

For submission to NRWC2014

Lena Hansson, CFK, School of Business, Economics, and Law, University of Gothenburg

**The redistribution of competence in the pursuit of sustainable consumption
– A case study of ethical mobile consumption apps**

Extended abstract

The digitalization of the consumer society and the increased use of digital market devices such as mobile internet, smartphones, mobile applications (apps), e-stores etc. are changing consumption practices both in private and commercial settings. It allows market actors to communicate and interact with consumers at any time and where ever they are and consumers are in turn given new capabilities to go about their consumption practices tracing product information, calculating and comparing products (Cochoy, 2012; Licoppe et al., 2008).

For promoters of ethical issues, such as Fairtrade, sustainability and organic farming, the digital evolution has made it possible to mobilize action globally and come up with new market devices such as mobile apps to promote sustainable consumption. The question is how they aid consumers in making more 'ethical' choices?

This paper presents work in progress and draws on a practice-based approach to consumption (Warde, 2005; Shove & Pantzar, 2005; Watson & Shove, 2008; Røpke 2009), which emphasize how the social and material world interacts. The concept of 'distributed competence' will be used to analyze and discuss how these new forms of market devices acts as agents in the configuration of competence (Shove et al., 2007; Watson & Shove, 2008). So competence is both considered to be a human quality but also something that is distributed between practitioners and the devices and tools used, i.e, embedded in things as well (Shove et al., 2007).

The paper aims to describe how the 'ethical' competence is distributed between the apps, other digital sources, experts, and consumers. It is based on an on-going case study of three consumption apps 'Fairtrade', 'Green guide' [Grön guide] and 'Shopgun'. The material collected includes close observations of the apps' interfaces, functions and content; interviews with the owners/designers of these apps; as well as interviews with consumers who have tested the apps.

The Fairtrade app provides information about premises like cafés and restaurants that serve Fairtrade marked products through GPS and list what Fairtrade labeled products you can find in specific grocery shops (www.fairtrade.se). As a consumer you can also meet the producers of the Fairtrade products from countries all over the world, read their stories or watch movies. Fairtrade also provides possibilities for consumers to engage in different way of making the world more fair and promoting Fairtrade as well as producing content for the app. The app is also used as a communication channel for their cause. The Green guide is a digital guide for making environmental friendlier choice that has now been translated into an app (www.naturskyddsföreningen.se). The app provides information about 'green' labels, help you find stores with second hand, ecological, fair or environmental labeled clothing, give you tips on what fish, fruit or vegetables you should choose. For instance, different types of vegetables are evaluated as ok, sometimes, and avoid together with more information about when to eat it and from what country of origin. Overall advice about eating,

housing, buying, and traveling is also given and how to handle waste. The Shopgun app is developed by engaged consumers in order to help other consumers to choose 'better' products in retail store in terms of environment, ethics and health (www.shopgun.se). With the app you can scan a product's bar code in-store and be informed of how good choice it is on set evaluation categories marked as red, orange or green. You can get the same information for any product category you type into the system. The information that the evaluation is based on is provided by a number of advisors like WWF, Bra miljöval, Fairtrade among others, in addition to the Shopgun editors.

The analysis will focus on the embedded knowledge in the apps and aspects of competence distributed between the apps, other digital sources, experts, and consumers. It will be illustrated how the apps have been inscribed with capacities previously embedded in experts and individual consumers, such as searching for and evaluating ethical and environmental friendly products etc., that is, the competence has been redistributed. Furthermore, similarities and differences in interfaces and functions will be presented along with the prescriptions for evaluating products and services. The apps are also inscribed with expectations and conventions of specific consumer practices, how consumers should act in an 'ethical' way, which can be discussed in relation to the openness of inscriptions and the different levels of engagement made possible for consumers. The paper will end with a critical discussion of the implications of these new kinds of mobile apps for consumers and retailers.

References

Callon, M., Millo, Y., & Muniesa, F. (eds.), 2007. *Market Devices*, London: Blackwell.

Cochoy, F. 2007. "A sociology of market-things. On tending the garden of choices in mass retailing," in M. Callon, Y. Millo & F. Muniesa, (eds.), *Market Devices*, London: Blackwell, pp. 109-129.

Cochoy, F., 2008. "Calculation, qualculation, calculation: shopping cart arithmetic, equipped cognition and the clustered consumer", *Marketing Theory*, vol. 8 (1): 15-44.

Licoppe, C., Diminescu, D., Smoreda, Z., and Ziemlicki, C. (2008), Using mobile phone geolocalisation for 'socio-geographical' analysis of co-ordination, urban mobilities, and social integration patterns. *Tidschrift voor economische en sociale geografie*, 99: 584–601.

Shove, E. & Pantzar, M., 2005. "Consumers, Producers and Practices: Understanding the invention and reinvention of Nordic walking". *Journal of Consumer Culture*, vol. 5(1):43-64.

Shove, E., Watson, M., Hand, M., and Ingram, J., 2007. *The design of everyday life*. Oxford: Berg.

Warde, A., 2005. "Consumption and Theories of Practice". *Journal of Consumer Culture*, vol. 5 (2):131-153.

Watson, M. & Shove, E., 2008. "Product, Competence, Project and Practice: DIY and the dynamics of craft consumption", *Journal of Consumer Culture*, vol. 8(1):69-89.