

Reviewing consumption patterns: an educational commitment

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Abstract: *Without any pretence of being exhaustive, this essay intends to focus on the importance of an effective marketing system in determining a real and lasting change towards social responsibility, fairness, the choice of values from the perspective of sustainability.*

For many people commodities seem values to accept without wondering about their origin, their meaning and their use.

Pedagogical reflection must be committed to transform these dynamics in educational conscious choices, taking into account consumption through the media, considered to be one of the privileged places in which people in our society experience paths of socialization and interaction, in an innovative way.

Riassunto: *Il presente contributo, senza pretesa di esaustività, sottolinea l'importanza di un efficace sistema di marketing nel determinare un cambiamento reale e duraturo verso la responsabilità sociale, l'equità, le scelte valoriali nella prospettiva della sostenibilità.*

Per molte persone le merci sembrano alimentare significati cui aderire senza porsi sufficienti domande di senso in relazione alla provenienza, al significato, all'utilizzo.

La riflessione pedagogica deve impegnarsi nel trasformare tali dinamiche in scelte consapevoli ed educative, prendendo in considerazione anche il consumo attraverso i media, uno degli spazi privilegiati in cui nella nostra società le persone sperimentano percorsi di socializzazione e interazione, secondo modalità inedite rispetto al passato.

Keywords: *Education, Sustainability, Green Marketing, Consumptions, Growth*

Introduction

In recent years, the concept of sustainability has taken on a strategic reference value for a fast growing number of companies, aware of their responsibility at both economic and social level. Environment friendliness, which has for a long time been perceived as an obstacle to the economic

expansion of companies, is now often seen as an opportunity for growth – a real strategic sector.

In line with this trend, for many companies, marketing practices, until only a few years ago still marginal with respect to concepts of social responsibility and sustainability, are designed to inform consumers that the company is focused on social, ethical and ecological aspects, and that it addresses environmental issues in an ethical perspective, starting with inter-generational and intragenerational equity concepts and the rights of future generations.

While the marketing concept is commonly seen as encouraging people to buy things they do not need, exploitation of natural resources, the excessive use of packaging and limitation of product shelf life, an original marketing approach is gaining ground, in which, alongside the four traditional levers (Product, Price, Promotion, Place) we find a growing interest for People and the Planet.

As W. Scott points out «Those who, for one reason or another are involved in marketing strategies and policies – i.e., relations between companies and markets – cannot but wonder whether or not it still makes sense to imagine a constant and continuous process of growing consumption and whether it is still possible to introduce onto the market products which, both during the course of their cycle of use and at the end of it, contribute to environment pollution and degradation» (Scott, 2009, 219).

The debate between consumption and sustainable production forces companies to interrogate themselves on the sustainability of the way in which their products and services satisfy the lifestyles of customers, in the conviction that window-dressing operations, easily identifiable and attackable and greenwashing, are not enough.

Such logic involves not only manufacturers, but also distribution and consumers; the latter can exercise their influence on the market by intensifying the demand for precise information on product characteristics and performance and by playing an active role through greater willingness to reconsider their consumer habits in favour of more sustainable forms.

The current economic situation which, for most Italian consumers represents the peak of the financial emergency which started in 2008, appears at the same time as the «end of a model whereby uncritical consumption and hedonism have been elected as the only indicator of the degree of well-being achieved by society. Austerity brings with it the correction of

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a number of extremes typical of consumerism and the reassertion of more frugal but also more sustainable lifestyles» (Coop, 2013,71)³.

The consumer thus tries out new consumption models. There is growing attention for waste, an end to impulse buying and a preference for just-in-time consumption. Such cautionary attitudes by consumers, in this particular moment of the Italian economy, is to some extent an invitation to once more look, reflect and debate «in the light of an anthropology which, in an authentic dialogue between culture and values, is built up on the very specificity of the individual» (Vischi, 2011, 119).

In a context like that of today, which appears lacking in ethical references and not always aimed at the promotion of human beings, the critical situation can become a chance for the reorientation of planned strategies, to determine new horizons of sense.

According to Ottman «Green has gone mainstream because more people are worried about sustainability- related issues than ever before. Reflecting awareness that has been steadily building over the past 20 years, the general public is beginning to comprehend the impact these issues will have on their lives now, and in the years ahead – and is starting to act» (Ottman, 2011,3).

New media and consumption. The consumer 2.0.

Every age has an icon that clearly distinguishes it from others; in contemporary society, consumption through the media can be considered one of the privileged spaces wherein individuals experiment paths of socialization and interaction in original ways compared to the past. Our way of thinking, speaking and relating with each other and with reality is distinguished by new communication devices; first and foremost the Web is a medium, an emblematic place where individuals can implement purchase and consumption choices, shedding the space and time bonds of communication not mediated by technologies.

Among the many possible combinations, I should like to take a look at the relationship between media and consumption from three different perspectives to consider the possibility of educating people to consume: the

³ *Rapporto Coop 2013 Consumi e distribuzione. Assetti, dinamiche e previsioni, available online* <https://www.e-coop.it/consumiedistribuzione> (04/14), p. 71.

first is tied to the use of the media as an online sales tool, the second relates to the consumption of technologies as status symbols by a large number of people, especially youngsters, while the third considers the waste disposal and environmental pollution produced by new technologies.

Virtual environments dedicated to selling «are places of both symbolic and material production, privileged tools which permit interactive relations with consumers in the process of the spectacularization of goods» (Russo, 2006, 275). Consumption thus takes on the features of an increasingly more mediated phenomenon, which requires expertise and aware decision-making by consumers. M. Ferraresi underscores how, in the modern world, digitalization has become one of our most common habits, to the extent that «consumption, all consumption, turns into digital consumption» (Ferraresi, 2006, 247) including as regards daily purchases and consumption. Search engines are by now an integral part of the decision-making and purchasing process of Italians.

Increasingly greater is the effect of comments and write-ups of other users in making final choices, while smartphones and local searches are also starting to change purchasing habits in sales outlets. Highlighting this behaviour is the survey commissioned from SEMS in August 2011 by Fullresearch (Fullresearch, 2011) regarding the use of search engines in Italy. According to this study, more and more consumers are using their smartphones to compare the prices and specifications of what they want to buy with those of what is available online.

Emblematic, by way of example, is the case of online auctions. E-Bay is among the most popular e-commerce websites in the world: this is a web community with a space dedicated solely to auction sales. It groups together thousands of small and large shops, giving life to a single global market.

This is a real virtual market with well-defined rules; the founder of E-Bay, Pierre Omidyar, presents the site as «an example of a cross between technologies and community, as a theoretical experiment to determine whether people are able to exchange enough trust to trigger a trade relationship with a minimum amount of control by a broker». (Franchi, 2010, 57)

On E-Bay, it is the user him/herself who determines the price of an object according to his/her own subjective evaluation; the consumer can thus exercise control over a very wide and diversified range of products.

Another representative case consists of the low cost tied to online tourism: it is now common for people to book air and rail tickets and make

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hotel and museum entrance bookings from home. We are faced with new purchasing patterns which eliminate a number of costly phases of the distribution process and introduce new forms of efficiency.

Consumption patterns and advertising are mirrored images of the same phenomenon. “Consumer society” and “Society of the spectacle” are complementary and it is now crucial for companies to understand how consumers move on the web, what they are looking for and what are their needs.

For this reason, specific market surveys have been conducted aimed at obtaining such information. Many web servers are able to trace user profiles, record consumer choices and behaviours and instantly produce websites with personalized ads, thus implementing a one-to-one marketing process. There are also many companies which do not terminate their relations with the consumer after a purchase, but create a blog of their own: this way the company not only further publicizes its products, but also conveys its vision and enables the consumer to speak about him/herself and make suggestions and express choices and emotions which result in the manufacture of more *ad hoc* products, focused on the real requirements of buyers. Consequently, once an affective relationship has been established between the consumer and the product, the former will publicize it by speaking about it on his/her blog, recounting the reasons why he/she shared the values of that brand. «Consumer narration thus becomes a part of the narration of daily life and answers the need to relate, recognize, share and express the new forms in which belonging and loyalty are produced» (Franchi, 2008, 87). Internet is a phenomenon capable of attracting large masses of people to technologies; among the most important reasons why consumers are lured to using the online purchasing channel (*e-commerce*) is undoubtedly the convenience of being able to make purchases without space, time or logistic constrictions.

The company offering an online purchasing option does in fact favour a very considerable saving in terms of the time required to reach the sales outlet. It also permits providing a whole range of information and in-depth and real-time benchmarking.

A second perspective through which relations between media and consumption can be reviewed is by extending access to consumer goods once only available to the better-off classes and which are now within reach of the middle class: “accessible luxury” products.

Silverstein has described this phenomenon by referring to the *trading up* (Silverstein, Filske, 2004) concept: every day millions of people decide how to spend their income and are willing to practise *trading down* in many

categories, where they choose the less expensive products, in order to afford *trading up* in others. Consumer goods have in fact become a way to fulfil and express oneself and to dialogue. In the categories which manage to involve the individual emotionally such as technologies, personal body care, children's products, the consumer practises *trading up*, while in other cases, he/she chooses and buys low-cost goods.

The status-symbol value of products thus becomes increasingly more subjective and individual, while the exchange value has become «the main message conveyed by the media and has imposed its logic, completely focused on the continuous circulation of goods and money» (Codeluppi, 1992, 15).

Objects, products and services take on meanings tied to the emotional, social and symbolic-cultural experience of individuals. Individual identity seems to find an anchor point, albeit weak, in the social recognition provided by the possession of goods, in aligning itself with a conformist, homologated and not very original lifestyle.

«The choice of a product is strongly influenced by these forms of attribution of meaning and by the private, and above all, public value given to a product» (Russo, Moderato, 2009, 18)⁴.

In this perspective, the concept of individual responsibility is extended, until it includes the very choice of one's own social role. While social identity was once based on professional skills, today «our identity and our place in the world are defined by consumption, our social rank is marked by consumption, which acts as an indicator of status, which stratifies» (Minestroni, 2006, 307).

In the complicated system of the media, selecting details of real interest is a big challenge for the individual: if, on the one hand, consumer behaviour is a sort of mirror, on the other, it is a part of human make-up.

It is in this context, so packed with stimuli, that in recent years there has been a widespread proliferation of media and tools to facilitate the purchase of environment-friendly products which, when considered in their entire life span, from production to disposal, are more respectful of the environment than other ones similar in terms of performance and quality.

When it comes to green products, quality means minimum levels of pollutant emission, low energy consumption during production, recyclable packaging, logistics and transport, long product life, easy disposal and good

⁴ MANCA LA NOTA????

consumer communication via the label.

Certification and labelling systems are currently being put in place in many countries which indicate top-quality products and provide information on the environmental characteristics of the product itself.

The ecological quality concept alludes to eco-compatibility and sustainability; a real corporate philosophy distinguishing a company, its products and its marketing system.

Among the tools which a company can use to communicate its products, of major importance is the Environmental Product Declaration (EPD) (Cassinelli, Del Duro, 2007, 195). This tool has been conceived to improve environment communication, *business to business* on the one hand, and *business to consumers* on the other. The *Environmental Product Declaration*, required by community environmental policies, is based on the assumption that, while remaining focused on the product, whether goods or services, every company has the chance to communicate its strategies and its commitment towards more environment friendly production, thereby giving added value to the product itself.

By choosing ecological products or services, the consumer receives transparent information and does not impact the environment with his/her choices, thus implementing a sustainable purchasing policy.

Care for the environment is not the only feature of green products, which often have equally important secondary benefits such as longer life, positive repercussions for the health of those who use them and a minimalist style that does not imply giving up refinement and luxury.

The demand for ecological products is nevertheless still fragmentary: few people seem interested in this market which can often be assimilated in terms of quality and prices to the “luxury products” category: the reasons for this slow green purchase takeoff can be put down to diffidence on the part of the user, to the lack of clarity concerning the information conveyed to the media and to economic reasons tied to the cost of the products themselves.

The offer of ecological products is often constructed around three economic concerns: small and medium artisan companies, large organized distribution and direct sales through local purchase groups.

Agriculture, processing industry and trade have put in place advertising and awareness arousing campaigns to support the promotion and sale of these products including through the media: many green companies avail themselves of unconventional forms of communication, to attract a con-

sumer increasingly better informed and more expert than in the past.

Campaigns also promoting green products on the Web first of all point to the benefits consumers will have in terms of safety and well-being by using a product that does not contain substances harmful for human beings. The binomial “green product” and “saving” represents a strong ground for buying, as does the possibility of future energy savings.

A third aspect that should be well reflected on as regards the relation between media and consumption relates to demand, often dictated by fashion, for increasingly more updated and cutting-edge technological instruments. And this is a point that again brings us to the debate on lifestyles.

It cannot in fact be underestimated that «the race to purchase the latest technological product, besides producing an often pointless squandering of resources, not only increases an uncontrolled consumption of energy, but also fuels the electronic waste disposal market» (Teti, 2009, 13). An emergency, the resolution of which can no longer be put off is in fact that of electronic waste, known as e-waste. The integrated management of such waste looks all set to become an increasingly more important item on the corporate system agenda.

Often, such waste is disposed of in countries in the south of the world, masked behind the wording “technological humanitarian aid”. What it is in fact is uncontrolled disposal which, for local inhabitants, can result in bigger breathing problems, allergies and immune system damage.

Concluding remarks

The above observations testify to the fact that what has been said about consumption patterns points to a planning opportunity, a major topic to be investigated in order to consider innovation and sustainability in a green education perspective, in which various elements can be recognized alluding to the education of human beings. Sustainable educational planning can help create reflective practices able to prompt people to transform thoughts into correct attitudes and behaviours, thereby also caring for themselves, others and the environment through purchases, in a logic of responsibility.

Pedagogical reflection is called upon to determine original educational needs in order to plan the sustainability of human development and promote ethically correct ways of production and consumption aimed at achieving a change in lifestyles.

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In a cultural scenario in which communication opportunities are growing, pedagogy needs to propose a wide-ranging reflection resulting not only in the presentation of instrumental methodologies, but also in the processing and sharing of a cognitive system capable of finding an original heuristic and hermeneutic horizon.

Synergy is therefore required between science, education and politics: real and complete growth can only be achieved through coordinated, harmonic and constant networked action. Spreading the awareness that technological progress brings with it changes that modify the ecosystem is crucial because it enables companies and consumers to learn to consider the footprints of their own actions.

As C. Birbes points out «Consuming environmental resources is to some extent like consuming the future. To escape indifference and unawareness, the future asks us to look after ourselves and it, to learn to live on Earth wisely, passing from the culture of waste to fraternity, educating ourselves to welcoming and free giving in all life contexts, involving ourselves in responsibilities, in fact learning joint-responsibility» (Birbes, 2013,12).

The educational sustainability thus becomes a cornerstone of a society prepared to change itself starting with the analysis and restructuring of educational systems, in order to build up a civil society consisting of people who have assimilated an awareness of the need for a change in attitude towards the world.

Building a “green culture” starting with consumption patterns is equivalent to investing in every human being, the chance and the possibility of systematizing a shared and educational reflection. Allowing adults to intentionally choose sustainable consumption behaviours which protect themselves, others and the earth of which they are custodians, means providing them with original educational opportunities and creating situations that allow changing habits and stereotyped behaviours.

Pedagogical reflection is called upon to interpret the challenge represent by consumption, to sustain democratic participation and personal growth and education, designing an innovative heuristic perspective. «Educating requires reference to an anthropology which, in an authentic dialogue between cultures and values, is built up on the very specificity of individuals» (Malavasi, 2012, 51). Orienting consumption patterns in a pedagogical direction is like positively addressing purchasing options, divulging and ascertaining the importance of choosing truly environment-friendly products not only to the benefit of individual health, but also to ensure the well-

being of the planet and therefore of all those who live on it.

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