

Revisiting Consumer Empowerment: An Exploration of Ethical Consumption Communities

Journal of Macromarketing
2017, Vol. 37(1) 40-56
© The Author(s) 2015
Reprints and permission:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0276146715619653
journals.sagepub.com/home/jmk



Eleni Papaoikonomou¹ and Amado Alarcón¹

Abstract

This article explores the notion of consumer empowerment in ethical consumption communities, known as responsible consumption communities (RCCs) in Spain. Although consumer empowerment has previously been discussed in the ethical consumer field, mainly in relation to notions of voting in the marketplace, it has yet to be explored thoroughly. In particular, the concept of empowerment should be moved beyond an individualized lens of analysis, acknowledging connectedness of persons. A combination of qualitative techniques was employed, including focus groups, in-depth interviews, observation, and documentary analysis. Our empirical case shows that consumer empowerment should be understood not in relation to consumption, but in relation to new forms of social organizing and experimentation that emerge around consumption.

Keywords

ethical consumers, consumer empowerment, power, communities, sustainability, networks, anticapitalism, macromarketing

Introduction

Macromarketers have been long concerned with the transition towards a more sustainable paradigm and how consumers can contribute to this paradigm shift (Mittelstaedt et al. 2014; Prothero and McDonagh 2015). Previous literature suggests that ethical and sustainable consumption has emerged as a potential challenge to the dominant market organization (Prothero, McDonagh, and Dobscha 2010). According to the neoliberal model, ethical consumers are able to bring about social change through their individual purchasing decisions (Low and Davenport 2007; Shankar, Cherrier, and Canniford 2006). This is how consumer empowerment has been largely understood in the ethical consumption field. We argue that this is a limited view of consumer empowerment because it provides an individual and consumer-centric understanding of consumer empowerment in ethical consumption. In this article, we emphasize the need to explore further the spaces and discourses that ethically minded consumers collectively create to become empowered, to achieve their social and environmental objectives, and to bring about social change.

Our study examines consumer empowerment in the context of ethical and sustainable consumption among members of consumer cooperatives (RCCs) in Spain. In particular, we explore how members of these communities discursively construct consumer cooperatives as life alternatives and forms of resistance to the traditional marketplace, as well as the practices employed in these spaces and the meanings created. To achieve this objective we used a combination of qualitative methods including focus groups, individual interviews,

ethnographic observations, in addition to content analysis of a RCC member magazine and written and published materials by the consumer cooperatives.

The theoretical contribution of this research is to move forward and broadens the notion of consumer empowerment. While previous literature in the ethical consumption context has presented empowered consumers as active, aware and sovereign, willing to participate in the society through their individual consumption choices (Shaw, Newholm, and Dickinson 2006; Wright 2006; Carrington, Neville, and Whitwell 2010), we challenge these assumptions and move the focus from the individual to the collective level. We analyze consumer empowerment not in relation to individual consumption choices, but in relation to the construction of alternative modes of social organization around consumption. These alternative modes of social organization are manifested through the construction of shared spaces, practices, and discourses and aim for more sustainable and democratic social macrostructures. We show that in the domain of ethical consumption empowerment is relational and it emerges through collaboration with others (Arendt 1972). By adopting a cultural-discursive perspective, our approach allows us to observe the creation of new

¹Business Management, Rovira and Virgili University, Reus, Spain

Corresponding Author:

Eleni Papaoikonomou, Business Management, Rovira and Virgili University, Avinguda Universitat 1, Reus 43204, Tarragona, Spain.
Email: eleni.papaoikonomou@urv.cat

discursive formations of social relations and social experimentation around consumption.

Our findings suggest that the process of empowerment occurs on various levels. On one level, RCC participants construct an alternative that, while it cannot claim to restructure the political economy, does constitute a different means of consumption and production (both a real and a potential choice). On a second level, we focus on the greater organizational empowerment that RCCs may offer, such as their potential for civic mobilization and collective action through the creation of new social ties and the collaboration of many small-scale communities of consumers and producers (Forno and Graziano 2014). On a third level, our study shows that consumers become empowered by challenging the cultural domination of norms and meanings related to consumption and citizenship. RCC participants collectively deconstruct the terms “consumer” and “citizen” – which are intertwined – as expressions of personhood and collectively reconstruct them. Here, RCCs emerge as empowering systems that contribute to social transformation, firstly because they become spaces in which participants can exercise consumption and citizenship as they desire (Arendt 1972), and secondly because these spaces are used for the creation of meanings and the dissemination of collectively created discourses (Foucault 1980). RCCs can be understood as co-creations that produce truth claims via iterative and co-evolving process of objectivization and subjectivization (Denegri-Knott, Zwick, and Schroeder 2006; Foucault 1982). This is of particular interest in countries like Spain and Greece, where the recent Indignados and Syntagma square movements have opened several collective spaces such as cooperatives and Timebanks conceived as alternative channels of political participation (see Castañeda 2012; Prentoulis and Thomassen 2013).

The article is organized as follows. In the next section, we discuss the conceptualization of consumer empowerment, drawing from different research traditions. We then describe the data collection and qualitative methodology used for our discursive analysis. Finally, we explore consumer empowerment in the context of ethical consumer communities, leading to a discussion of the findings.

Consumer Empowerment

The concepts of power and empowerment have been widely studied across different fields, including feminism, minority groups and poverty literature (Denham Lincoln et al. 2002; Kabeer 1999). In the case of consumers, the question has often been whether consumers or marketers have the ability to direct markets for their own benefit (Varman and Vikas 2007). Given the vast body of literature on the subject, we do not intend to provide an exhaustive account of theories on power and instead use the comprehensive framework provided by Denegri-Knott, Zwick, and Schroeder (2006) as a mapping tool. In the following paragraphs we will present two different perspectives on power and empowerment: 1) the neoliberal model and 2) the discursive-cultural model. We position our study in the latter of the two.

According to the dominant neo-liberal ethic, power and control may be gained through individual consumer choices (Shankar, Cherrier, and Canniford 2006). Empowered consumers are presented as active, aware and sovereign (Shaw, Newholm, and Dickinson 2006; Wright 2006), willing to participate in “the new agora of consumer democracy” through their daily purchase decisions (Schwarzkopf 2011, p. 8). Thus, purchases may act as a positive vote in the marketplace and non-purchases as a vote against (Schwarzkopf 2011; Shaw, Newholm, and Dickinson 2006). As such, here the consumer empowerment process involves the removal of constraints that impede consumers exercising their role as choosers. These constraints include lack of quality market offerings, lack of knowledge of the consumer market, and lack of ability to search for information about market offer (Pires, Stanton, and Rita 2006; Thøgersen 2005). Therefore, if markets are competitive in offering a wide array of choice (Rezabakhsh et al. 2006) and consumers have the resources and social skills to exercise choice (Adkins and Ozanne 2005), then the consumers become empowered. Furthermore, in the Internet era consumers enjoy greater sanction and legitimate power, as the Internet allows for a network model of information flow (Castells 2008; Rezabakhsh et al. 2006). The Internet may provide the tools and space for higher empowerment, making information more symmetrical and, as Howells (2005) argues, rendering consumers free and citizens protected.

However, drawing on previous literature we question the underlying assumptions of the neoliberal perspective. First, the neoliberal discourse emphasizes agency and rationality, which cannot be taken for granted. For example, although the Internet may provide tools for “empowerment” it remains uncertain whether these tools are effective enough or that they are critically used, or indeed used at all, by consumers. For example, Rezabakhsh and colleagues mention that consumers may not take full account of the information available to them, due to heuristics or lack of time. Howells (2005) brings up other impediments such as switching costs, information asymmetries and limited access to information for vulnerable consumers. In the ethical consumer literature, the problem lies not only in the quantity (Mohr, Webb, and Harris 2001; Uusitalo and Oksanen 2004), but especially in the “quality and complexity” of available information (Berry and McEachern 2005, p. 87). Information overload makes processing unmanageable and complex, while information soon becomes obsolete (Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt 2010; Dickson 2005; Lang and Gabriel 2005). Too much information may lead to cognitive overload and a deferral of consumer decisions (Wathieu et al. 2002). As Shankar, Cherrier, and Canniford (2006) argue, the freedom to choose may be empowering and liberating, but it can also be paralyzing. Therefore, we question whether information seeking and consumer decision-making can be rational in the first place. Furthermore, this view presupposes that information seeking may offer access to an objective truth and social reality, which is also highly debatable.

Second, Schwarzkopf (2011) challenges this market democracy, in which individuals’ alleged free consumer choices

reflect the people's will. Instead, he submits historical evidence to show how the myth of the consumer as voter serves both to legitimize marketing methods as a social technique that cannot supposedly "fool" the empowered, free consumer (Denegri-Knott, Zwick, and Schroeder 2006; Ritzer 2005) and to endorse capitalism as the only system in which modern democracy is possible (Bauman 2001). Furthermore, Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt (2010) show how in the case of ethical products, change is often initiated by companies that adopt a more socially responsible position, while consumers simply adjust to their new, more ethical branding. Therefore, social negotiation often does not occur and markets continue to be directed by marketers who provide an illusion of empowerment and freedom to consumers. In addition, ethical consumerism has been critiqued as another type of unsustainable consumerism (Barnett et al. 2005; Heath and Potter 2006) and a privilege of wealthier consumers, raising issues of freedom versus ability to choose (Morris 2009). According to this line of thought, consumer empowerment is an exclusive right not of consumers, but of purchasers (Varman and Vikas 2007).

Third, the neoliberal view of empowerment celebrates individualism. However, for Arendt (1972), power is not a property of an individual, but exists only relationally in a group and emerges between people acting and speaking in concert. Empowerment, then, is achieved through collaboration with others. A related issue here would be the debate about the replacement of citizenship with consumption, which has been criticized by many (e.g., Assadourian 2010; Bauman 1988; Johnston 2008). We agree with Bauman's view (1988) that free consumers who do not participate in public affairs are poor consumers. Instead, we draw on the post-structuralist tradition of power to inform our empirical case, using the cultural-discursive model as framed by Denegri-Knott and colleagues (2006). Torfing (2009) provides an excellent analysis of this tradition of power, drawing on the work of Derrida, Laclau, Foucault and Žižek, among others. From a post-structuralist perspective, the conception of power goes beyond its understanding as causation and structure and agency-based conceptions. Rather, power is related to discursive systems that include and exclude, that shape the way we perceive reality. In this case, the social reality is not objective but incomplete and undecidable. Following Laclau, Torfing (2009) explains how in an undecidable world decidable forms of discourse articulate a new social order through the construction of social antagonism. Hegemony is articulated through discourses that fix social meanings and identities, because "the hegemonic forces must produce myths and social imaginaries" (p. 120). As a result, empowerment is not seen as liberation from suppression but as resistance that permits new forms of social experimentation and government. Foucault (1982) identifies three types of struggles: against forms of domination, exploitation, and subjectivity and submission. Individuals are objectified by institutional discourses that create consciousness and subjectified through the practices of the self. For example, in dominant social discourses individuals are assigned their share of responsibility for the environmental crisis (Fontenelle

2013). In this way, their "possible field of action" is structured (Foucault 1982, p. 790; Foucault 1991). But individuals can also develop potential for resistance to ruling social force relations, because there is a "multiplicity of force relations" that both restrict and open possibilities for action (Foucault 1990, p. 92).

Although the neoliberal view of power is dominant in the consumer literature, poststructuralist notions of power have been adopted in previous consumer research. For example, Shankar, Cherrier, and Canniford (2006) discuss consumer empowerment from a Foucauldian perspective. Zwick and Dholakia (2004) also explain that the construction of consumers as cultural objects takes place through discourses, so empowerment depends largely on the ability to control discourses that produce knowledge and allow the constitution of oneself. Changes in the logic of representation will produce different forms of knowledge, meaning and practice, hence power is not shifting from one social actor to another social actor. It is omnipresent, defining discourses of right and wrong, creating norms, building meanings, and legitimizing certain kinds of actions over others. As Shankar, Cherrier, and Canniford (2006, p. 1020) argue, technologies of consumption can be simultaneously disciplining and liberating, which is the paradox of searching for a meaningful self through consumption. The authors, citing Foucault, provide the bottom line for empowerment: "thinking outside of the knowledge systems which frame us" (p. 1025). This may be the case of bloggers who contribute to the public discourse construction connecting "the individual mind with the collective mind" (Castells 2008; Shankar, Cherrier, and Canniford 2006). Under this notion of empowerment, individuals become self-governing, determining what can be known and done through their discursive strategies (Cova and Dalli 2009; Denegri-Knott, Zwick, and Schroeder 2006).

Consumption is presented as a site of resistance where individual consumers employ creative tactics to deal with the imposed and constraining status quo (Zwick and Dholakia 2004, p. 35). Examples include the appropriation of brand and other meanings created by marketers (Cova and Pace 2006) or oppositional consumption to mark the distinction from establishment values (Ozanne and Murray 1995). However, these tactics and signs can be easily appropriated and marketed, thus losing their sign value and critical force (Baudrillard 1998; Heath and Potter 2006). When this happens, the subculture has to change the signifier and, beyond that, must become "an organized movement of reflexively defiant consumers" (Ozanne and Murray 1995, p. 523). This notion of consumer empowerment accepts that power may be transcendent, if consumers do not "play" and participate, emphasizing the changing power relations. This also explains the distinction made by Denegri-Knott and colleagues (2006) between consumer resistance and consumer empowerment, in that the former may simply involve adaptation of existing marketing signs and spaces, while the latter relates to the creation of spaces of resistance.

Herein, we adopt a productive view of power (Arendt 1972; Foucault 1980). Power is not understood as a measurable

divisible entity depending on who influences whom more in the company-consumer relationship (Denegri-Knott, Zwick, and Schroeder 2006). Power is not objectified as something that can be owned, lost, and acquired. Instead of “power over,” we embrace the notion of “power to,” which means, on the one hand, the capacity to achieve something and, on the other hand, generating the autonomous empowerment of an individual or a group (Göhler 2009). By exploring RCC as spaces of resistance where discourses are created – knowledge and consciousness is created thus, according to Foucault – we explore consumers’ social practices and the dialectical development of forces and relations with regard to food production and consumption. We observe how consumers organize themselves in communities, collectively deconstructing and reconstructing the term “consumer” (and the term “citizen,” as we will see in following sections) to create alternative modes of social and market organization. We believe that this can result in a more sophisticated notion of consumer empowerment, particularly in the field of ethical consumption.

Methodology

The unit of observation of this study consists of the members of the RCC (*Cooperatives de Consum Responsable* in Catalan) located in the northeastern Spanish region of Catalonia. The purpose of the empirical analysis is to explore how members of these communities discursively construct the RCCs as life alternatives and forms of resistance to the traditional marketplace, as well as the practices employed in these spaces and the meanings created. To achieve this we used a combination of participants’ narratives and researchers’ field notes read various times during and after the fieldwork. These ethical consumer communities are local, neighborhood-based groups whose primary activity is the collective purchase of products on the basis of ethical criteria decided by the group. The same general criteria are used by all groups: 1) a preference for small, local producers; 2) the avoidance of intermediaries, to ensure a direct relationship with the producer; and 3) the purchase of organic products made under fair labor conditions. The choice of producers required an in-depth knowledge of their business and, in many cases, more general aspects of their lives.

To identify and select the cooperatives, a Spanish ethical magazine and directories of cooperatives were used as the initial sampling frames. The sample was not predefined, as concepts emerging from the data analysis led to subsequent rounds of data collection (Corbin and Strauss 1990). Thus, we did not impose a conceptual framework on the data but adopted the view of concepts as tools that fit better for different intellectual tasks (Clegg and Haugaard 2009). In line with the grounded theory methodology, we employed the “zig zag” process of simultaneous data collection and data analysis (Cresswell 1998). This allowed for a reflective account of the data, although it extended the fieldwork to 14 months. We also used theoretical sampling and continued the fieldwork until we reached saturation. As an example, the fieldwork started with more mature cooperatives, but younger cooperatives were

subsequently incorporated to explore differences in functioning and practices.

Although our purpose was not to create a profile of the participants, we noted that that most RCC members were middle-class consumers with a high educational level. Many were involved in education – teachers and lecturers in secondary schools and universities, Ph.D. students, researchers – or had a university degree in the natural sciences (chemistry, biology, agricultural engineering).

In light of the objectives of the study, we adopted an interpretive methodology to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the experience of participation in these groups. More specifically, we used a grounded theory approach to facilitate the emergence of participant-centered themes, rather than categories prompted by the researchers (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Glaser and Strauss 1967). By adopting a constructionist approach, we accept the performative nature of research (Heiskanen 2005) and consider our findings “joint constructions of knowledge” produced through the interaction between the respondents’ narratives and the researchers’ interpretations (Mauthner and Doucet 2003, p. 424).

A multi-method design was used, which combined three data-collection techniques: observation, interviews (including focus groups), and document analysis. The use of different research techniques allowed for data triangulation. In addition, external audit and member checks were used as data quality control measures (Cresswell 1998). Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of the research methods used.

Observation (online and offline) helped the researchers to establish a rapport with the cooperative members, as in most cases members initially showed some distrust of the study. Gaining access was difficult, and the researchers gradually came to focus on how best to present themselves, namely, as students instead of researchers (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson 2001). A more informal style of dress was chosen, avoiding recognizable brands due to the negative response they generated among RCC members. In several cases, the researchers were repeatedly asked about the purpose of the study and whether companies would use the results. We explained that it was an academic study and that no funding had been received from companies. Frequent visits to the RCCs enabled each researcher to become an accepted part of the participants’ world, although it was impossible to eliminating the status as researchers altogether (Maxwell 2013). The scope of the observational focus was quite broad and included the participants’ interactions within the physical setting of the cooperative, their e-mails, and meetings with producers. In some cases, the researchers would simply act as spectators. On other occasions they completely immersed themselves in the setting as full participants, having informal chats with participants, going for lunch with them, and sharing car journeys.

The interviews and focus groups generated a large amount of information about the operating of the RCC, the practices employed, the relationship among members and producers, the experience of participating in the RCC, and various stories and anecdotes. The interviews were conversational in nature, but a

Table 1. Research Design of the Study.

Research Method	Main Characteristics
Observation	Online (mailing lists and websites of ethical communities) and traditional observation in physical settings (visits to the communities and to events organised by them). In the traditional observation, a field notebook was kept during the observational process. In the online observation, information was sourced through subscription to mailing lists of two groups resulting in 178 mails for the first group and 85 mails for the second one. Total duration of research technique: 14 months.
Focus Groups	Four Focus Groups with 32 participants. Sessions lasted from 90 to 120 minutes and all took place in the setting of the ethical consumer communities. All sessions were tape-recorded and videotaped. They were then transcribed verbatim.
In-depth Interviews	Nine in-depth informal interviews followed with duration of 40 to 120 minutes taking place in diverse settings selected by the interviewees. All interviews were tape-recorded. They were then transcribed verbatim.
Document analysis	Analysis of documents provided by the communities (e.g. statutes, objectives of group) and of an online magazine written and published by the members of the groups. In this magazine, the participants of the cooperatives would write articles on various topics related to sustainability. Fifteen, 20-page extension issues were downloaded representing a five year period (2003-2008).

topic guide was used to ensure that the main issues were covered. Special attention was given to the wording of questions. The objective was to ask “truly open-ended questions” (Patton 2002, p. 353) and to avoid directing participants’ answers. The focus group made it possible to observe the live interaction among members and the dynamics of the group (Patton 2002). Participants would build on each other’s narratives and offer a more complete idea about the RCC, how it worked, and what it represented. Furthermore, given that the participants knew each other, they were more likely to provide an authentic self-presentation (Wooten and Reed II 2000).

Document analysis complemented the other methods because, unlike the other techniques, it did not involve any mediation from the researchers. The documents offered access to information that covered a 5-year period. According to Patton (2002, p. 559) “checking the consistency of what people say about the same thing over time” is a form of triangulation of qualitative data sources. A particularly useful source was a magazine, named TROC, written and published by RCC members. We reviewed numerous articles to determine the structure and content of information provided, the recurring themes, and the language used.

To organize and manage the large volume of data generated, N-Vivo software facilitated the data analysis process and helped to identify the point at which theoretical saturation was reached. It also allowed for greater data transparency and minimized errors (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The interpretations of the data are outlined in the themes in the following section.

Findings

This section examines the dimensions of consumer empowerment that appear in the discourses of participants and in our field notes. Here, participants narrate their empowerment process by acknowledging their state of disempowerment as citizens and consumers and explaining to what they attribute it. Next, they present the RCC as an empowering system and explain how they collectively construct it in such a way to

exercise their own choice of consumption and citizenship and to provide alternative social imaginaries.

Empowerment: A Critical Understanding of Power Structures?

Participants in this study perceive an unequal distribution of power in the political and economic status quo. They heavily criticize capitalism as the mother of many ills (Heath and Potter 2006) because, for them, it has ceded too much power to large multinational firms that impose their rules in the single-minded pursuit of profit maximization. In this respect, companies contribute to an unsustainable growth model and create an unfair marketplace that exploits consumers, workers, and small producers.

Manolo (Interview): Capitalism doesn’t work. I think capitalism has contaminated everything, how things are grown, the market. They only look for financial profit. They don’t care if what they do contaminates and if in the future it will harm the environment.

Sheila (Focus group): Supermarkets stifle producers with the prices they impose. There are a huge number of producers and consumers, but the few middlemen that exist manage to take advantage and impose their own prices and varieties.

Consumers address an abstract notion of capitalism, and although they may mention examples of companies such as Coca Cola and Carrefour, these simply serve as representatives of capitalist market ideology (Thompson and Arsel 2004). The anti-capitalist and anti-consumption ethos is obvious in the participants’ discourses. Capitalism contaminates the environment, destroys small and local producers, creates inequalities, and promotes overconsumption and materialistic lifestyles as a solution to all problems. In particular, excessive consumerism

breaks strong social ties and alienates individuals from the real world and real problems. It was often referred as a sickness spreading throughout modern society.

Ferran (TROC Magazine): If you feel depressed, buy three sweaters. If they treated you badly at work today, order a new kitchen, and if you have problems with your partner, you can make it better if you buy. Spend and you'll feel better.

Manolo (Interview): Consumerism is like a 20th-century sickness. It's the result of brutal capitalism. They say buy, buy, buy! You're activating the economy. And look what we've got. The worst crisis in history. Tell me, how do you explain that? It doesn't make sense.

However, although capitalism is the great abstract adversary, capitalism materializes in more specific or "immediate enemies" (Foucault 1982, p. 780), although again abstract notions of these immediate enemies – the government, multinationals, and middlemen – are usually employed. Participants describe the power structures, as they perceive them, and how they are maintained. On the one hand, the system consists of large companies – the perceived power-holders – who create norms and dominant discourses, and on the other hand consumers – the oppressed, manipulated popular class – who adopt these structures first at the consciousness level (Kozinets and Handelman 2004). As Foucault explains, during this process frames of knowledge and consciousness are created. Participants evaluate the role and the structured field of action of the consumer subject. As the quotes show, much attention is focused on the dominant consumer-centered culture, but this is also because it places so much emphasis on the social role of the consumer replacing other forms of political participation and civic engagement (Assadourian 2010; Bauman 1988; Johnston 2008). By recognizing capitalism as a structure of domination, participants acknowledge their disempowerment principally as citizens and then as consumers. Their disempowerment is largely linked to their limited participation in the decision making of today's democracy. Politicians (again as an abstract term in most narratives) set the agenda for discussion and promote the interests of big companies over what the people want. This brings to mind one of the main slogans of the Indignados movement that started two years after our fieldwork: "They [politicians] do not represent us."

Josep (TROC Magazine): In Barcelona we're so lucky because the model of city planning promoted by the council means that we all have a Carrefour 5 minutes from home.

Sheila (Focus group): Because they don't give a s... about us as citizens and this democracy is

so fake. We participate in a democracy that boils down to us voting once every four years.

Another prevalent perception that reinforces capitalism as a structure of domination is that information is asymmetric and non-transparent on issues of interest to citizens. The participants argue that "powerful" social agents withhold information that should be made publicly available to consumers. Examples include undisclosed information about genetically modified products (an issue of vital importance in TROC, with articles in almost every issue from 2003 to 2008) or about sustainable alternatives that have never been launched on the market and remain hidden.

Carmen (Interview): I remember when I was a university student in 1977 and they taught us all about the fridge. So, let's say we have two identical rooms. In one we put an electric fire and in the other one a fridge. You plug them in and calculate the energy flow. Well, it was more efficient to leave the fridge door open than the electric fire on. And then you start thinking. If they've known this since 1977 when they explained it to me, more than 20 years have gone by, so why do these appliances still exist when there are more sustainable models? So you start to notice these contradictions. You say, there's something not right here. There are economic interests looking for maximum profit. There are other alternatives, but no one pays attention because there is no businessman behind them.

What becomes clear from the participants' narratives is that in order to increase their power and construct alternative discourses, they want to increase their social participation and remain informed and self-governed. Carmen claims to have knowledge that the general public did not have, hence she implicitly claims to be more empowered than others. Such findings agree with what Kozinets and Handelman (2004) observed in their fieldwork. Participants constantly discuss the importance of critical thinking, reflexivity, and awareness, in line with the suggestions of Ozanne and Murray (1995). Furthermore, they build their collective identity on that basis, drawing a clear line between themselves and the manipulated others who prefer living in their "middle class lie."

However, Carmen and other respondents accept their limitations and recognize how difficult and challenging it is to be informed, a finding in line with previous literature on ethical consumption (Carrigan, Szmigin, and Wright 2004; Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt 2010). For example, one of the participants, Silvia (Interview), finds it difficult to distinguish between real stories about unethical corporate practices and "urban myths." Another participant, Rebecca (Interview),



Figure 1. Websites and information in TROC about feminism, ecology, and alternative movements.

engages in an effortful search for information. She looks up a number of different sources and then systematizes the information found. However, she accepts that the whole process is challenging and at times she “feels paranoid” in her search for the truth. As individual consumers, participants see themselves in a state of disempowerment when they experience difficulties remaining adequately informed.

By belonging to RCC, participants find that the stress and effort of searching for information can be alleviated through formal or informal processes. Members gather information from seminars on waste management, recycling, and other sustainable practices and share ideas on a person-to-person basis. For example, Jordi (Focus group) explained that when he was unable to find shops selling organic herbs he asked someone in his RCC. Similar to what Thompson and Troester (2002) found, participants can access RCC “communal wisdom,” which offers reliable information and minimizes their time costs and cognitive effort.

In addition, a horizontal information network is often established. The following quotes reveal that participants act as both senders and receivers of information in this network of interaction:

Carmen (Interview): Four months ago I subscribed to a conference on fair trade. So for the last 4 months I’ve received around 10 articles a day. And then I pass them on (to the co-op). You can keep yourself and others updated.

Kat (Focus Group): We have a mailing list and circulate information about conferences, consumption, etc.

Although, Carmen’s comments may reflect the disempowering role of information saturation (10 articles per day), the participants’ narratives and the researchers’ subscription to three RCC mailing lists are not indicative of an information overload. What is experienced is how the established network serves as an informant, navigator, and coordinator (Rezabakhsh et al. 2006) that produces knowledge and collective capabilities

(Arendt 1972). A clearer example would be the TROC magazine, which is available online and aims to become “the vehicle for ideas, reflections, news and activities of consumer groups in Barcelona regarding consumption, ecology and new consumer movements,” as stated in the introduction of every issue. Each issue contains articles on different matters such as renewable energy, ecological agriculture, the producers the writers buy from, recipes for how to cook the vegetables they receive on a weekly basis, and further sources of information for concerned consumers (see Figure 1). The information presented in TROC is of both an episodic and a thematic frame (Micheletti and Stole 2007). Episodic framing focuses on particular high-profile issues such as genetically modified products, whereas thematic framing encourages consumers to question the context and underlying mechanisms of unsustainable lifestyles in general. The fact that RCC members edit TROC is also important as it shows that consumers create and disseminate discourses through their own means as another tactic of resistance. The established network of interaction and information flow shapes common belief systems, ideologies and the interpretation of information (Gaventa 1980).

Participants perceive themselves to be in a privileged, more empowered position because they believe in thinking outside of the knowledge systems that frame them, especially when they compare themselves to the general public. In fact, one participant uses the examples of the movie *The Matrix* and Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*, as in the study of Kozinets and Handelman’s (2004), to demonstrate how he sees himself in relation to others.

Manolo (Interview): ...When the prisoner escapes and at first the light blinds him. This is what happens to you when you understand that there is another option. And you say: Man, there is so much to be done. So the prisoner goes back to the cave and says to the others: What you see in the cave is not reality, what they teach us is a lie. And the others say: “No,

no, don't set us free. We like it here. Whatever exists outside doesn't matter to us." You know?

This quote highlights the perceived transformative nature of information, alluding to Freire's notion of "conscientization" (1974). Manolo explains that it changes his view of the world and, thus, marks a clear difference between him and those "unwilling to see the truth."

Previous research describes this as the "Aha! Experience" (Thompson and Troester 2002, p. 560) or the "moments of truth" (Kozinets and Handelman 2004, p. 695). On a similar note, our participants claim to "connect the dots," to become spiritually aware, mindful of the conventions, behaviors and lifestyles that are deceitfully proposed within the mainstream market, and to establish their "rituals of truth." Manolo uses the Plato myth and *The Matrix* to emphasize the process of indoctrination that individuals go through learning to think in certain ways, having certain desires and wants, and governing and controlling their field of action (Foucault 1982). Furthermore, there is an implicit reference to the production of a certain type of enjoyment that sustains the hegemonic paradigm. For Manolo, however, individuals are simply manipulated and typecast in their roles as consumers, rather than citizens, ideologically blind to issues of great significance to their lives. In this sense, power operates through people's wants, desires and preferences, which define their choices. As Foucault states (1991, p. 100), "the population is the subject of needs, of aspirations, but it is also the object in the hands of the government, aware, vis-à-vis the government, of what it wants, but ignorant of what is being done to it." Citing dialogues from *The Matrix*, once Manolo acknowledges the truth, "there is no turning back," only further exploring "how deep the rabbit-hole goes." Thus, critical consciousness emerges and participants move from unquestionably accepting the social order to adopting a critical perspective of it. This is where the RCC plays a critical role for its participants. Some moments of truth take place when they join the RCC, whereas other may go through the same experience beforehand. However, for most participants RCCs act not only as credible information systems and an alternative form of consumption, but also as spaces in which members can co-produce counter-hegemonic discourses and knowledge.

Gaining Empowerment through RCCs: Individual Versus Collective Efficacy

The participants' narratives contain a preponderance of anti-consumption discourses, including "reduce consumption to the minimum," "avoid luxuries and brands," "own only one pair of shoes," and "no waste," while their behaviors may exhibit consumer resistance in the choice of alternative distribution channels, such as consumer-to-consumer exchanges, to oppose the mainstream market (Lee et al. 2011).

As individual consumers, the respondents prefer local and small producers, participate in swapping, and buy from

second-hand stores. However, they all encounter difficulties such as a lack of time, product availability, and social pressure from friends and family members who do not share their concerns. Tony (Focus Group) mentions that sometimes he just has to go to McDonalds with his children and other parents, otherwise his family social life is limited. However, within the RCC, participants find other like-minded individuals and collectively decide what products should be purchased and from whom. The act of consumption is no longer individual and relies on the creation of social ties and personal connections, so power from consumption also belongs to the group (Arendt 1972). Some participants even call the RCC "a utopia" in which they can impose their rules and conditions, something they cannot do outside of it. As Marc (Interview) puts it: "If I'm in the co-op, it's because I want to help the people that really need it and that I'm interested in supporting."

For Marc, the act of participation supports the small, local, and environmentally friendly producers chosen by the co-op. As understood by Marc, small, local producers are also disempowered. However, they can do little to help themselves and have to play by the rules of the market. Thus, through RCCs, participants aim to empower both themselves and the powerless producers. In this case, power is not objectified, shifting from one party to the other. RCCs are constructed as spaces that exclude other, powerful social actors and re-configure the relationship between the disempowered actors. The functioning and principles of RCCs reveal the creativity and reflexivity of participants with regard to whom they want to empower and who really needs their help. Beyond buying food, RCC participants construct a personal relationship with producers, to whom they often refer as their friends, which is an important difference with the great, anonymous consumer market. Although this "distaste for anonymity" is not a new finding (see Kozinets 2002, p. 28), it is fundamental for our participants and to the functioning of RCCs.

The selection process of producers is done carefully and established on the basis of strict criteria. Producers should be small, local, organic, and free from middlemen. If a producer does not meet the RCC's main requirements, the collaboration may be terminated. Carmen gives one such example. She explains how her RCC stopped buying organic onions from a supplier in Cairo, Egypt, because they were not locally produced. Nevertheless, most participants emphasize the open relationship of collaboration and communication between consumers and producers. Furthermore, RCC members agree to cover part of the costs if farmers undergo a misfortune that destroys their produce, similarly to the Community-Supported Agriculture model (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007). Also, as we will explain below, participants delegate control over the choice of fresh produce such as fruits and vegetables to suppliers. In doing so, they are trying to maintain control over aspects important to them without disempowering the producer. They claim to engage in a consumer-producer relationship that builds mutual understanding, empowers both parties, and excludes powerful, oppressive social actors.

To maintain control, RCC members establish a range of structures and processes including control committees, regular

visits to producers, and meetings to discuss RCC practices. Several articles in TROC describe visits to producers. The control committee¹ is in charge of purchases. It searches for producers who meet RCC requirements and then negotiates and maintains the agreement. The committee also pays frequent visits to producers, as described in the following quote:

Marta (Focus Group): Because of my work I have a lot of contact with producers and a personal relationship with them. And I trust them. So I go there and he explains to me how he (the producer) makes it and maybe I agree with him, maybe I don't. But I prefer this to a brand where they just tell me that the production process respects society and the environment. I prefer to find out and see for myself.

The direct relationship with the actual producer, which has generally been lost in the modern system of intermediation (Cook 2004), allows for negotiations and a greater sense of control and transparency in two main, but specific, aspects: control of the production process and control of labor conditions. As Sheila (Interview) says: "It is better to consume something in a co-op than from a multinational because that way I know under what labor conditions it was made. That's one of the joys of it." In other words, RCC members ensure information transparency while they negotiate and create an alternative model of production-consumption, at least for certain products. Sheila argues that not simply accepting offerings already in the marketplace is one of her joys. The collective nature of the project facilitates this since individuals are not acting alone.

Furthermore, some RCCs arrange their own production of products, such as toothpaste and wine. They are led by members who teach them how to do so or who are producers themselves. Also, in some cases RCCs rent land to cultivate vegetables, which can be combined with what they buy from local producers:

No author (TROC magazine): News from our garden! After harvesting beans and garlic, tomatoes were planted. For the summer, weekly shifts are scheduled to water the garden. We remind you that the garden is an activity of the cooperative open to every member. We encourage you to participate!

This seems at odds with the participants' will to empower smaller producers since in this case they exclude them by taking charge of some of the produce. It should be mentioned, though, that self-production takes place on a small scale and can enable lower-income members to join and exchange work for food credit.

The participants' discourses reveal a more effective agency as members of the group than as individuals. Examples are



Figure 2. Invitation to the 5th meeting of cooperatives and producers in 2013.

commonly offered as proof of the change generated, such as the increasing popularity of the RCCs.

Marti (Focus group): You don't have to do anything, it just happens. Many people want to join [the co-op] and companies are thinking more and more about these things. I think we just come here, buy and everything will happen by itself.

Angels (Focus group): There are many, many things that are more positive, aren't there? New forms of consumption are appearing, such as the cooperative. There are just a few co-ops but more are appearing. And it's funny, but 25-30 years ago they didn't exist. But now they do!

The above quotes are proof of the perceived collective efficacy of the RCC project. Similar to Shaw, Newholm, and Dickinson (2006), many participants also identify a larger imagined consumer community of which they are part. For instance, Marti (Focus Group) mentions the existence of ethically oriented consumers in other countries even though he does not know any personally. For him, that ethical products exist proves that there are consumers interested in buying them. Participants use this tangible or less tangible evidence to self-assert the impact of their actions, and at the same time this proof of empowerment strengthens their motivation to continue.

Ecoconsum, the coordinating body of RCCs in Catalonia, also serves this purpose. Apart from being a source of information for cooperative members, *Ecoconsum* strengthens the perceived existence of a larger community by organizing meetings on an annual basis to bring cooperative members and producers together (see Figure 2). It also provides information on the success of the project, such as the increasing number of RCCs, a representational practice (Kjellberg and Helgesson 2007) that exemplifies the popularity of the project and helps potential

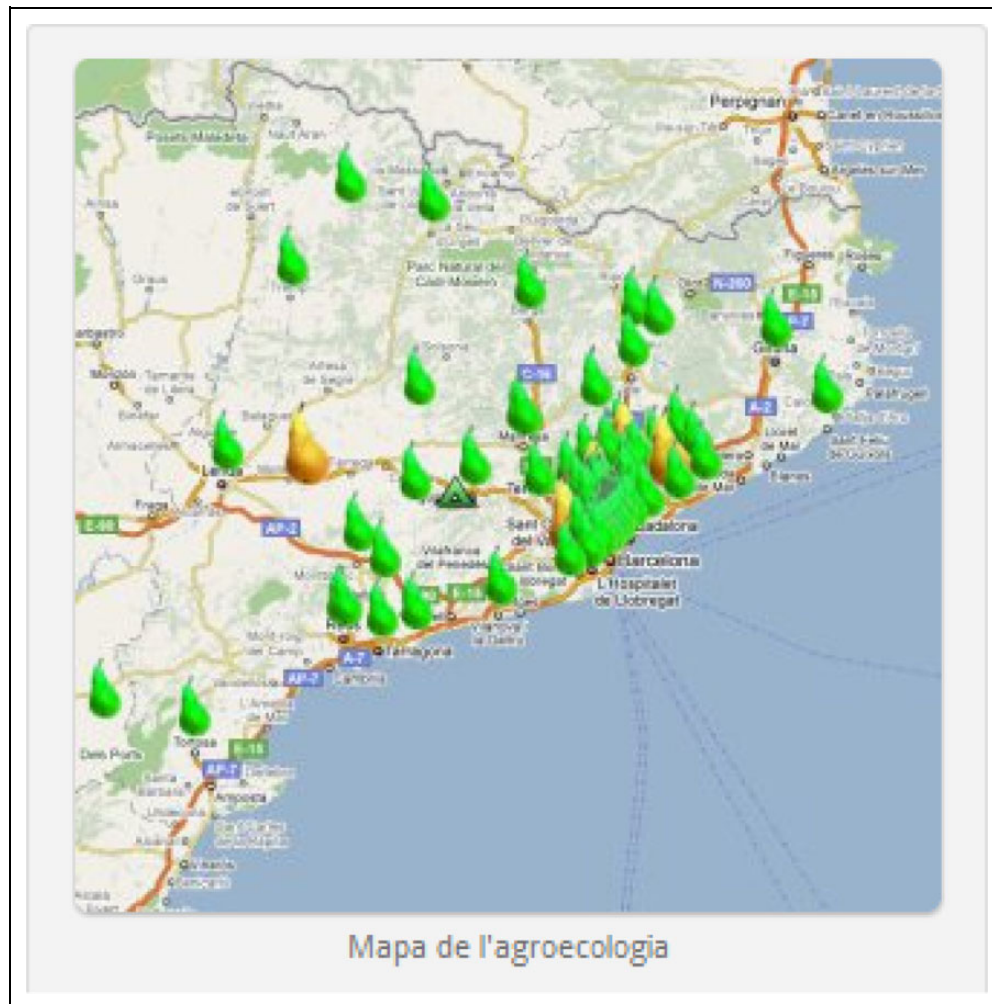


Figure 3. Mapping RCCs in Catalonia using google maps.

members find a RCC near them (see Figure 3). For example, from the *Ecoconsum* website it can be seen that:

There are more than 1000 families with an eco-commitment

1,920,000 euros are invested annually

Another form of consumption has already emerged (www.ecoconsum.org)

The visibility of *Ecoconsum* can generate a belief in the utility and rationality of collective action (Wollebaek and Selle 2002), while also enabling action on a collective level by coordinating events such as the ‘No Buying Day’ (see Figure 4) and the *Repera* meetings of RCCs (Figure 2).

Indeed, collective efficacy appears to be greater than individual efficacy for participants. As they see it, participants have a greater influence on the socio-political system in a group than as individuals.

Sheila (Focus group): Obviously I feel that I have more power as part of a group than as an individual. We

have the chance to participate in the changes taking place, not just in the cooperative but in general, to challenge this structure.

Furthermore, decisions are taken collectively, reinforcing their perceived legitimacy. Connolly and Prothero (2008) found that perceptions of empowerment for the individual consumer may be accompanied by insecurities about “what is the right thing to do.” However, the decisions taken within the group are discussed and negotiated by all members, and this reduces the potential burden and responsibility of a consumer acting alone.

More than Consumption: Further Notions of Empowerment

The discourses mentioned earlier in this paper focus largely on how the participants construct their status as more empowered consumers. However, the RCC project also empowers them as citizens. Participants embrace the main tenets of the cooperative movement: self-government, decisions through consensus,



Figure 4. No buying day: Dance, talk, hug, draw, sing, question, exchange (translated from Catalan).

and equal participation in decision making and responsibilities. In this way they create a social imaginary of what citizenship should be like. In one RCC, participants had put on the wall tips about how discussions should be carried out because, as they explained, modern citizens do not know how to discuss such matters.

Marc (Interview): It is clear to me that there a number of things that should be basic: information transfer, deciding by consensus, for example. One of our aims is to decide things by consensus and not by voting. If someone from the coop doesn't agree with something, we have to figure out a way for that person to feel represented in the decision we take. If not, they will feel excluded. It's finding the point of balance for everyone, right? It is not always easy, but if we wanted it to be easy we'd be happy just voting every four years.

Undoubtedly, certain principles of RCCs, such as equal participation and consensus through debate, can be challenging. Marc, for instance, mentions that it can sometimes takes hours to reach a decision, while Laura (Focus Group) explains that there are often free riders and an unequal distribution of

workload that requires constant monitoring. This prompted her to leave the cooperative. However, for most participants these challenges imply a learning curve, while also acting as a filter to eliminate those members without a genuine commitment to the initiative.

In addition, most RCCs establish a maximum number of members (normally 35-40). Participants explained that this restriction is directly related to the feasibility of the self-government model. If new members wanted to enter, they would instead be advised to start their own RCC and receive help to do this.

It is interesting to observe how participants generate structures in which they regain the control lost in traditional functions of citizenship like voting. Furthermore, it becomes clear that cooperatives are more than simply spaces of consumption and in fact resemble "schools of democracy" that generate social trust, social networks, civic engagement and thus social capital (Putnam 1993), although they are different to the political communities suggested by Bauman (1988). For most members, this type of functioning is the complete reverse of the existing political system, which limits their freedom and does not let their voices be heard. RCCs enable participants to take action, to get involved in issues that concern them, and to bring about the social changes they desire, both as citizens and consumers (Arendt 1972; Micheletti and Stolle 2007).

Other examples of further participatory action involve members considering setting up organic quality standards system of their own (another tactic of resistance) instead of accepting the standards established by the local government.

Carmen (Interview): Look at the Catalan Council of Organic Production label. We don't trust it. What's happening now with genetically modified crops is that now that we've had them for eight years they say there's contamination. So the council says . . . We can tolerate 0.9% of the genetically modified strain in ingredients! But we don't! We don't tolerate it at all! It's just that a moment comes when like a cooperative we can question the label, whether we want it or not.

This finding is in line with the general lack of trust regarding government mechanisms. The creation and implementation of a certification system by the RCC provides an alternative route for quality control, but it is also directly related to the group's perceived collective efficacy. Furthermore, Fair Trade is also largely criticized as being unsustainable, for hiding real problems, and for reproducing existing power structures. An article in TROC discusses how Fair Trade can be considered condescending to Third World countries and offers multinationals like Starbucks the opportunity to "greenwash." Participants question ethical solutions such as the organic certification system and Fair Trade because they see them as limited definitions of problems. They emphasize the need to widen the scope by addressing the questions: What is organic produce and how



Figure 5. The Multireferendum platform-The people decide (translated from Catalan).

should it be certified? Is Fair Trade fair? In this sense, becoming empowered requires a constant renegotiation of and reflection on what constitutes fair, ethical, and sustainable marketplaces and what action may lead to these. According to Gaventa (1980), understanding the mechanisms of power is necessary prior to any type of mobilization and social dialogue. Also, participants seem to be confident of defying existing market structures and keen to engage in further action as a group: participants gain system, action-related, and effectiveness knowledge through the representational practices described above (Kjellberg and Helgesson 2007). This results in positive spill-over effects of the RCC project (Thøgersen and Ölander 2003). For example, RCCs actively promote sustainable lifestyles and civic participation in general, including traditional political activism.

Silvia (Interview): Well, the dual objective was firstly to consume and provide a service to the members that wanted to be in the group so they could consume ecologically in a space, and at an organizational level. But secondly it's about the social innovation well, we've been

participating in campaigns, well, all about making it popular.

The above quote shows that participants consciously and reflexively think of the RCCs not only as an alternative option for consumption but also as a kind of social innovation. Examples include participation in campaigns such as “We are what we sow,” in protest against GM crops in Catalonia, and “No supermarkets, thank you.” RCC members actively participated in these campaigns, collecting signatures in the street, giving out leaflets and information, and writing about the campaigns in TROC.

It is also interesting to note the evolution of the RCC network in terms of the issues it deems important. For example, in 2014 the Multireferendum platform was created (post on *Ecoconsum* website, see Figure 5). The main aim of this initiative is to conduct various referendums on different issues of a local nature – such as the water supply of local town councils or the BCN World project² – and those more general in scope, such as establishing legal processes for referendum calls. The clearest statements on the group website are similar to the

narratives of the participants: calls for direct democracy and reference to issues that local authorities block and refuse to discuss. Instead of the traditional top-down voting system, a more direct and democratic bottom-up approach is demanded (Bau-man 1988).

The Paradox of Choice: Giving Away Control

The participants' narratives clearly reveal the need to regain control, both as consumers and as citizens. However, an interesting contradiction exists in that, while the participants strictly adhere to their purchasing principles of local, organic producers and transparency in the production-consumption cycle, they completely delegate control to the farmer when it comes to what products to produce and therefore consume. The logic is simple. It is not the farmer who ultimately chooses; it is nature. A naturalistic, eco-centric perspective is adopted in that only seasonal and mainly local products are bought. Respect for nature and what it provides is a strong belief in the RCC. More extreme views are found, for example, in the case of Rebecca, who substitutes chocolate with carob because chocolate is not produced locally. Favoring localness emanates from concerns about the existing capitalist agricultural system, which does not allow territorial self-sufficiency and food sovereignty:

Araceli (Focus group): All territories should have a degree of self-sufficiency. I don't understand this model of colonialism, thinking that the world is my farm and that those in the Ivory Coast should produce cocoa. And if they don't like chocolate, who cares? They're not going to eat it!

In this production model, autochthonous seed varieties are being lost. This is an important issue for participants because in Catalonia and Spain agriculture forms part of their local tradition and cultural identity.

In neoliberal views of consumer empowerment, choice or freedom of choice is the bottom line. However, in this case participants embrace the delegation of control over what will be produced and consumed, as long as the production process abides by their ethical requirements and concerns. They eagerly accept not knowing what products they will receive every week.

Kat (Focus group): Now that's a surprise! What's going to be in it? I like cooking things I've never eaten.
Me? Pumpkin? I'd never eaten it before the cooperative. Or beets. It's a new experience.

This verbatim reveals that the product itself is not the central concern for the members of RCCs. Instead, their main focus is the way in which the social relations around food should be organized in society, for example, production and consumption

practices and the relationship between consumers and producers. Participants still make a choice. They choose to focus on the issues that are important to them, such as establishing a direct relationship with producers, gaining transparency in the consumption-production cycle, and obtaining healthy and fresh products instead of choosing the type and quantity of food, as they would in a supermarket. By adopting this approach, they challenge the notion of the empowered consumer as it is often depicted in neoliberal markets where more choice means more power. The emphasis here is on choosing what matters, instead of from a predefined – in many aspects – choice set.

This model could also be interpreted in the light of the “paradox of choice” (Shankar, Cherrier, and Canniford 2006). Participants seem happy to accept it because it frees them from having to choose what they will consume every week. A further advantage of not choosing is that it allows for new culinary experiences, which foster the group's creativity. The recipes in each issue of TROC and the cookery classes organized by the group deal with the practical problem of not recognizing, and thus not knowing how to cook, all of the fruits and vegetables delivered by producers.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our study broadens the notion of empowerment by examining it as a collective, social progression towards a more sustainable market paradigm. Participants provide descriptions of the perceived power relations, their enemies, and the struggles taking place. Anti-capitalist discourses are common, as in previous studies (Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Thompson and Arsel 2004; Varman and Belk 2009), and capitalism is presented as the principal abstract enemy. Participants describe dominant social players (multinationals, government, middlemen) and the disempowered groups, the consumers and small producers (Kozinets and Handelman 2004). But interestingly, in their narratives, participants seem to understand themselves as having the potential to become empowered, whereas smaller producers have little choice but oppression. If as consumers they allow themselves to be manipulated, embracing a consumerist lifestyle dictated by marketers, they also contribute to perpetuating this structure of domination.

Our findings reveal a debate over consumption and citizenship and about the systems of meanings and norms that condition hegemonic social and market organization. Participants principally link their disempowerment to being unable to participate on an equal footing in social dialogues about market organization. Moreover, asymmetrical, non-transparent information leaves them in the dark. To remedy this, they construct RCCs as spaces of resistance, and indeed we can see how conditions of information asymmetry and opacity might trigger consumer movements and democratic struggles that destabilize information barriers. Within the confines of RCCs, participants endeavor to change the rules and power structures in which they are immersed, moving from a disempowered position to a more empowered one. RCCs become spaces in which participants test tactics of resistance against ruling social force

relations. At the same time, they challenge consumption and citizenship as constructed in dominant social discourses, predefining their social field of action as consumers and citizens. Within the RCC they collectively deconstruct and reconstruct these terms. During this process, they question what constitutes a fair, sustainable market and criticize mainstream forms of ethical consumption, such as Fair Trade certification systems, as well as any corporate attempt to offer them local and organic food. However, a simultaneous process emphasizes the fluidity of power. Whereas participants resist the capitalist market's power discourses, they also submit to the discourses created within their spaces (Thompson 2004).

Power here is not a zero-sum. Participants are not trying to take power from other social agents. Instead, they are striving as a group to develop power for themselves and for other oppressed social actors. For example, the creation of RCCs constitutes an alternative that extends the set of choices available to consumers in general (potential choice). At the same time, they try to shape a relationship with the producers that, to their understanding, is empowering for both parties because it is based on transparency, solidarity, and negotiation. They establish strict conditions (producers must be organic, small and local) for partnership, yet at the same time they do not decide what they receive each week. This paradox shows that empowerment in this case is not about a larger choice set or about gaining absolute control over the producer or over what is produced. Rather, it concerns the capacity to establish and maintain (even on a small scale) an alternative form of market organization, the desired roles of consumers and producers, and the relationship that should exist between the two.

Different issues raised by this research are of interest to macromarketing. RCCs are microstructures that propose a different market organization based on direct negotiation and collaboration between the producer of food and the consumer of food. In our study, participants simultaneously carry out their ethical "consumer duties" as an individual task and as members of the RCC. Our findings suggest that participants claim to feel lost, tired, paranoid, and confused in their effort to be aware, critical and reflexive. For example, they observe and experience informational asymmetries, information saturation, and lack of transparency and credibility. It would be naïve to claim that the RCC overcomes all of these barriers, but the group seems to facilitate members in certain ways. RCCs become networks of interaction, information flow, and production, acting as informants (providing relevant information), navigators (indicating and guiding the information search), and coordinators (stimulating and coordinating consumer-to-consumer communication and collective action) (Rezabakhsh et al. 2006). In a RCC, knowledge is created and disseminated through advancing "new ways of governing and being governed" (Torfing 2009, p. 123).

Participants seem to experience greater collective efficacy that is materialized through their discursive strategies, giving examples that prove the efficacy of their action and defend the logic of the RCC project. They discursively construct the RCC as an alternative form of consumption and citizenship. The

creation of the TROC magazine and the RCC network (*Eco-consum*) are clear examples of this intended strategy. Both constitute representational practices (Kjellberg and Helgesson 2007) whose visibility reinforces the continuance of the project, as there is tangible proof of the social change they generate. This also leads to the repetition of successful practices and even to further traditional political activism at the group level, such as participation in campaigns and promotion of referendums. Participants argue to be more confident of repeating and extending their responsible behavioral repertoire as individuals and as a group. They experience little victories within the spaces of resistance they create. But, most importantly, they gain the confidence and morale to pursue participation and choice over the major issues (Denham Lincoln et al. 2002). What we observe here is a type of civic spillover (Thøgersen and Ölander 2003).

Most importantly, however, RCCs go beyond consumption and represent networks and platforms that span various issues of importance to their members. Some of these issues remain over time, but new ones are also added, as the *Multireferendum* project shows. Such findings confirm Forno and Graziano's (2014) claim of changing modern protest tactics, from food riots and public gatherings to locally organized actions and networks, seemingly supporting different forms of consumption. Marc, one of the participants, categorically rejects the reduction of his role to that of a mere consumer. So, in this case consumption does not substitute for citizenship, but it is used because it is a template "for action and understanding available to most people" (Arnould 2007, p. 105). Communities such as RCCs may capitalize on the lasting power inherent to network relationships. This greater relational and organizational empowerment of groups such as RCCs and other platforms is tied to the greater macro-structures and to different issues associated with consumption, society, and politics. To give an example, in the May 2015 elections in Spain an activist from an anti-eviction platform was sworn in as the mayor of Barcelona.

Finally, the functioning and principles of RCCs are also relevant to macromarketing. Beyond consumption, participants create their micro-versions of participatory democracies in which they are required and expected to act as informed and active citizens, or a kind of confederation of *demoi* (Fotopoulos 2003). This illustrates how consumer freedom is not enough for those participants who crave public freedom (Bauman 1988). Different strategies and mechanisms are established to ensure a more democratic, participatory governance of RCCs. These include setting a maximum number of members to ensure self-governance, creating committees where all members participate equally and rotate over time, and taking decisions by consensus instead of voting. In this sense, RCCs contribute to the generation of societal structures that not only challenge mainstream consumption and agriculture, but also create alternative spaces for civic participation. Cooperatives resemble schools of democracy in which empowered citizens can exert more tangible control, unlike in the traditional political system.

Therefore, on a micro level, communities like RCCs may create "habits of cooperation and solidarity" (Putnam 1993, p. 90) by acting as pedagogical laboratories (Latouche 2009).

On a macro level, RCCs can be seen as channels of influence and as intermediaries between individual members and the political system (Forno and Graziano 2014; Putnam 1993; Wollebaek and Selle 2002). For instance, the existence of a network of cooperatives and the coordinating body, *Ecoconsum*, enables the interests, values and arguments of individual citizens to take on a clearer shape at a collective level, with the potential to become an agent of deeper structural societal change (Micheletti and Stolle 2007). Thus, the collective dimension of RCC projects, their increasing popularity and their organization may establish RCCs as local stakeholders.

Our research moves the discussion from neoliberal understandings of the empowered, free ethical consumer to a more sophisticated exploration of consumer empowerment. RCC members create a new option for consumption, but they also produce collective discourses that change their field of action. RCCs represent a cultural and economic alternative that questions many of the tenets of the capitalist market and society, “decolonising the social imaginary” (Latouche 2009, p. 95), among them, the notions of consumer and citizen. In this sense, struggles in the domain of consumption may shape broader discourses of democratic, accountable, and participative governance. These findings show that, in line with Speer and Hughey (1996, p. 178), the concept of empowerment should be moved “beyond an individualized account of change to locate it at a higher level of analysis, thus acknowledging connectedness of persons and organisations.”

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to Keiji Fujiyoshi, Federico Farini, Cristina Morales, Nadya Georgieva-Stankova and Trinidad Valle for their useful comments, as well to the three anonymous reviewers for their feedback.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Other committees are also established, such as the communication committee in charge of external relations or the activities committee in charge of organizing seminars, workshops, and other events. All members participate in a committee and rotate over time.
2. BCN World is a recreational project including six casinos that has received much criticism. Some have argued that it destroys the local economy, incentivizes gambling, and provides only short-term economic benefits to the region. The conditions of the licenses granted to the casinos have also been disputed.

References

- Adkins, Natalie and Julie Ozanne (2005), “Critical Consumer Education: Empowering the Low Literate Consumer,” *Journal of Macromarketing*, 25 (2), 153-62.
- Arendt, Hannah (1972), *Crises of the Republic: Lying in Politics; Civil Disobedience; On Violence; Thoughts on Politics and Revolution*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Arnould, Eric (2007), “Should Consumer/citizens Escape the Market?” *Annals AAPSS*, 611, 96-111.
- Assadourian, Eric (2010), “Transforming cultures: From Consumerism to Sustainability,” *Journal of Macromarketing*, 30 (2), 186-91.
- Barnett, Clive, Paul Cloke, Nick Clarke, and Alice Malpass (2005), “Consuming Ethics: Articulating the Subjects and Spaces of Ethical Consumption,” *Antipode*, 37 (1), 23-45.
- Baudrillard, Jean (1998), *The Consumer Society Myths and Structures*. London: Sage.
- Bauman, Zygmunt (1988), *Freedom*. Stony Stratford, UK: Open University Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt (2001), *La Posmodernidad y sus Descontentos*. Madrid, Spain: Akal
- Berry, Hannah and Morven McEachern (2005), “Informing Ethical Consumers,” in *The Ethical Consumer*, Rob Harrison, Terry Newholm, and Deirdre Shaw, eds. London, UK: Sage, 69-88.
- Carrigan, Marylyn, Isabelle Szmigin, and Joanne Wright (2004), “Shopping for a Better World? An Interpretive Study of the Potential for Ethical Consumption Within the Older Market,” *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 21 (6), 401-17.
- Carrington, Michal, Benjamin Neville, and Gregory Whitwell (2010), “Why Ethical Consumers Don’t Walk Their Talk: Towards a Framework for Understanding the Gap between the Ethical Purchase Intentions and Actual Buying Behaviour of Ethically Minded Consumers,” *Journal of Business Ethics*, 97 (November), 139-58.
- Castañeda, Ernesto (2012), “The Indignados of Spain: A Precedent to Occupy Wall Street,” *Social Movement Studies*, 11(3/4), 309-19.
- Castells, Manuel (2008), “Comunicación, Poder y Contrapoder en la Sociedad Red. Los Nuevos Espacios de la Comunicación,” *TELOS: Cuadernos de comunicación e innovación*, 75 (2008), 11-23.
- Clegg, Stewart and Mark Haugaard (2009), “Discourses of Power,” in *The Sage Handbook of Power*, Stewart Clegg and Mark Haugaard, eds. London, UK: Sage, 400-65.
- Connolly, John and Andrea Prothero (2008), “Green Consumption, Life Politics, Risk and Contradictions,” *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 8 (1), 117-45.
- Cook, Ian (2004), “Follow the Thing: Papaya,” *Antipode*, 36 (4), 642-64.
- Corbin, Juliet and Anselm Strauss (1990), “Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons, and Evaluative Criteria,” *Qualitative Sociology*, 13 (1), 3-21.
- Cova, Bernard and Danielle Dalli (2009), “Working Consumers: The Next Step in Marketing Theory?” *Marketing Theory*, 9 (3), 315-39.
- Cova, Bernard and Stefano Pace (2006), “Brand Community of Convenience Products: New Forms of Customer Empowerment-The Case ‘My Nutella The Community,’” *European Journal of Marketing*, 40 (9/10), 1087-105.
- Cresswell, John W. (1998), *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among the Five Traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Denegri-Knott, Janice, Detlev Zwick, and Jonathan E. Schroeder (2006), "Mapping Consumer Power: An Integrative Framework for Marketing and Consumer Research," *European Journal of Marketing*, 40 (9/10), 950-71.
- Denham Lincoln, Nicola, Cheryl Travers, Peter Ackers, and Adrian Wilkinson (2002), "The Meaning of Empowerment: The Interdisciplinary Etymology of a New Management Concept," *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 4 (3), 271-90.
- Devinney, Timothy M., Pat Auger, and Gianna M. Eckhardt (2010), *The Myth of the Ethical Consumer*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Dickson, Marsha A. (2005), "Identifying and Profiling Apparel Label Users," in *The Ethical Consumer*, Rob Harrison, Terry Newholm, and Deirdre Shaw, eds. London, UK: Sage, 155-70.
- Easterby-Smith, Mark, Richard Thorpe, and Paul Jackson (2001), *Management Research: An Introduction*. London, UK: Sage.
- Fontenelle, Isleide (2013), "From Politicisation to Redemption through Consumption: The Environmental Crisis and the Generation of Guilt in the Responsible Consumer as Constructed in the Business Media," *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization*, 13 (2), 339-66.
- Forno, Francesca and Paolo Graziano (2014), "Sustainable Community Movement Organisations," *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 14 (2), 139-57.
- Fotopoulos, Takis (2003), "The Inclusive Democracy Project: A Rejoinder," *Democracy and Nature*, 9 (3), 429-72.
- Foucault, Michel (1980), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, Michel (1982), "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (4), 777-95.
- Foucault, Michel (1990), *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1, An Introduction*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, Michel (1991), "Governmentality," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 87-105.
- Freire, Paulo (1974), *Education for Critical Consciousness/Extension of Communication*. London, UK: Sheed and Ward.
- Gaventa, John (1980), *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Glaser, Barney G. and Anselm L. Strauss (1967), *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Göhler, Gerhard (2009), "Power to and Power over," in *The Sage Handbook of Power*, Stewart Clegg and Mark Haugaard, eds. London, UK: Sage, 27-39.
- Heath, Joseph and Andrew Potter (2006), *The Rebell Sell: How the Counterculture Became Consumer Culture?* London, UK: Capstone Publishing Limited.
- Heiskanen, Eva (2005), "The Performative Nature of Consumer Research: Consumers' Environmental Awareness as an Example," *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 28 (2), 179-201.
- Howells, Geraint (2005), "The Potential and Limits of Consumer Empowerment by Information," *Journal of Law and Society*, 32 (3), 349-70.
- Johnston, Josée (2008), "The Citizen-consumer Hybrid: Ideological Tensions and the Case of Whole Food Market," *Theory and Society*, 37 (3), 229-70.
- Kabeer, Naila (1999), "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment," *Development and Change*, 30 (3), 435-64.
- Kjellberg, Hans and Claes-Fredrik Helgesson (2007), "On the Nature of Markets and their Practices," *Marketing Theory*, 7 (2), 137-62.
- Kozinets, Robert V. (2002), "Can Consumers Escape the Market? Emancipatory Illuminations from Burning Man," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29 (1), 20-39.
- Kozinets, Robert V. and Jay M. Handelman (2004), "Adversaries of Consumption: Consumer Movement, Activism, and Ideology," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31 (December), 691-704.
- Lang, Tim and Gabriel Yiannis (2005), "A Brief History of Consumer Activism," in *The Ethical Consumer*, Rob Harrison, Terry Newholm, and Deirdre Shaw, eds. London, UK: Sage, 39-52.
- Latouche, Serge (2009), *Farewell to Growth*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Lee, Michael S. W., Hélène Cherrier, Dominique Roux, and Bernard Cova (2011), "Anti-consumption and Consumer Resistance: Concepts, Concerns, Conflicts, and Convergence," *European Journal of Marketing*, 45 (11/12), 1680-87.
- Lincoln, Yvonna and Egon Guba (1985), *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Low, William and Eileen Davenport (2007), "To Boldly Go... Exploring Ethical Spaces to Re-Politicise Ethical Consumption and Fair Trade," *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 6 (5), 336-48.
- Mauthner, Natasha and Andrea Doucet (2003), "Reflexive Accounts and Accounts of Reflexivity in Qualitative Data Analysis," *Sociology*, 37 (3), 413-31.
- Maxwell, Joseph A. (2013). *Qualitative Research Design, an Interactive Approach* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Micheletti, Michele and Dietlind Stolle (2007), "Mobilizing Consumers to Take Responsibility for Global Social Justice," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 611 (May), 157-75.
- Mittelstaedt, John, Clifford J., Shultz II, William E. Kilbourne, and Mark Peterson (2014), "Sustainability as Megatrend: Two Schools of Macromarketing Thought," *Journal of Macromarketing*, 34 (3), 253-64.
- Mohr, Lois A., Deborah J. Webb, and Katherine E. Harris (2001), "Do Consumers Expect Companies to Be Socially Responsible? The Impact of Corporate Social Responsibility on Buying Behaviour," *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 35 (1), 45-73.
- Morriss, Peter (2009), "Power and Liberalism," in *The Sage Handbook of Power*, Stewart Clegg and Mark Haugaard, eds. London, UK: Sage, 54-69.
- Ozanne, Julie L. and Jeff B. Murray (1995), "Uniting Critical Theory and Public Policy to Create the Reflexively Defiant Consumer," *American Behavioral Scientist*, 38 (February), 516-25.
- Patton, Michael Q. (2002), *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Pires, Guilherme D., John Stanton, and Paulo Rita (2006), "The Internet, Consumer Empowerment and Marketing Strategies," *European Journal of Marketing*, 40 (9/10), 936-49.
- Prentoulis, Marina and Lasse Thomassen (2013), "Political Theory in the Square: Protest, Representation and Subjectification," *Contemporary Political Theory*, 12 (3), 166-84.
- Prothero, Andrea and Pierre McDonagh (2015), "Introduction to the Special Issue: Sustainability as a Megatrend," *Journal of Macromarketing*, 35 (1), 7-10.
- Prothero, Andrea, Pierre McDonagh, and Susan Dobscha (2010), "Is the Green the New Black? Reflections on a Green Commodity Discourse," *Journal of Macromarketing*, 30 (2), 147-59.
- Putnam, Robert (1993), *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Rezabakhsh, Behrang, Daniel Bornemann, Ursula Hansen, and Ulf Schrader (2006), "Consumer Power: A Comparison of the Old Economy and the Internet Economy," *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 29 (1), 3-36.
- Ritzer, George (2005), *Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Revolutionizing the Means of Consumption*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Schwarzkopf, Stefan (2011), "The Consumer as 'Voter', 'Judge', and 'Jury': Historical Origins and Political Consequences of a Marketing Myth," *Journal of Macromarketing*, 31 (1), 8-18.
- Shankar, Avi, Hélène Cherrier, and Robin Canniford (2006), "Consumer Empowerment: A Foucauldian Interpretation," *European Journal of Marketing*, 40 (9/10), 1013-30.
- Shaw, Deirdre, Terry Newholm, and Roger Dickinson (2006), "Consumption as Voting: an Exploration of Consumer Empowerment," *European Journal of Marketing*, 40 (9/10), 1049-67.
- Speer, Paul W. and Joseph Hughey (1996), "Mechanisms of Empowerment: Psychological Processes for Members of Power-based Community Organisations," *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 6 (3), 177-87.
- Thøgersen, John (2005), "How May Consumer Policy Empower Consumers for Sustainable Lifestyles?" *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 28 (2), 143-78.
- Thøgersen, John and Folke Ölander (2003), "Spill-over of Environmental Friendly Consumer Behaviour," *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 23 (3), 225-36.
- Thompson, Craig J. (2004), "Marketplace Mythology and Discourses of Power," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31 (1), 162-80.
- Thompson, Craig J. and Zeynep Arsel (2004), "The Starbucks Brandscape and Consumers' (Anticorporate) Experiences of Globalization," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31 (December), 631-41.
- Thompson, Craig J. and Goksen Coskuner-Balli (2007), "Enchanting Ethical Consumerism: The Case of Community Supported Agriculture," *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 7 (3), 275-303.
- Thompson, Craig J. and Maura Troester (2002), "Consumer Value Systems in the Age of Postmodern Fragmentation: The Case of the Natural Health Microculture," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 28 (March), 550-71.
- Torring, Jacob (2009), "Power and Discourse: Towards an Anti-foundationalist Concept of Power," in *The Sage Handbook of Power*, Stewart Clegg and Mark Haugaard, eds. London, UK: Sage, 108-24.
- Uusitalo, Outi and Reetta Oksanen (2004), "Ethical Consumerism: A View From Finland," *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 28 (3), 214-21.
- Varman, Rohit and Russell W. Belk (2009), "Nationalism and Ideology in an Anticonsumption Movement," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 36 (4), 686-700.
- Varman, Rohit and Ram Vikas (2007), "Rising Markets and Failing Health: An Inquiry into Subaltern Health Care Consumption under Neoliberalism," *Journal of Macromarketing*, 27 (2), 162-72.
- Wathieu, Luc, Lyle Brenner, Ziv Carmon, Amitava Chattopadhyay, Aimee Drolet, John Gourville, A.V. Muthukrishnan, Nathan Novemsky, Rebecca K. Ratner, Klaus Werthenbroch, and George Wu (2002), "Consumer Control and Empowerment: A Primer," *Marketing Letters*, 13 (3), 297-305.
- Wollebaek, Dag and Per Selle (2002), "Does Participation in Voluntary Associations Contribute to Social Capital? The Impact of Intensity, Scope and Type," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 31 (1), 32-61.
- Wooten, David and Americus Reed II (2000), "A Conceptual Overview of the Self Presentational Concerns and Response Tendencies of Focus Group Participants," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 9 (3), 141-53.
- Wright, Len Tiu (2006), "Consumer Empowerment Special Issue," *European Journal of Marketing*, 40 (9/10), 1-4.
- Zwick, Detlev and Nikhilesh Dholakia (2004), "Whose Identity Is It Anyway? Consumer Representation in the Age of Database Marketing," *Journal of Macromarketing*, 24 (1), 31-43.

Author Biographies

Eleni Papaoikonomou (PhD, Rovira and Virgili University) is a lecturer in Marketing, School of Business Management, Rovira and Virgili University, Spain. Her research has been published in academic journals such as the *Journal of Consumer Culture*, the *Journal of Business Ethics* and the *International Journal of Consumer Studies*.

Amado Alarcón (PhD, University of Barcelona) serves as Professor of Sociology, School of Business Management, Rovira and Virgili University, Spain. He is also the president of the research committee Language and Society for the International Sociological Association. His research has been published in numerous books and academic journals such as *Language in Society*, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, and *Revista Internacional de Sociología*.