



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research



Experiential responsible consumption

Ebru Ulusoy*

University of Maine, Maine Business School 5723 DP, Corbett Business Building, Orono, ME 04469, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 January 2015

Received in revised form 1 June 2015

Accepted 1 June 2015

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Responsible consumption

Experiential consumption

Alternative break

Volunteer tourism

Transformative learning

Self-transformation

ABSTRACT

Responsible consumption is an increasingly observed phenomenon. Previous research has largely investigated this phenomenon as a conscientious activity by rational individuals. An understanding of the incidental, communal, and experiential aspects of responsible consumption and how these aspects affect consumers remains relatively limited. This study utilizes qualitative methods to explore the self-transformative dynamics of participation in an experiential responsible consumption context that is radically different from everyday life. The context of this study is the alternative break (AB) program in the United States in which student volunteers spend their spring break helping others or improving the environment. In this context, responsible consumption becomes an act of hybrid of moral, rational, social, and ludic agencies. This study shows that some people participate in some forms of responsible consumption incidentally without any specific ideological motivation; they perceive it more emotionally than rationally, and they are transformed by the experience into people who integrate responsibility considerations into their identities. The analysis reveals that there are six interrelated factors that result in these transformations: organic community, unpretentious fun, embracing the other, developing and utilizing capabilities, challenge, and self-reflection. Participants exit AB trips with heightened feelings of empowerment and feel more committed to responsibility considerations and responsible behavior due to these transformations.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Responsible consumption has traditionally been investigated as a rational form of consumption where aware citizen consumers collect all information available about the solutions to social and environmental problems that result from careless or mindless mass consumption. They “consciously evaluate” these issues, and then work on changing their consumption behavior to make a difference either in their own lives or in the lives of others (Antil, 1984; Caruana, 2007; Follows & Jobber, 2000; Hobson, 2002; McDonagh & Prothero, 2014; Zolfagharian & Pentina, 2011). Although focusing on the instrumental rationality and deep-seated values of individual consumers is extremely important in exploring why and how people act as responsible consumers, understanding communal and experiential dimensions of responsible consumption activities can be just as significant (Rasmussen, 2014). In today's experience and community-oriented culture, we observe the increasing role of these dimensions in shaping the experiences and values of consumers in almost every consumption context, including responsible consumption ones, such as the Burning Man festival (Kozinets, 2002) or trends like freeganism (Nguyen, Chen, & Mukherjee, 2014). These are the dimensions that lead to an emotional connection with contexts and causes, and they are shown to be as important as

rationality in creating responsible and altruistic behaviors (McCarthy & Tucker, 2002; Schwartz, 1977). However, the research on these aspects and how they shape consumers' responsible self-concepts is limited. This study aims to fill in some of these gaps in the literature.

Two overarching research questions that guide this study are: (a) why are some people willing to spend a spring break with limited free time engaging in physically and/or emotionally challenging social or environmental work when they have options that are marketed as more attractive, such as a mythical carefree fun vacation that has almost the same monetary cost, or could be just relaxing? (b) How does participation in such a vacation option contribute to the self-concepts of consumers?

The context of this study is the alternative break (AB) trip phenomenon in the United States, a form of volunteer tourism (voluntourism) in which participants spend their money and time to participate in a service trip during spring break, a time traditionally devoted to relaxation and fun. Even though AB participants are volunteer tourists who go on service-trips, as the findings of this study show, they do not necessarily have specific ideological motivations to engage with social or environmental issues that typical volunteer tourists have. Most initially participate in AB trips to have a different and unique experience without having any deep understanding of what they will be doing or of what it means to give back. In the process of participation, they perceive the meaning and value of what they do emotionally as a member of a community rather than individually and rationally. Hence, consumption in

* Tel.: +1 207 581 4944.

E-mail address: ebru.ulusoy@maine.edu.

this context can be considered an extraordinary experiential type of responsible consumption.

Through a qualitative study of this activity, this research explores the motives of participants, as well as the experiential, emotional, and communal drivers of personal and communal transformations that take place in an out of the ordinary contexts of responsible consumption. It also explicates the meanings these transformations have for the participants. In so doing, this study advances the understanding of the multiple dimensions and effects of responsible consumption beyond instrumental rationality.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Responsible consumption and identity

In this study responsible consumption is defined as “the consumption that has less negative impact or more positive impact on the environment, society, the self, and the other-beings.” It is an umbrella concept that highlights various types of consumption terms that represent specific practices such as *sustainable consumption* – consumers consider the impact of their consumption on society, the environment, and the economy, and use resources taking future generations into consideration (Phipps et al., 2013); *ethical consumption* – consumers are driven by pure motivations (Cooper-Martin & Holbrook, 1993; Memery, Magicks, Angell, & Williams, 2012), though not every consumption that has ethical content impacts the well being of others (Francois-LeCompte & Roberts, 2006); *consumer citizenship* – consumers prioritize and actively contribute to the maintenance of just and sustainable development by caring and acting responsibly on family, national, and global levels (Schrader, 2007); *socially responsible consumption* – consumers prioritize their contribution to social issues and make it a point to buy from companies that care about these issues (Antil, 1984; Webb, Mohr, & Harris, 2008); and *green consumption* – consumers privilege their contribution to environmental issues over other issues (Cho, Thyroff, Rapert, Park, & Lee, 2013; Haws, Winterich, & Naylor, 2013). Even though any of these practices refer to responsible consumption, each emphasizes different aspects of it. Responsible consumption is used in this research as the broader term, as it is not limited to taking future generations into consideration, to maintaining justice in development, to concern about social or environmental issues, or driven only by altruism. Overall, it is a complex phenomenon that has multiple dimensions.

Consumers are increasingly interested in various forms of responsible consumption, and the number of consumers who identify themselves as ‘responsible’ is a growing segment, and this growth is the consequence of increasing awareness about social, environmental, and/or ethical issues (Schrader, 2007) that result from mindless consumption in today’s society (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). Responsible consumers are conceptualized in previous studies as consumer citizens who have duties and rights, are aware of these duties and rights, and act on them (Schrader, 2007). However, taking on an identity as “responsible” is not always a rational, straightforward process. Responsible consumers create meanings of different responsible identity types through a process of reflecting on diverse contexts and people, as well as on multiple layers of cultural, structural, social, and individual meanings (Bruner, 1995; Burke, 1991). When consumers perceive these meanings as positive and intense, responsibility identities become salient. In other words, responsibility becomes an important determinant and dimension of their attitudes and behaviors (Reed, 2002). Yet, identities related to consumption are reflexive and dialectical in nature (Abrams & Hogg, 1999; McAdams, 1996). Identity meanings constantly change as consumers endlessly reflect on ever changing contexts (Bisogni, Connors, Devine, & Sobal, 2002; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993).

The literature on responsible consumer identities and behaviors concerning the priorities of consumers is fragmented, and it is fragmented

as well regarding how and why consumer develop responsible identities. Yet, there are two conditions for responsible consumer identities that are common in most previous research: 1) consumers actively seek, process, and interpret information about responsibility, and 2) they actively choose to act on it (Schrader, 2007). Hence, responsible consumption is closely related to feeling certain obligations and having specific values. Responsible consumers manage their behaviors rationally according to these obligations and values (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). According to previous research, cognitive internalization of information is what influences consumer identity negotiation and expression, and it shapes their motivational structure for responsible behaviors (Zolfagharian & Pentina, 2011).

Yet, as mentioned earlier, responsible consumption is a complex process and the literature on it involves further questions that have only been partially answered, such as whether consumers are motivated either altruistically or by personal interest, and why consumers who say that they have a positive attitude toward behaving responsibly do not act accordingly. Therefore, it is useful to explore different contexts and types of responsible consumption in-depth.

2.2. Voluntourism and self-transformations

One context of responsible consumption concerns tourism, as mass tourism has a variety of significant negative impacts on society and the environment (Durbary & Seetanah, 2015; Mathieson & Wall, 1982) such as tasteless and problematic development, environmental harm, social alienation and homogenization (Butler, 1990). The discussion about responsible consumption is expanding in the tourism field, and alternative forms of tourism are increasing. Voluntourism – an alternative form of tourism that combines traditional tourist activities such as sightseeing with volunteer service work activities that range from construction to environmental protection (Brown, 2005) – is positioned as a responsible form of consumption (Wearing, 2001). Typically, volunteer tourists (voluntourists) are citizens who travel “with a purpose” (Brown, 2005; Caruana, 2007). Previous research proposes that volunteer tourists are motivated by the desire for immersion in a different culture, “to give back,” and “to make a difference,” (Brown, 2005), unlike the fun-oriented motives of mainstream tourists. Voluntourists are motivated by an ideology that prompts them to diverge from the market-driven priorities that drive mass tourism (Brown, 2005; McGehee & Andereck, 2009). Voluntourism is proposed to have many identity related outcomes, such as self-actualization, self-fulfillment, sense of empowerment, independence, increased self-awareness, self-development, and self-renewal (Brown, 2005; Coghlan & Gooch, 2011; McGehee & Santos, 2005; Stebbins & Graham, 2004; Wearing, 2002; Zahra & McIntosh, 2007).

Even though most research is limited in its understanding of how and why these identity outcomes take place in voluntourism contexts, two main themes that can be inferred from most research are transformational learning and experiential consumption. It is important to explore how these two themes interact in the shaping of responsible consumer identities.

2.2.1. Transformational learning

Voluntourism is a form of transformative learning (McGehee & Santos, 2005; Mezirow, 1991; O’Sullivan, 1999; Wearing & Neil, 2001), which, according to O’Sullivan (2002, p. 11) “... is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world.” For the most part, transformative learning engagement is due to a “disillusion with existing sets of reference and the search for something new.” (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011, p. 718). It shifts one’s understanding of one’s self and one’s self-locations, relationships, understanding of relations of power, and visions of alternative approaches to living (Mezirow, 1991; O’Sullivan, 1999; O’Sullivan, 2002). It has a significant role in developing a sense of responsibility, as it can help one to develop a sense of connection with others in need through role relationship, chance encounter, or direct appeal (Berkowitz & Daniels, 1963; Berkowitz & Daniels, 1964).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10492963>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10492963>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)