

## The sustainability and the role of the mass media: representation, values and behaviours among consumers in Italy

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**Abstract.** Sustainability is nowadays a relevant issue that received in the last few years a growing attention from scholars and practitioners. Sustainability is a broad topic that concerns not only institutional policies and corporate choices, but also ordinary people consumption behaviours; in particular, food-choice is strongly connected to sustainability. Among consumers there is a weak knowledge of the subject, the very word "sustainability" takes on different meanings and values for consumers/citizens. This paper aims at discussing the relationship between communication and the representation of sustainability and the connection between sustainability and the food consumption behaviour. The analysis was carried out through qualitative and quantitative surveys investigating the meaning of sustainability on a representative sample of Italian consumers, with a particular focus on food choices. Following a qualitative investigation using semi-structured qualitative interviews with projective techniques (Okamoto, 2006) and focus group discussions, a questionnaire was developed and administered to a representative sample of adult consumers and young consumers: two quantitative surveys were conducted in 2010 and 2011 with involvement (in the first survey) about one thousand people aged between 18 and 65 years, and (in the second survey) with the involvement of 1000 young people aged between 18 and 30 years. The aims of the questionnaire, according to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), was to analyse the meaning attributed to sustainability, and the awareness and concern on the issue, and the actual "sustainable consumption". Comparing the data to the representation of sustainability (since 1992) in media communication and the effects on the attitudes of the young people can detect the presence of the existence of a "sustainable generation" influenced by the way in which communication has addressed the issue of sustainability. Moreover, the quantitative analysis allowed us to identify the variables identifying a consumer "sustainable". The results show that there is a general inconsistency between common knowledge, beliefs, opinions, declared values and behaviours acted out. The consumers act in different and contradictory way if compared to what they say they want to do; often their opinions and attitudes are contradictory; the declared awareness of the role of sustainability does not always coincide with the habits and behaviour of consumers. From the review of the literature and the document published about the wide theme of sustainability, it emerges the centrality and importance of information, communication affecting the construction of social reality (Goleman, 2009). In particular, the Internet is the best channel for the collection and acquisition of general or specific information about sustainable of the products and the companies; social media are recognized the most effective tools available, as they break down geographical boundaries and allow an active participation of the consumer on the sustainable choices; the traditional media are viewed with suspicion because they are not independent and tied to economic and political interests; personal relationships, family and friends, are considered the most reliable source of information, as invested with a high degree of confidence (word of mouth). The television is not considered a credible source of information. This study allowed us to compare the way in which scientific communication and public communication have been addressed the issue of sustainability in Italy across the years. The results allow identifying some communication strategies in order to promote the sustainability knowledge and practices among consumer behaviour.

**Keywords:** consumer behaviour, sustainability, food consumption, lifestyle, social representation theory

### 1. Objectives

The research has the overall purpose to provide a detailed description of the phenomenon of sustainability and its relation to communication. The specific objectives are, from one side, to understand

whether and to what extent sustainability is now a value that influences consumption choices of Italians; from the other side, to investigate the role of media communication in the construction of the sustainability social representation and to analyse the effects on the food consumption.

## 2. Research background

In the literature review, we registered a lack of information in the sustainability issue and, on the other hand, the ever increasing interest of the public in sustainable development. There is a general inconsistency between declared values and behaviours acted out: consumers act in different and contradictory way if compared to what they say they want to do; often opinions and attitudes are contradictory and the declared awareness of the role of sustainability does not always coincide with the habits and behaviour of consumers (Biel et Dahlstrand, 2005). As far as communication channels, the Internet is a primary source of sustainable information (Riffe et al., 2008), more credible than television news (Kiouisis, 2001). Food consumption mirrors economic and social relations, ideals and hierarchies of values of a community: food adaptability is physiologically and culturally determined (Roche, 1999). Food affects identity and social distinctions, structural conditions and symbolic constructions: food is a symbol of socio-cultural reality of which it is, at the same time, the product (Sassatelli 2004, Douglas, 1985). With reference to food consumption behaviour, consumers who buy directly from the producer will pay attention to packaging reduction, control of supply chain, product sourcing, nutritional content (Connell, 2008); it emerges also that young people are interest in sustainable food issues and behaviours (organic, short chain, food control) (Bissonette et Contento, 2001) and that among consumers is increasing an awareness that greater pleasure may be gained from eating better quality, organic food, or by cycling to work – that motivates the uptake of environmentally-preferable behaviour, as much as it is an altruistic ethical or environmental concern (Soper, 2007). In addition, food, health and environment are closely linked because communication tends to promote the "good food" in relation to its ability to respect the environment and ensure a healthy choice (Lea, 2005). The Theory of Social Representation (Moscovici et Huston, 1983) framework can be applied on the investigation of environmental studies, taking advantage from some key aspects, including the clarification of the concepts guiding the research, the enlargement of the levels of analysis addressed, and a triangulation strategy at the methodological level (Castro, 2006). The concept of social representation denotes a form of specific knowledge, known in literature as the common sense, which confirms the social origin of the operation of generative and functional processes. It is about the way in which knowledge is denoted and shared within a established social context. The communication hold a primary role in the study of social representations acting in the social dynamics and determining their genesis and evolution. In particular, the media communication channels play a crucial role in the education and in the knowledge spread process and contribute to the phenomena social representation construction (Jodelet, 1992).

## 3. Methodology

The two-years research took advantage of different methodologies: traditional qualitative methods and strictly quantitative data analysis. In particular the main theoretical framework to which this quantitative analysis was referred is the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), which has been demonstrated to be an appropriate conceptual framework for understanding sustainable and ethical consumer behaviour in the field of food (Bissonette et Contento, 2007). An extended version of the TPB (ETPB) has been also implemented to investigate ethical and sustainable consumption (Shaw et al., 2000; Ozcaglar-Toulouse et al., 2006), food choices of adults (Sparks et Shepherd 1992; Sparks et al., 1995; Raats et al., 1995), and of adolescents in the domain of sustainable and ethical food (Bissonette et Contento, 2007). The mixed methods research, called "Mixed Methodologies", is used to strengthen conclusions based on many sources of information (Tashakkori et Teddlie, 2003). The choice has been addressed according to the research objective: the explorative purposes were the basis for the subsequent purposes of generalizability of the data and validation of the working hypotheses. The following schema provides a description of the research designs:

Study	Objectives	Methods	Target	Materials	References
1	Description of the sustainability	Systematic review of literature			

2	Analysis of the Social Representation of the sustainability and the role of communication	study-explorative interviews and focus	11 opinion leaders expert of sustainability + and 4 focus group with consumers (2 in North and 2 in South Italy)	semistructured interviews and focus	Silverman, 2000; Creswell, 1998; Dey, 1993
3	Investigate the relationship among communication, social representation and processes of consumer choice.	Quantitative study	Consumer age (18 - 65) (800 consumers with CAWI and 200 consumer with face to face)		Ajizen, 1991; Shaw, Shiu e Clarke, 2000; Ozcaglar-Toulouse, Shiu e Shaw, 2006; Bissonette and Contento, 2007
4	Analysis of the Social Representation of the sustainability and the role of communication in the company	Qualitative study with interviews	Opinion leaders (12 interviews to manager of communication company, ONG, public sector, industry)	Semi-structured interviews	Silverman, 2000; Creswell, 1998; Dey, 1993
5	Analysis of the effect of the sustainable communication on expectation and taste preferences	Sensorial experiment about the influence of the communication on the food taste:	157 young consumers (age: 22 - 42)	Eight commercially available full-fat-milk, strawberry-flavoured yogurts as experimental samples: three organic yogurts and five conventional yogurts	Deliza and MacFie, 1996; Bourn and Prescott, 2002
6	Analysis of the Social Representation of the sustainability in different communication tools (press and TV)	Content analysis study-press, and television	Press (two national newspapers from 1992 to 2010) and TV (two weeks, from 4 pm to 7 pm, 6 national free channels)	Checklist and content analysis	Riffe, Lacy, Fico, 2005
7	Analysis of the Social Representation of the sustainability in different Internet communication tools	Content analysis tweet and blog	3 weeks 272 tweets and 8 blog	Software Tlab - Tools for Text Analysis	Lancia, 2007
8	Analysis of the Social Representation of the sustainability and the role of communication in the young consumer	In-depth interviews	18 young consumers (18-30) in North, Centre and South Italy.	Semi-structured interviews, projective techniques and photo interviewing	Silverman, 2000; Creswell, 1998; Hurworth 2003; Okamoto, 2006
9	Analysis of the term of sustainability in the scientific communication	Scientific communication analysis	Quantitative analysis of scientific journal with "sustainability" in the title or abstract. Platform ISI Web Knowledge T.R.		
10	Analysis of the Social Representation of the sustainability and the role of communication in the young consumer	Quantitative study	Young Consumer (age18 - 30 (1000 subjects with CAWI)		Ajizen, 1991; Bissonette and Contento, 2007

Fig. 1: The research design.

## 4. Results and Discussion

Sustainable development has been defined in many ways, but the most frequently quoted definition is from the 1988 Brundtland Report: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". The issue of sustainability was discussed even before the Brundtland Report by scholars interested in the field and

environmentalists, but it was almost unknown by common people. From the press analyses, it emerged that the word "sustainability" has been in the public domain in Italy since 1998, but with a different meaning: it was related to the feasibility of the retirement system and of the public debt and to the necessity of reforming the retirement system. Not for environmental problems. During the same years, some national and international events related to the environment and some environmental catastrophes increased the level of public attention on this aspect; in particular, the mass media communication used the sustainability concept as an "umbrella word" useful to identify the most urgent environmental problems. For this reason, "sustainability" became to be increasingly related to environmental issues, overshadowing the other initial meanings. People, institutions and mass media, setting a mutual mechanism of influence among journalists, politicians and the general public, fed this process concurrently. From literature review and the document published about the wide theme of the sustainability, it emerges the centrality and importance of information, communication affecting the construction of social reality (Goleman, 2009). The most used tools encouraging a more sustainable consumption are e-mail, the Internet, television programs (above all, green washing advertising), public affairs programs and nature documentaries, green media and press in general (Holbert et al., 2003); finally, a new tool can be identified: the narrative approach (Autio, 2009). As far sustainable food consumption concerns (green behaviour), there is the tendency to maintain habits and consumption patterns, although the strong positive attitude towards the environmental protection. The values can be identified in the attention to its own health, the food taste, purity and freshness (Tanner et al., 2003). The marketing communication has its own strength in the "turn-to-the-local" (Feagan, 2008), where food consumption is an experiential situated: the purchased food is perceived as a tasty, healthy and environmental friendly food. The content analysis of the mass media (newspapers, television and the Internet-blog and tweet) is confirmed the connection between the process and the content of the analysed sources in terms of mere information dissemination and co-construction sustainability of the social representation. There are some general convergence trends in the sustainability social representation: the media communication on sustainability is increasingly in various domains. This process facilitates the "contamination" between the fields and sustainability as a concept appears more significant than in meaning. Advertising is the channel most frequently intercepting the sustainability issue, as a business instrument. From the analysis of the academic publishing, it emerges a non linear growth of the sustainability interest: from 1989 until the early 90s, there were almost no articles containing the term "sustainability". Since 1994 there has been a growing presence of the term and this trend continues till now: in 2005 the articles published on sustainability were about 400, in 2010 more than a thousand. The analysis of the scientific communication shows that the concept of sustainability is part of a heterogeneous system of meanings, relationships and areas characterized by many variables and facets. The common thread is the meaning of "sustainability" as defined by the Brundtland Report (1988) and understood from time to time, according to the objectives of the research and in its different meanings: ecological, economic, social and cultural. For opinion leaders, managers and consumers, sustainability is perceived as a relevant issue affecting the environmental emergency, which can be translated into everyday life behaviour, even if it is considered difficult to be and to act as "sustainable consumers". The focus is on the environment and natural resources, which consequently involve a preference for healthy lifestyle and an ethical behaviour sphere when thinking about the social development: it emerges a juxtaposition of the individual responsibility and the responsibility of the great actors of the economy, including businesses and government institutions. They state that the communication is still unclear and the existing one is misleading and not effective because it creates neither knowledge nor conscience, therefore, no liability. In the first phase of the research emerged a general inconsistency between common knowledge, beliefs, opinions, declared values and behaviours acted out. Hence, according to the literature, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (extended version-ETPB) seems to be an appropriate theoretical framework for the current study. The sustainable behaviours for consumers are mainly doing diversified harvest, eating seasonal products and saving energy. The less sustainable perceived behaviours are buying ethical fashion leaders, avoiding GMOs food, buying organic food and buying fair trade products. The data also show a high correlation between the variables provided by the ETPB, in the total sample and in the clusters identified, which segment people in relation to their sensitiveness to sustainability. From a practical point of view, young people believe that sustainability can be implemented through small daily gestures such as energy saving and reduction of the practices that have a strong impact

on the environment. In terms of food consumer behaviour, people are influenced by the locally grown and organic characteristic avoiding, if possible, supermarkets and branded products. The information conveyed through logos and labels are believed to be reliable, only if the source is a non-profit institution or associations. The biologic is unclear and controversial because is also associated to a brand image strategy, a marketing tools or a temporary trend. As far communication concerns, the Internet is the most reliable source if communication and information, while less and less trust is placed in strictly commercial communications purposes. It is possible to identify a generation of "sustainable natives": young people born in the years following 1987 and grew up in an ever more widespread culture of sustainability transmitted through family, school, education and the media. Because from the previous analysis (consumers, opinion leader and communication manager) the choice of organic food is correlated with a sustainable approach to the consumption, the objective of this part of research was to evaluate whether the information about the organic food may change the liking of the product tasting (Bourn and Prescott, 2002). The subjects (cluster insensitive and more sustainable) expect a different perception of taste before trying the organic yogurt, when faced with only the packaging of the product (potential condition). According to the results, in a potential condition the two groups expressed preferences statistically different for two of the three organic products. In particular, the group of sustainable sensitive expressed the expectation on a higher preference than the group of not interested for organic food. We can state that the communication can have an effect on subjects sensitive to the issue of sustainability affecting expectations of product quality and taste.

In conclusion, the sustainability is still a vague concept for a large part of consumers; some specific variables, such awareness, responsibility and autonomy, determine the level of knowledge and discriminate between who is sustainable and who is not sustainable.

## **5. Conclusions and further research**

In the present research, different phases of activity, research fields and tools were integrated with the aim of an holistic understanding of the phenomenon itself. From the comparison between public opinion and the scientific community, it emerged the gap between the philosophical and conceptual understanding of the phenomenon and the representation of it among consumers and in their daily behaviours. Companies, consumers, institutions, not for profit organizations and even the scientific community agree that there is a need of information about sustainability; in this scenario, education, information and communication system should play in a synergic way. The analysis of current communication conveyed via the Internet and via television confirms that a process of concept selection has occurred and is still in progress. A first line of development is inspired to the need to deepen the analysis of past and current communication processes in order to identify a "shift-moment" in this context. It would be desirable to explore the theme focusing on smaller objects of investigation: for instance a specific communication channel. It would be appropriate to refine the tools of observation and improve sampling procedures and analysis in order to implement the research process to the highest degree of reliability and validity of the instruments, and achieve more easily generalizable results. In terms of content paths, there are many parallel fields to investigate in future research. The first concerns behaviours, attitudes, choices and experiences of consumers; the research allowed to acquire a first conceptual tool for the study of sustainable consumption patterns: the model of the extended theory of planned behaviour. The research should deepen the conceptual assumptions and reliability and validity of the model narrowing the field of investigation (for example, focusing the analysis on a specific behaviour) or improving the sampling procedures. The second issue to be developed is the role of young consumers investigating their opinions even with the most exquisitely qualitative methodologies such as narrative or ethnographic observation techniques, in this way implementing the data on social changing processes. Finally, the definition of the general concept of sustainability should be narrowed, so that any analysis carried out in the future can better match the already rooted representations in the consumers' imagination.

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