, has in fact been quickly exploited by brands with the rise of fair trade products from 'biologic' farming to environmentally friendly products (François-Lecompte & Valette-Florence 2004). The pertinent question, then, is 'Why are firms incorporating ethics into their strategy: is it because the demand from consumers is clear or is it because retailers must counter an increasing criticism from the aware consumer of unethical retail practices, mainly

related to the environment, health and social issues (e.g. fair wages/prices for producers)?'

Earlier studies have demonstrated the growing concern of consumers as to the harmful consequences on the environment of industrial activities, which explains firms' response to this concern/awareness by using more and more strategies such as 'green marketing' as an essential component of their approach (Manrai *et al.* 1997). As such, several studies suggest that CSR actions have an impact on consumer behaviour (Brown & Dacin 1997; Menon & Menon 1997; Lamine & Dubuisson-Quellier 2003; Swaen & Chumpitaz 2008), and can even influence beliefs and attitudes towards products and brands. Consumers are no longer interested only in their consumption experience, but are also concerned about the practices and strategies of those companies whose products they consume (Lamine & Quellier-Dubuisson 2003). These practices must be congruent with consumers' beliefs and perceptions, which means that the demands of consumers may result in rejection of and opposition to the firm in the case of incongruence or absence of practices that concur with the beliefs and perceptions of consumers. Consumer responses to firms' CSR practices or 'citizen argument' are variable depending on the type of business activity and the perceptions in relation to the credibility and the purpose of the commitment. In this context, consumers may develop a negative reaction against CSR activities, taking into account cognitive dissonance. Some practices of firms said to be environment friendly can be perceived as 'manipulative', since they are still inscribed in the market logic, supported by sales and marketing techniques (Penaloza & Price 1993). Consumer scepticism is fuelled in particular by the poor communication of brands or firms, and by the poor reputation of CSR initiatives (Swaen & Chumpitaz 2008).

Consumers therefore remain wary; they are hence less likely to take into account the CSR initiatives or citizen argument to form their perceptions about a company and its products – more so if they feel that the company communicates about CSR with the singular goal of increasing its profits. In this way, acts of resistance are developed against any citizen argument put forward by the brand. Thus the consumer expresses, according to circumstances, a conscious and active resistance.

Some work on ecological attributes shows that consumers interested in green products are generally sceptical of advertising done in this regard (Shrum *et al.* 1995), or feel disturbed by the environmental claims used by companies. This scepticism is mainly produced by the exaggeration of certain messages used, as well as by the lack of clarity and/or meaning

in them. Penaloza and Price (1993) suggest that the 'irresponsible and unethical use' of marketing methods has resulted in the emergence and nurturing of consumer resistance. Thus, among the factors of consumer opposition are the 'irresponsible and unethical' marketing perceived by the consumer, and the strategies referred to as value-added instruments by the retailer (Lavorata 2008).

As the CSR issues are unlikely to diminish in importance, the concerned retailers must then adopt a position in terms of commitment, and communication strategies that can meet the expectations of the more aware consumer (Holbrook 1999). It is here that this study intends to clarify for retailers the complex nature of consumer responses towards their CSR efforts, investigating in particular the motivations and manifestations of consumer resistance to their 'citizen argument', a clear understanding of which would permit retailers to provide their socially responsible consumers with 'a higher perceived value' (see Table 1).

Table 1 Literature review – CSR practices and consumers

- Positive reaction to social and environmental commitments: Levy 1999; Lamine & Dubuisson-Quellier 2003
- Positive link between CSR and financial performance, cognitive and behavioural responses: Pava & Krause 1996; McGuire et al. 1998; Stanwick & Stanwick 1998; Oppewal et al. 2006.
- Interaction between social responses and the marketing mix: Brown & Dacin 1997; Creyer & Ross 1997; Murry & Vogel 1997; Ellen et al. 2000; Sen & Bhattacharya 2001
- CSR practices and price, quality: Creyer & Ross 1997; Folkes & Kamins 1997
- Complex nature of CSR practices: Brown & Dacin 1997; Sen & Bhattacharya 2011
- Scepticism/low reputation of CSR: Shrum et al. 1995; Chumpitaz & Swaen 2008

Methodology

An exploratory study is generally used when the research problem is blurred, or when the available literature does not seem clear or has some grey areas. As this paper tries to understand consumer reaction vis-à-vis the CSR efforts of retailers, an exploratory inquiry via interviews is most suited to respond to its research questions. As such, recruitment of the research sample is an essential first step and requires careful attention. The recruitment of 17 interviewees for this study was done on the basis of various criteria: first, variety in terms of age, sex and socio-economic status was ensured with a diverse panel of French consumers (ten males, seven females, with 11 consumers whose age varied between 22 and

35, eight consumers from a positive socio-professional background and nine consumers from a negative socio-professional background); second interviewees were selected from distinct geographical areas (four from Paris, six from the Ile de France region outside Paris and seven from five different regions of France). Further, as this study is exploratory in nature, it does not require a large representative sample of the population studied. The sample size is considered satisfactory when the researcher believes he or she has reached theoretical saturation – that is to say, a certain level of variety in the themes discussed by the interviewees has been reached.

Once the research sample was constituted, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 17 respondents. The data collected was analysed through content analysis. Bardin (1993) presents this analysis as 'a set of communication analytical techniques destined, by systematic and objective procedures of messages description, to obtain indicators (quantitative or not) for the inference of knowledge related to the production/reception conditions of these messages'. As part of a content analysis, a rigorous methodology based on explicit rules of reading interpretation and coding ensures reliable results. What makes the technique particularly rich and meaningful is its reliance on the coding and categorising of the data (Shaw 1999; Spiggle 1994; Strauss 1987).

The basics of categorising can be summed up by this quote: 'A category is a group of words with similar meaning or connotations' (Weber 1990, p. 37). Based on the premise that repetition of units of discourse analysis (words, similar expressions or meanings, phrases, paragraphs) reveals the speakers' areas of interest and their concerns (Allard-Poesi *et al.* 1999), this further helps in identifying elements of discourse to reveal the interests of the respondents (Allard-Poesi *et al.* 2007). The units of speech were transcribed and a thematic analysis was conducted by adopting an interpretivist posture. The process of exploration and understanding has consisted primarily of trying to reflect the interpretations, visions and ideas of the actors studied, following the various interviews, transcripts and codifying (Thiétart *et al.* 2007), while minimising the subjective interpretation of the researcher. The reliability of analysis was improved by double coding, by two researchers using the same guidelines; the comparison showed minimal differences between the two results, particularly regarding the emergent themes. Post-content analysis, these emergent themes form the basis of our findings (see Table 2).

Table 2 Interview sample

Interviews	Sex	Age	Profession	Civil status
Mohamed	M	37	Guardian	Married, 3 children
William	M	22	Student	Single
Luc	M	28	Teacher	Single
Noel	M	29	Blue-collar job	Single
Carole	F	62	Retired school teacher	Married, 3 children
Fabienne	F	44	Unemployed	Married, 2 children
Mathilde	F	51	Auxilliare de vie	Divorced, without children
Agnes	F	33	Professor	Marital pact, 1 child
Betty	F	60	Retired professor	Single
Regis	M	40	Police commissioner	Married, 2 children
Veronique	F	31	Lawyer	In couple, without children
Eric	M	37	Trader	Single
Eduard	M	22	Student	Single
Hector	M	46	Carpenter	Married, 2 children
Marie Madeleine	F	78	Housewife	Married, 3 children
Michel	M	77	Retired engineer	Married, 3 children
Philippe	M	76	Retired researcher	Married, 2 children

Findings

Antecedents of consumer resistance to the 'citizen argument' of the retailers

Negative perception of the motivations and practices of large retailers
The pejorative assessments that consumers attribute to the commitment of large retailers in terms of CSR are primarily related to a strong sense of scepticism. 'They [the retailers] jumped on the bio, it's not because the bio was something that would help the world cope, simply because it was a growing market' (Betty). It should be noted that consumer scepticism regarding the motivations of large retailers in socially responsible commitment is non-sector specific. In any commercial sector, consumers believe that profit is the primary purpose of any economic actor. If we assume that the wave of social responsibility provides players in the retailing sector with a strategic tool for differentiation against tough competition, the fact of communicating its engagement with various stakeholders is to some observers an operational marketing element used to improve the image. 'Let's say there's always a business side behind; even if they do actions towards the environment, employees, consumers, there is

always the business side behind' (Ludovic). This is perceived by consumers as belonging to a selfish and manipulative motivation, and hence arouses some strong reactions and rejections as evidenced by the responses of our participants. Inconsistencies in the practices of large retailers, a source of cognitive dissonance among consumers, are the engine of resistance to the socially responsible positioning sought by mass retailers in France. The reaction of a few consumers questions the compatibility of price pressure on suppliers with the requirements of a social quality that guarantees people's fundamental working rights or with conditions for less intensive agriculture.

Negative image of mass retailers, based on social issues
We asked our interviewees what they thought about retailers. The majority of respondents have a negative image of retailers in response to the citizen argument. 'I am wary of retail, I say to myself that they are riding the current wave of sustainable development openness, fair trade ... I cannot remove this suspicious/unreliable side of the retailers, which for me has a strangely negative side, even if it was Leclerc who introduced the first store bags, plastic bags. It was a great idea but it is then its use for precisely the pervert and push consumption that we are going into regression in this area' (Mathilde).

The reasons for this image are many, but we identify five main elements: (1) a negative image related to the size of brands and their interest in profit; (2) a negative image related to employees' work conditions; (3) a negative image because of the 'destruction of small businesses'; (4) a negative image because of consumers' reports; and (5) a negative image related to producers' and suppliers' reports. However, although respondents recognise certain types of commitment by brands to sustainable development, this recognition does not greatly alter the generally negative attitude, and gives rise to great suspicion and caution in the interpretation of such commitments. 'There is a concern to respect the environment; for example, we see less and less plastic bags but it is all a bit, well, trivial compared to all the problems that arise in general, it seems more a way to display a concern rather than really the desire to pass it on all levels' (Agnes).

Causes of resistance: history related to personal experience of the consumer
The history identified through the interviews helps to bring out the motivations related to the personal experiences of consumers. Here we distinguish three forms of resistance: (1) 'resistance by guilt'; (2) 'resistance

by solidarity'; and (3) 'resistance by identity'. These three motivations are more preliminary forms of resistance related to the personal experience of consumers, which form the first sign of resistance.

Resistance by guilt is characterised by the heaviness of an experienced deprivation and/or shortage, which feeds mixed feelings vis-à-vis the abundance and consumerism facing our society today. 'We panic when we go to the supermarket and we see quantities of products which they propose and aren't sold' (Marie-Madeleine). In our interviews, we noticed that people who share a difficult experience, particularly in terms of need for food, develop a unique attitude vis-à-vis certain practices of society, and demonstrate a specific attitude vis-à-vis the consumer society in general and the practices of retailers in particular. 'We have known the war, we don't like wasting' (Marie-Madeleine). Our respondents adopt a different behaviour, characterised by a form of voluntary simplicity they practise in their daily lives, especially their consumption behaviour. 'We don't change the shoes, the clothing stuff all the time' (Michel).

Resistance by solidarity represents the solidarity demonstrated by consumers towards local shops: while recognising the importance of retail, particularly in terms of job creation, some of our interviewees explain their resistance to the retail offer in favour of local shopkeepers. 'I got used to going to the market and now I go to the local merchants consistently … and then there's this voluntarism to save the small local business which means by buying bananas or salads …' (Philippe). Our study recalls that one of the causes of the poor image 'enjoyed' by retailers is that they crush and accelerate the disappearance of local shops, so this is consistent with its values of solidarity. 'We are vigilant enough to buy all our fruits and vegetables in the small North African shops so they do not disappear, well yes because they seem to be having trouble … and so it seems important that they survive' (Philippe).

Resistance by identity constitutes strong rejection by our respondents of socially responsible practices by the retailers. 'They lie to us all day long. They distort the truth for us. They don't tell us the truth. They do not give us the chance to understand certain things, so they lure the public from A to Z, for economic reasons, from a social standpoint, Now I do not believe anything at that level' (Betty). 'They do some window dressing, but the reality … I'm not quite sure of transparency in any area, not at all, we do not live in a world of transparency' (Betty). Rejection, which according to us emerges from propensity to resist, is entrenched in the personality of each individual.

Manifestations of consumer resistance to the 'citizen argument' of retailers

Resistance to the control and manipulation of behaviour through boycott
Across different respondents persists a strong perception of the existence of sales and marketing 'manipulation', which explains their scepticism as to their eventual commitment to the market system. Thus, the speech of consumers at this level is punctuated with expressions of doubt and hesitation as to the actions and commitments of retailers. This negative perception towards mass retail is justified by inconsistencies in their practices (e.g. ethical products alongside 'monster' products, the selling of fair trade products while continuing to exploit employees). 'Anyway there they are not clear at all levels, more so on fair trade, SD, I think they lack the communication, anyway, at least in my case if I doubted what they communicated, I would ask for credible evidence, because it is fancy to advertise by saying we do this we do that but it really must be true, they would also have to prove it' (Mathilde). A wide range of lexically inconsistent behaviour, combined with speech full of expressions of negative feelings, generates a strong cognitive dissonance for consumers. The content of interviews reveals two unique forms of resistance: (1) 'resistance to a consumerist practice', which consumers attribute to retail, and identify as characteristic of our times, and (2) 'resistance to "ambush" commitment' in the various aspects of sustainable development where sincerity is claimed by large retail chains. This resistance results in behaviour not only of boycotts of distribution channels, but also of specific brands. 'The Carrefours, the Leclercs, personally me I tend to boycott them, because to me they are places of perdition. I'm sure it's there where the over-debting of people who do not know how to manage took place' (Mathilde). These boycott behaviours are a result of a strong sense of scepticism and overall negative perception against retailers. 'As for boycotting, of course I boycott to the max. I will not buy Adidas shoes, or anything' (Regis).

Quest for 'humanisation of the market' through the pursuit of alternative retail
Parallel to these manifestations of resistance, other forms seem to be emerging early. Indeed, dealing with the perception of the practices and motivations of large retailers, consumers seek the 'humanisation of the market' through the exclusive pursuit of organic, environmental and fair trade products at special sale points. '[Supermarkets] are really starting to

develop bio (organic) product lines/ranges, sometimes even fair trade, so it's true that I buy them when I go shopping because I take care of an older person … So sometimes I buy organic at Leclerc but it's true that I do not go all cheerful as for me this is not the same bio [organic] that I can find in specialty stores, bio cop or naturalia Paris' (Mathilde).

Consumers nevertheless seem hampered by the constraints of prices, demonstrated in their behaviour and further reinforced by the negative image from which major retailers are suffering. Beyond the search for 'humane practice' of the market, analysed discourses highlight the development of a reversal of consumer power, and this through the rejection of certain actions and information. 'It is true that I tend to take products that are labelled fair trade uh … or bio [organic], it's true that it attracts me/gets my attention. I have more tendency to turn to these types of product' (Agnes).

Development of a consumer consecration

As earlier studies demonstrate, when dissatisfaction with marketing practices and markets occurs, consumers are able to engage in resistance efforts to 'regain control'. In our findings this form of resistance appears to be a real expression of consumers' pursuit of autonomy, while at the same time it is a voluntary act of joining the reflexively defiant consumer rebellion. 'I think they [retailers] will be constrained by the fact that consumers are becoming "eco citizens", because it's always by the pressure that they will be forced to adapt to demand and if there is a demand for ethics and accountability that goes into each "eco citizen", the demand will change and we will use less, we will consume what is needed, we will consume more organic, more ethical, more responsible and they will be forced' (Mathilde). This behaviour of rebellion and seeking to regain power is expressed through a strong metaphorisation of perversity – retailers are compared to 'monsters', 'mammoth', 'crushing everything in their path'. These different perceptions and dissonances are a result of feeding motivation, resistance, then the consumer consecration, and through this rejection, boycotting certain products, retail channels and the creation of alternative projects. 'I am a member of ANEF and every year they send me their annual report and in fact I see even a small company that starts with a thorough environmental, social or ethical approach, I say it has the right to earn money, that it be clean money, earning a livelihood with dignity, so we respond to ethics, to responsibility, especially when everyone is happy to contribute to development' (Mathilde).

Conclusion

In terms of theoretical contribution, the findings of this study reinforce the results of earlier studies, especially as to the impact of CSR actions on consumer behaviour (Lamine & Dubuisson-Quellier 2003; Swaen & Chumpitaz 2008) and the importance of congruency of CSR actions with consumers' beliefs and existing negative perceptions of the motivations and practices of large retailers. Our paper further stresses the value of mobilising knowledge in terms of consumer resistance to better understand consumer responses to CSR – an original perspective that provides new tools to supplement the understanding and prediction of consumer responses to socially responsible business practices in general and in particular towards retailers. In the process, this study primarily outlines consumer response to the citizen argument of the mass retailers, through highlighting (1) that the negative image of mass retailers is rooted in social issues, (2) that CSR practices by mass retailers are susceptible to consumer resistance, (3) this consumer resistance is propelled by consumers' guilt, solidarity and identity, and (4) this consumer resistance manifests itself in the form of consumer boycott, consumer shift towards alternative retail, and development of consumer consecration. Clearly, as more and more retailers are inclining towards CSR, this understanding can help them in several ways: (1) retailers, through effective communication about their CSR practices, can minimise resistance among consumers, i.e. the main grievances against the mass retailers are related to 'communication' – lack of information, lack of transparency and lack of credibility – all the while addressing the issues of guilt, solidarity and identity, which catalyse consumer resistance; and (2) retailers can improve consumers' perception, which plays a significant role in consumer resistance, especially when consumers remain doubtful about retailers and the motivations behind their socially responsible commitment. The results will hence permit the retail chains to better adapt their communication strategies and find the most effective ways to deliver them to consumers.

Further, 'enviropreneurial' strategies and citizenship are at risk of being perceived as exploitative or opportunistic if there is a subsequent gap between the marketing claims of retailers and emerging environmental realities. This breach of perception will have strategic implications for retailers and disappoint consumers; hence retailers have to remain overtly cautious while communicating their CSR efforts and ensure the honest implementation of their CSR claims. In this manner, the study outlines several managerial implications for mass retailers. However, as it remains exploratory it falls short of extrapolating its findings to other sectors.

This opens up new avenues for any future studies, which may extend this study of individual motivations beyond behaviour or resistant attitudes to the social responsibility of retailers to other sectors. Finally, as this study was conducted among French consumers, future studies could focus on comparative studies of consumer perceptions of CSR arguments from the resistance point of view, especially useful for multinational firms in helping them to effectively cope with differences in consumer perceptions vis-à-vis their CSR practices.

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Note

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