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The Consumer and the ‚New Normal‘ after COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our lives. We want to come back to “normality” and when we ask ourselves if we are going to find everything as it was, the World Health Organization asks us to be prepared for a ‘new normal’ (WEF, 2020a).

With this statement, we can understand that we will hardly come back to those ‘normal’ times in which we were living last year. But, do we really want to come back to the world as it was? Can we take advantage of this crisis to change something in our world? We have heard endlessly that the planet cannot longer sustain

our current levels of consumption, that our lifestyles are not sustainable enough and that humanity and the planet are endangered.

The most known effort to reach a more sustainable world is the “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, adopted on 25 September 2015 by all United Nations Member States (United Nations, 2015), which aims to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all (United Nations, 2019). One of the most important challenges of this agenda is sustainable consumption and production (United Nations, 2020). Sustainable consumption has

been defined as “the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimizing the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life-cycle, so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations” (OECD, 2012, p. 2). The United Nations (2016) has been seeking to encourage consumers to consume responsibly by reducing waste and being thoughtful about what they buy and by choosing sustainable options whenever possible. Institutions, governments and specially, different areas of knowledge have been contributing to reach this goal.

Marketing has been accused of promoting consumerism by encouraging people to buy unnecessary products. Nevertheless, the marketing academy has been trying to contribute in different ways to alleviate the lack of sustainability in the world by understanding one of the most important challenges of the “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”: Consumption (United Nations, 2016).

MARKETING AND SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

The interest of the marketing academy in promoting social goals is not new. More than four decades ago, the marketing stream known as Social Marketing (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971) proposed to use the same marketing principles or technologies to influence consumers to voluntarily change a behavior for their own welfare or for the benefit of certain groups or the society (Kotler, Roberto & Lee, 2002). More recently, the Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) movement, since its birth in 2004 has been seeking to address the effects of consumption trends and practices on consumer welfare (Mari, 2011), to mention just two examples.

In general, research on sustainable consumption within the marketing field sets out to understand consumption behaviors that conduce to a sustainable development (Reisch & Thøgersen, 2015). Different marketing studies regarding sustainability have been interested in understanding the characteristics of the “green” consumer, the discovering of environmental beliefs, knowledge and attitudes and their impact on behavioral intentions, as well as the role and impact of “green” advertising in sustainable consumption, to name just a few (Kilbourne & Beckmann, 1998).

» The key element in sustainable consumption is the consumer: He finally decides to buy or not to buy a product, and to have or not to have a sustainable lifestyle. «

The interest and research regarding sustainability has been so important for the marketing discipline that some authors consider it urgent to reframe the general meaning of marketing if the marketing academy wants to tackle sustainability on a broad focus (McDonagh & Prothero, 2014).

The journey has not been easy. There is still a lot to understand because consumers’ sustainable attitudes and behaviors do not always reflect their concern and increasing interest in sustainable consumption; there is a gap

between consumer positive attitudes toward sustainability and consumer sustainable consumption behavior (Lehner, 2015; Prothero, et al., 2011). Therefore, further studies on sustainable consumption have been recommended in order to understand how the individual becomes committed and which factors can support or hinder this process (Hofmeister-Tóth, Kelemen & Piskóti, 2011).

As we have seen, the key element in sustainable consumption is, undoubtedly, the consumer. Despite all efforts made by institutions, governments and researchers, it is the consumer who finally decides to buy or not to buy a product, and to have or not to have a sustainable lifestyle.

CORONA CRISIS AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

However, could the coronavirus crisis be an opportunity to encourage consumers to adopt a more sustainable consumption behavior? Could it be possible that during this time, we as consumers could be able to see clearly how we were living and why is it important to consume in a more sustainable way? I really think so. Although the negative effects of the massive lockdown are big and the economic recovery will be a challenge for all countries, the coronavirus pandemic brought along the possibility to see how we were living, what was important for us, what is ‘now’ important for us and to evaluate our consumer behavior deeply. That suddenly, consumers could ‘realize’ what governments, intuitions and researchers have been trying to tell us for decades. Now, as a consequence of the pandemic, lockdowns restricting travel and industry have resulted in significant improvements in air quality all around the world (WEF, 2020b). We are facing shortages of different pro-

ducts that come from other countries, including food. The impossibility to go outside as much as we want to buy groceries and the lack of some foods are leading many consumers to think seriously that growing vegetables free of pesticides at home could be a good idea. An activity that in addition to food, could bring health, recreational, economic and environmental benefits (Sofa & Sofa, 2020).

I am sure that when we come back to the 'new normal' we won't forget the 'negative' and the 'positive' effects that the coronavirus pandemic brought to us. I know that it is too early to know if this will happen. Only time will tell whether we could take advantage of this situation for our own benefit, the benefit of the society and the benefit of our planet.

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