



Research article

Discourses of the food retail industry: Changing understandings of ‘the consumer’ and strategies for sustainability

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the various ways in which ‘the consumer’ is portrayed in sustainability debates within the food retail industry and how these are interconnected with concepts of industry responses to sustainability-related issues. Paying attention to the significance of the consumer as a rhetorical figure this research contributes to social science debates on consumer responsibility and the concept of consumer choice. The empirical study examines the attitudes, behaviours, roles and responsibilities ascribed to consumers in discourses on sustainability in “The Grocer” magazine during four time periods between 2005 and 2015. The analysis demonstrates that notions of both, ‘the consumer’, as well as ‘sustainability’ are mutually dependent and subject to change over time. A significant shift in the understanding of strategies and implementations for sustainability takes place, from a rationale of ‘helping’ consumers to make sustainable choices in the supermarket towards a rationale of responding to consumers demand for sustainability by eliminating unsustainable choices. Although the argumentation throughout all years is consumer-centred, this discursive shift detracts attention from the supermarket as a realm for strategies and implementations for sustainability. Based on these findings it is established that rather than assigning responsibility to consumers the analysed debates maintain the paradigm of consumer sovereignty. It is further concluded that it is not so much consumer responsibility expressed through consumer choice that determines which strategies for sustainability are taken into consideration, but the dominant interpretation of values and behaviour of the sovereign consumer located within a particular understanding of sustainability.

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1. Introduction

In economic, as well as political and civil society debates, businesses are held to play a central role in transitions towards sustainable production and consumption (Michaelis, 2003). As the ‘gatekeeper’ between the production and consumption of goods, retailer operations are subject to particular attention with the intersection between retailer and consumer informing broad debates among academic and stakeholder audiences (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004). In this intersection, business responsibility and economic rationality are interrelated with consumers’ choices (Harrison et al., 2005; Sassatelli, 2007). In the process consumers have been ascribed moral duties and responsibility, whereby their aggregated choices in the supermarket are seen to carry the potential to deliver change towards sustainability through the transformation of the market. Social and environmental ‘activism’ is presented as individual sovereign consumers who ‘vote’ with their money and the supermarket is constituted as the central site of action (Micheletti et al., 2004). Others have opposed this way of

thinking about the consumer, arguing that a focus on consumer responsibility is an insufficient target for intervention (Spurling et al., 2013) and would obscure the extent of government, businesses and other agents’ impact on options and possibilities (Shove, 2010).

This paper examines this interplay between businesses (in particular retailer) and consumer agency with respect to sustainability. It does so by analysing discourses of the food retail industry over the time period from 2005 to 2015. Articles published in *The Grocer*, the UK’s leading magazine for the food and drink retail sector, are analysed in terms of how discursive framings of the consumer have changed, or more precisely, how ideas on consumers’ attitudes and behaviours are framed in debates on businesses’ agency for sustainability. It thus does not examine consumer behaviour per se, but the ways in which conceptualisations of the consumer condition debates on businesses’ engagement with and commitment to sustainable consumption.

Where scholarly debates address questions on consumer agency for sustainability on the premise of ‘the consumer’ as a pre-defined category and discusses the distribution of responsibility between businesses and consumers, this paper takes a different stance. Concerned with the relevance of discourses to

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sustainable policy-making (Feindt and Oels, 2005), a critique of the consumer as a self-evidential category, and often-rhetorical figure, is presented (Trentmann, 2006; Barnett et al., 2011). Sustainability discourses are analysed to reveal the consumer as a rhetorical figure that changes and differs from the ‘real’ consumer as sustainability agent. The study thus intervenes in debates on consumer responsibility by demonstrating that consumer-centred narratives do not necessarily assign responsibility to consumers as agents. It complements recent scholarship with insights on how discourses of the consumer frame strategies for ‘sustainability’ and contributes to recent social science literature by strengthening the dialogue between contemporary consumption scholarship and research on sustainable business strategy and food policy.

The remainder of this paper is divided into five sections. The first presents an overview of the core positions of social science literature in regard to ‘consumer responsibility’, followed by an outline of the research design, including an overview of discourse analysis and the data analysed. The third section analyses how concepts of sustainability in the food industry are framed and how the figure of the consumer is mobilised in debates on sustainable production and consumption. The fourth section demonstrates that the sovereign consumer is a constant paradigm in the discourse throughout the years analysed and that varying interpretations of consumer desires and demands are mobilised to explain and legitimise strategies towards ‘sustainability’. The final section concludes by arguing that discourses of the consumer frame what is permissible and possible when it comes to strategies and implementations for sustainable production and consumption.

2. Consumer responsibility for a sustainable food system

‘The consumer’ represents a central point of reference in stakeholder debates on sustainable production and consumption. This is based on an established understanding of aggregated individual activity that impacts markets, which are understood to be analogous to a democratic system (Schwarzkopf, 2011). Questions on how to obtain more sustainable food systems are thus often based on the underlying premise that change can be achieved through a collective of sovereign consumers who exercise responsibility in their daily shopping. In this line of thought, a utility maximisation model of consumer behaviour which assumes consumers rationally reflect on cost-benefit considerations such as price, functional efficacy and convenience, is extended to sustainability-related considerations such as carbon emissions, social justice and animal welfare. The purchasing act in the supermarket is thereby commonly regarded as a conscious choice performed by ‘citizen consumers’ or ‘ethical consumers’ who ‘vote’ with their money (Sassatelli, 2007; Trentmann, 2006). Extensive bodies of social science and behavioural economics literature, which address strategies and implementation for change towards more sustainable food systems, share this tendency to individualise responsibility by making individuals and their choices in the market the focal point of change. Dealing with (un-)sustainable activities that emerge in the intersection of consumers’ and retailers’ conduct, sustainability-related research has been centred on strategies and implementations for individual behaviour change at the point of purchase (e.g. Micheletti et al., 2012). Studies most notably encompass the exploration of the effects of consumer information, campaigns on sustainability-related issues as well as environmental and ethical labelling to influence consumer choice. Findings that derive from these studies often suggest that knowledge transfer and signposting at the point of sale or directly on products would ‘guide’ individuals into making the ‘right’ choices (Southerton and Evans, 2017).

Scholars have contested the focus on consumer demand and the attention paid to individual consumer choice and consumer

responsibility (Spurling et al., 2013). Opposed to ideas centred on rational choice, it is suggested that consumption occurs “often entirely without mind” but “within and for the sake of practices” (Warde, 2005: 145, 150), highlighting the more habitual, mundane and ‘inconspicuous’ forms of consumption. They further criticise the conceptualisation of sustainable consumption as a matter of rational considerations of individual consuming subjects, diverting attention to infrastructures, institutions and routines as well as the roles that they play in impacting (un-)sustainable individual consumer choices (Spaargaren, 2011). Encouraging a critical examination of ordinary social practices beyond consumer behaviour in the supermarket, a move ‘beyond behaviour change’ (Walker, 2015) is advocated for, whereby the consumer-choice-focused model that Shove (2010) critically summarises with the acronym “ABC – attitude, behaviour, and choice”—is contested. It is argued that the model of consumer responsibility, according to which values and attitudes drive the kinds of behaviour that individuals choose to adopt would deliver a narrow template for intervention. It would position “citizens as consumers and decision makers” and “governments and other institutions as enablers whose role is to induce people to make pro-environmental decisions for themselves and deter them from opting for other, less desired, courses of action” (Shove, 2010: 1280). Scholars in this field argue that with the ‘ABC’ constituting the dominant paradigm, “approaches that lie beyond the pale of the ABC” and do not that do not responsabilise consumers, would be “doomed to be forever marginal no matter how interactive or how policy engaged their advocates might be” (Shove, 2010: 1283).

The analysis that follows holds a critical stance not only towards the understanding of consumer responsibility as a means to deliver change, but also the framing and mobilisation of the consumer as a self-evident category. Of particular concern is how discourses are determined by and (re-)productive of social structures and institutions. It therefore draws from a strand of social science scholarship that holds a critical stance towards a normalised consumer-related rhetoric and understands narratives of individual consuming subjects as self-evident categories. Scholars have argued that the consumer “is now a god-like figure, before whom markets and politicians alike bow” (Gabriel and Lang, 2015 [1995]: 1), suggesting that the consumer is a variable figure that is mobilised in a variety of ways and, depending on the context, takes up roles such as the ‘chooser’, the ‘communicator’ or the ‘rebel’. Such approaches critically examine the assumption that the consumer is the primary agent of social change explore how ‘the consumer’ is mobilised as a powerful ‘rhetoric figure’ in socio-economic debates (Barnett et al., 2011). This strand of critical social science scholarship substantiates the analysis presented in this paper, which is concerned with various interpretations of the consumer and its interrelation with strategies for sustainability in discourses of the food retail industry.

3. Research design

The methodological approach underpinning this study draws from discourse studies, which facilitates analysis of the taken for granted ‘nature’ of the phenomenon of sustainable food production and consumption. The method of discourse analysis is not only concerned with how language frames the ways in which “naturally occurring” social conditions are understood (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 2), but also with questions on how language reinforces and legitimises certain social conditions and institutional structures (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Jäger, 2009). In the particular strand of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), ‘discourse’ is defined as “language use in speech and writing – as a form of social practice”. Discourse is thus considered to be “socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of

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