

ENTRE SOBRIETE CHOISIE ET CONTRAINTE : LES PARADOXES DES CONSOMMATEURS

Résumé de la communication en français de 100 mots au maximum :

La sobriété, définie comme une modération dans la consommation, est progressivement adoptée par certains consommateurs pour accélérer la transition écologique. Les motivations derrière la sobriété sont variées : certains choisissent la sobriété pour des raisons environnementales et sociales, tandis que d'autres adoptent ce mode de vie pour des raisons budgétaires, en particulier dans le contexte économique actuel. L'objectif de cette recherche est d'analyser de manière approfondie le phénomène de la sobriété en fonction de sa nature (choisie ou contrainte) et d'examiner ses effets sur les consommateurs, en termes de pratiques de consommation (i.e. les pratiques du faire soi-même -DIY-) et de perceptions liées à la marque (c'est-à-dire l'engagement envers les produits locaux et les attitudes durables envers les marques).

Mots-clés :

Sobriété choisie, Sobriété contrainte, Consommation locale, Marque durable, Faire soi-même.

BETWEEN CHOSEN AND CONSTRAINED SOBRIETY: CONSUMER'S PARADOXES

Abstract:

Sobriety, defined as a form of moderation in consumption, is progressively adopted by consumers as a promising approach for accelerating ecological transition. Consumers have different reasons for choosing sobriety, with some opting for it due to environmental concerns, while others do so for economic reasons, especially in the present economic context. This study aims to explore the phenomenon of sobriety, considering its nature (chosen versus constrained) and assess its impact on consumers' consumption patterns, such as do-it-yourself (DIY) practices, as well as their perception of brands, including their commitment to local products and attitudes towards sustainable brands.

Keywords:

Chosen sobriety, Constrained sobriety, Local consumption, Sustainable brand, Do-it-yourself

Managerial summary

The aim of this preliminary research is to compare the two forms of sobriety and examine whether constrained sobriety elicits similar reactions from consumers as chosen sobriety does. Unlike chosen sobriety, which emerges from an intentional decision by consumers who are generally convinced of this approach and therefore behave in accordance with their beliefs, constrained sobriety can lead to a return to old overconsumption practices once purchasing power improves. The question is to examine the reactions of the consumer who goes through a phase of constrained sobriety and compare it with the consumer who deliberately chooses to adopt sobriety in their way of life.

Interestingly, the initial results of this research show that consumers react differently to brands depending on the type of sobriety lifestyle they adopt (i.e., chosen or constrained). Results show that when consumers are forced into a sober lifestyle, they react negatively to local products, potentially because of a higher price of such products. This suggests that managers should try to make local products more accessible. Furthermore, consumers opting for chosen sobriety react negatively to sustainable brands, which could be explained by higher skepticism. However, both types of consumers (i.e., with a chosen or constrained sober lifestyle) will increase their DIY behaviors.

For responsible brands that decide to adopt a sobriety strategy, this study shows the importance of adjusting their marketing strategy based on consumers' sobriety mode. Firstly, brands must strengthen the authenticity of their corporate social and environmental responsibility strategy to improve attitudes towards the brand, regardless of consumers' sobriety mode.

Further, brands should also consider initiating new DIY practices for consumers by teaching eco-friendly tips related to the products they sell to reduce waste and promote zero waste practices. Similar to the awareness campaign in the Brittany region of France (i.e. a box for cookies, then photos, and finally pencil, but never thrown away!), informative messages on the various uses of the same product would be relevant. Additionally, Greenweez, a French leader in online organic and eco-responsible products, can promote its products while encouraging DIY practices and offering online learning workshops and video tutorials. For better effectiveness, the company can emphasize the economic benefits of adopting DIY for the most constrained consumers, and also encourage moderation of their product consumption for the most motivated consumers, demonstrating the brand's relevance in the market and its consistency with the aspirations of sober consumers.

BETWEEN CHOSEN AND CONSTRAINED SOBRIETY: CONSUMER'S PARADOXES

Introduction

Sobriety, defined as a form of moderation in consumption (Guillard 2019; Zavestoski 2002), is an approach that is increasingly emerging in our society. It is perfectly congruent with the new political ambitions advocating for a circular economy (i.e. the Anti-Waste for a Circular Economy law; the Climate and Resilience law) and a significant reduction in waste production. Sobriety is progressively adopted by consumers who are increasingly reevaluating their consumption choices and trying to minimize their impact by choosing new alternatives lifestyle (Shaw and Newholm 2002).

Relatedly, sobriety is promoted by major brands (e.g., Patagonia, Greenweez) that aims to appeal to current consumers' value while accelerating ecological transition. For consumers, the motivations behind sobriety are varied, as some consumers choose sobriety for environmental reasons, while others adopt this lifestyle for budgetary reasons, especially in the current economic context. Indeed, according to Kantar study "Who Care? Who Does? (2022), the percentage of consumers concerned about sustainable development has decreased by 4 points in 2022 compared to 2021 and 2020. Also, the current inflationary context inevitably explains why the "eco-skeptics" consumers has risen from 37% to 44% of the world's population. To preserve purchasing power and minimize expenses, consumers are using various strategies. This includes visiting different types of retailers, such as discount stores or those with loyalty cards, and reducing their frequency of shopping. Also, consumers are reducing quantities, limiting consumption of certain items (such as meat, fish, and organic products), preferring store brands and in-stock items, switching to products on promotion, and opting for lower-priced items (Ozdamar Ertekin et al., 2020; Voinea & Filip, 2011).

The purpose of this research is to investigate the two approach of the sobriety (chosen versus constrained) from the perspective of consumers. In both situations, it is important to understand how consumers differently react based on the nature of their sobriety lifestyle. Through a quantitative study conducted among 1000 respondents in Canada, this research aims to better analyze the phenomenon of sobriety and to examine its effects on consumers, in terms of consumption practices (i.e., do-it-yourself (DIY) activities) and brand-related perceptions (i.e., commitment towards local products and sustainable brand attitudes).

1. Literature review

In view of the emergence of the consumerist society during the "Trente Glorieuses" (1946-1975), awareness of the negative impacts of the consumerist system on individuals, society, and the environment has led to numerous forms of protest actions by consumers. The consumer engages in a process of reflection prior to consumption (Micheletti, 2003; Chessel and Cochoy, 2004), and also develops resistance to confront the non-virtuous practices of companies (Dobré, 1999; Roux, 2007; Fournier, 1998; Cochoy, 1999). In this context, sobriety begins to emerge. It is seen as a means of individual and occasional opposition to market practices and discourses deemed dissonant. Sobriety led to avoidance practices and passive withdrawal from the hyperconsumption society.

This shift in behavior has had a significant impact on the retail market, with changes in consumer preferences and demands leading to the emergence of new products and services. One of the most notable changes in the retail market has been the rise of zero-waste manufacturing processes. From clothing and accessories (Stanescu, 2021) to food (Daniel et al., 2022; Reniou et al., 2021) and beauty products (Pereira et al., 2022; Chakraborty et al., 2022; Morais et al., 2018), there has been a proliferation of options for those who are looking for more sustainable alternatives. This has created a new market segment (e.g. bulk market, ayurveda market) with many retailers and manufacturers focusing on developing and promoting sustainable products. In addition to the rise of sustainable products, there has also been a shift in the way that products are marketed and sold. Many retailers have responded to the sobriety trend by promoting the longevity of their products and encouraging consumers to repair or reuse items rather than simply replacing them (Cerio & Debenedetti, 2021; Kianpour et al., 2017; Terzioğlu, 2021). This has led to a greater emphasis on quality and durability in product design and marketing. Sobriety positioning has become a promising approach for brands. In addition to its positive impact on the environment, it provides a real competitive advantage for businesses that want to guarantee their longevity on the market and expand their target customer (Pietzsch et al., 2017; Ioannidis et al., 2021; Favier et al., 2019).

In parallel, sobriety is gaining increased interest in the marketing literature (Witkowski 2021; Guillard 2021). According to Guillard (2019), the concept of sobriety consists of questioning the real needs of consumers and satisfying them while limiting the impact on the environment. As an individual approach, sobriety consists of transitioning from instinctive consumption to a more thoughtful one, prioritizing the satisfaction of necessary needs and limiting superfluous purchases (Kolli, 2022). Sobriety leads to changes in consumption patterns (e.g., bulk purchases) and influences overall consumer lifestyles (Guillard 2019; Defontaine, 2020). In the literature, this concept is defined as reserve, restraint or moderation in consumption, this includes energy sobriety (Maresca, 2014), material sobriety (Guillard, 2019; Rumpala 2018) or even digital sobriety (Elgaaied-Gambier et al., 2020).

Two distinct streams have developed in this field (García-de-Frutos et al., 2018). The first considers the behavioral nature of sobriety (Guillard, 2018; Kropfeld *et al.*, 2018; Basci, 2014, Lee *et al.*, 2011; Makri *et al.*, 2020) and the second considers the psychological nature of sobriety (Zavestoski, 2002; Cherrier, 2008; Siadou-Martin et De Lanauze, 2010, Kropfeld *et al.*, 2018). The attitudinal approach proposes to study consumer sobriety by focusing on the meaning attributed by the consumers to their consumption patterns and the dominant motivations that, in turn, can lead to eco-responsible practices such as zero-waste practices and deconsumption practices (Cherrier, 2009). In contrast, the behavioral approach considers sobriety as an intentional and voluntary non-consumption behavior adopted by consumers who have the possibility to consume but choose deliberately not to consume (Kropfeld et al., 2018; Zavestoski, 2002).

In this study, sobriety is seen as an attitude, deeply anchored in the consumers who positions themselves as being "against consumption," which therefore distinguishes sobriety from deconsumption, defined as a selective and occasional behavioral practice ((Dugar, 2017, Wilczak, 2018; Séré de Lanauze et Siadou-Martin, 2013; Innocent *et al.*, 2016).

For the environmentally concerned consumers, sobriety reflects a favorable attitude towards anti-consumption and an emphasis on adjusting general consumption to strict necessary

needs (Shaw & Newholm, 2002). It is conceived as a philosophy of life, and even as a personality trait (Lastovicka et al., 1999). Researchers refer to this lifestyle as voluntary simplicity (Zavestoski 2002) or chosen frugality (Lastovicka 1999).

Most research in the literature focuses on chosen sobriety, which is the result of an intentional decision by consumers, generally convinced of the value of this ecological approach (Guillard 2019; Zavestoski 2002). In parallel to this sobriety movement, researchers have recently highlighted the notion of constrained sobriety, which pertains to a lifestyle guided by unfavorable circumstances (Pepper et al. 2009), including economic, political and sanitary crisis (e.g. Covid19). Constrained sobriety occurs when consumers attitude and consumption practices are regulated by external factors. In this case, consumer's relationship to consumption is modified in a constrained manner, leading to a restriction of purchases, a reduction in spending and a general decrease in consumption volume, without necessarily being concerned about their impact on the environment.

While previous research has focused on consumer sobriety as a lifestyle choice, it is important to study the phenomenon of sobriety from both perspectives (chosen versus constrained) and to examine the effects of sobriety on different variables, including alternative consumption practices (DIY), economic commitment to local brands, as well as attitudes towards responsible brands.

2. Method and data

A study was conducted with 1 000 participants from an online panel of a research firm in Canada (Male = 40%, Mean age = 46). The variables were measured using scales from past research. Chosen sobriety was measured with 2 items (Pepper et al. 2009) (e.g., *I gave up buying products/services that I didn't really need*) ($\alpha = 0.67$). Constrained sobriety was measured with 2 items (e.g., *I use flyers*) ($\alpha = 0.77$). DIY practices were measured with 8 items (e.g., *I renovated*) ($\alpha = 0.61$). Local consumption was measured with 3 items (e.g. *In the last year, I've given priority to buying local*) ($\alpha = 0.89$). The attitude towards responsible brands was measured with 2 items (e.g. *I appreciate a brand that provides information on the environmental footprint of its products*) ($\alpha = 0.82$). Financial stress was measured with 2 items (e.g., *In the last year, I am more stressed financially*) ($\alpha = 0.86$). All scales reported satisfactory psychometric results.

3. Results

Structural equation modeling (AMOS) was used. Indicators have satisfactory loadings ($> .4$; Hair et al. 2018). The constructs show the required reliabilities of 0.6 (Bagozzi and Yi 1988). The results indicate that the model fits the data well (CFI = 0.97, NNFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.05, chi-square = 226.83).

Results indicate that financial insecurity affects only constrained sobriety ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$) and not chosen sobriety ($p = 0.28$). Both types of sobriety influences DIY behaviors (constrained: $\beta = .24$, $p < .001$ / chosen: $\beta = .27$, $p < .001$). Chosen sobriety induce negative perceptions towards sustainable brands (chosen: $\beta = -.45$, $p < .001$), suggesting potential skepticism, whereas no relation is found between forced sobriety and perceptions towards sustainable brands ($p = 0.56$). Interesting, only chosen sobriety makes consumer committed to local products (chosen: $\beta = .80$, $p < .001$), where constrained sobriety makes consumers less committed to such products (constrained: $\beta = -.15$, $p < .001$).

These results indicate that, depending on the type of sobriety, consumer reactions (perceptions and actions) may vary. First, results show a strong relation between financial insecurity and constrained sobriety, but not chosen sobriety. This suggests that other variables (e.g., values) drive consumers to consciously choose a sober lifestyle. Furthermore, DIY behaviors are both positively affected by both types of sobriety. Lastly, consumers reactions to local products and sustainable brands vary depending on the type of sobriety; when consumers choose a sober lifestyle, they tend to favor local alternatives but remains skeptical towards sustainable brands.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This preliminary research makes three contributions. First, it highlights the important role of sobriety in transforming consumer practices, particularly by encouraging alternative consumption (DIY). This contributes to the marketing literature on retailing (Grappe et al., 2021; Louis et al., 2021; Louis et al., 2019; Abid et al., 2020; Wiese et al., 2015; Ganesan et al., 2009;) and shows the importance for retailers to integrate in their marketing strategy and offer proposition the consumer's alternative consumption trends (Edbring et al. 2016; Fernandes and Saraiva 2022) and anti-consumption practices (Lee et al. 2009; García-de-Frutos et al., 2018).

Second, it shows the importance of sobriety in driving economic engagement towards local products, but mainly when sobriety is chosen as a lifestyle. Consumers who deliberately choose to adopt a sobriety approach expect brands to increase their local impact and connection to communities. This can be connected to the transformative role of brands increasingly studied in the literature (Guèvremont et al. 2021). Interesting, consumers who are forced into a sobriety lifestyle react negatively to local products, potentially because of the higher prices of such products.

Finally, chosen sobriety induce negative attitudes towards brands aiming for a sustainable positioning. This highlights the skepticism of consumers in terms of brands' motivations and confirm the importance for brands to be transparent and authentic in their environmental efforts. This research provides a more nuanced understanding of today's consumers aiming for sobriety and their paradoxes (ElHaffar et al. 2020).

References:

- Abid, T., Rodier, F., & Durif, F. (2020). Motivations to buy local food products according to type of retail channel. *Decisions Marketing*, 98(2), 127-143.
- Basci, E. (2014). A revisited concept of anti-consumption for marketing. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 5(7), 160-168.
- Cerio, E., & Debenedetti, A. (2021). “Should I give it away or sell it?” A strategic perspective on consumers’ redistribution of their unused objects. *Journal of Business Research*, 135, 581-591.
- Chakraborty, D., Siddiqui, A., Siddiqui, M., & Alatawi, F. M. H. (2022). Exploring consumer purchase intentions and behavior of buying ayurveda products using SOBC framework. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 65, 102889
- Daniel, M., Monnot, E., Reniou, F., & Sirieix, L. (2022). Comprendre les spécificités de la distribution en vrac pour adapter le retailing mix: apport des théories des pratiques. *Décision Marketing*, (2), 91-116.
- Defontaine, G. (2020). La sobriété: indispensable à une transition réussie?. *Regards croisés sur l'économie*, 26(1), 153-160
- Edbring, E. G., Lehner, M., & Mont, O. (2016). Exploring consumer attitudes to alternative models of consumption: motivations and barriers. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 123, 5-15
- ElHaffar, G., Durif, F., & Dubé, L. (2020). Towards closing the attitude-intention-behavior gap in green consumption: A narrative review of the literature and an overview of future research directions. *Journal of cleaner production*, 275, 122556.
- Fernandes, E., & Saraiva, A. (2022). Alternative consumer practices for a sustainable identity: the perspective of organic food consumption. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 38(3-4), 279-308
- Ganesan, S., George, M., Jap, S., Palmatier, R. W., & Weitz, B. (2009). Supply chain management and retailer performance: emerging trends, issues, and implications for research and practice. *Journal of retailing*, 85(1), 84-94.
- García-de-Frutos, N., Ortega-Egea, J. M., & Martínez-del-Río, J. (2018). Anti-consumption for environmental sustainability: Conceptualization, review, and multilevel research directions. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 148, 411-435.
- Grappe, C. G., Lombart, C., Louis, D., & Durif, F. (2021). “Not tested on animals”: how consumers react to cruelty-free cosmetics proposed by manufacturers and retailers?. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 49(11), 1532-1553.
- Guèvremont, A., Durif, F., & Grappe, C. G. (2021). Why does this brand speak to me? Conceptualization, scale development, and validation of brand relevance. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 27(5), 609-629.
- Guillard, V. (2019). *Du gaspillage à la sobriété: Avoir moins et vivre mieux?*. De Boeck Supérieur.
- Guillard, V. (2021). Towards a society of sobriety: conditions for a change in consumer behavior. *Field Actions Science Reports. The journal of field actions*, 23, 36-39.
- Kianpour, K., Jusoh, A., Mardani, A., Streimikiene, D., Cavallaro, F., Md. Nor, K., & Zavadskas, E. K. (2017). Factors influencing consumers’ intention to return the end of life electronic products through reverse supply chain management for reuse, repair and recycling. *Sustainability*, 9(9), 1657.
- Kolli, I. (2022). Le sacrifice perçu pour l’environnement : conceptualisation, antécédents et impacts sur les pratiques de zéro-déchet et de déconsommation. Thèse de Doctorat PhD, Université de Montpellier, France.
- Lastovicka, J. L., Bettencourt, L. A., Hughner, R. S., & Kuntze, R. J. (1999). Lifestyle of the tight and frugal: Theory and measurement. *Journal of consumer research*, 26(1), 85-98.

- Louis, D., Lombart, C., & Durif, F. (2019). Impact of a retailer's CSR activities on consumers' loyalty. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*.
- Louis, D., Lombart, C., & Durif, F. (2021). Packaging-free products: A lever of proximity and loyalty between consumers and grocery stores. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 60, 102499.
- Morais, I. C., Brito, E. P. Z., & Quintão, R. T. (2018). Productive consumption changing market dynamics: A study in Brazilian DIY cosmetics. *Latin American Business Review*, 19(3-4), 323-347.
- Maresca, B. (2014). Sur le chemin de la sobriété énergétique-Engager les Français au-delà des éco-gestes. *Crédoc-Consommation et Mode de vie*, 265.
- Ozdamar Ertekin, Z., Sevil Oflac, B., & Serbetcioglu, C. (2020). Fashion consumption during economic crisis: Emerging practices and feelings of consumers. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing*, 11(3), 270-288.
- Pepper, M., Jackson, T., Uzzell, D. (2009). An examination of the values that motivate socially conscious and frugal consumer behaviours. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 33(2), 126-136.
- Pereira, V., Nandakumar, M. K., Sahasranamam, S., Bamel, U., Malik, A., & Temouri, Y. (2022). An exploratory study into emerging market SMEs' involvement in the circular Economy: Evidence from India's indigenous Ayurveda industry. *Journal of Business Research*, 142, 188-199.
- Reniou, F., Monnot, E., Sirieix, L., & Daniel-Chever, M. (2021). Le marché du vrac: un renouveau des pratiques.
- Rumpala, Y. (2018). Quelle place pour une «sobriété heureuse» ou un «hédonisme de la modération» dans un monde de consommateurs? Entre (re) construction d'un ethos et tensions non résolues. *L'Homme & la Société*, (3), 223-248.
- SÄfplÄfcan, Z., Márton, B. (2019). Determinants of Adopting a Zero Waste Consumer Lifestyle. *Regional and Business Studies*, 11(2), 25-39.
- Shaw, D., & Newholm, T. (2002). Voluntary simplicity and the ethics of consumption. *Psychology & Marketing*, 19(2), 167-185
- Stanescu, M. D. (2021). State of the art of post-consumer textile waste upcycling to reach the zero waste milestone. *Environmental Science and Pollution Research*, 28(12), 14253-14270.
- Terzioğlu, N. (2021). Repair motivation and barriers model: Investigating user perspectives related to product repair towards a circular economy. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 289, 125644
- Van Dormalen, L., & Kleesattel, S. (2018). The Consumer Journey to Adapt a Zero-Waste Lifestyle: A Trans-theoretical Approach.
- Voinea, L., & Filip, A. (2011). Analyzing the main changes in new consumer buying behavior during economic crisis. *International Journal of Economic Practices and Theories*, 1(1), 14-19.
- Wiese, A., Zielke, S., & Toporowski, W. (2015). Sustainability in retailing—research streams and emerging trends. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 43(4/5).
- Witkowski, T. H. (2021). Broadening anti-consumption research: A history of right-wing prohibitions, boycotts, and resistance to sustainability. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 41(4), 610-625.
- Zavestoski, S. (2002). The social-psychological bases of anticonsumption attitudes. *Psychology & Marketing*, 19(2), 149-165.