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Future trajectories for consumer education (translated to French in the book). Edited collection on consumer education titled, *Enseigner et penser l'éducation à la consommation*. Editors: Adolfo Agundez-Rodriguez and France Jurtas (pp. xiii-xix), Sherbrooke University. Publisher: Les Presses de l' Université Laval, Quebec (2013)  
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## Foreword

Although people have been consuming goods and services in the marketplace for centuries, the term *consumer education* only came into use at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Worldwide, it has followed different trajectories, but most countries can claim evidence of some semblance of education for people in their consumer role for the past 90 years. In many countries, home economists took the lead, starting in the 1930s, by introducing consumer education courses into school curricula or ensuring that consumer-related concepts were integrated into other subject areas.

In most countries, efforts to entrench consumer education into national policies and international dialogue began in the 1960s, within the global consumer movement. To briefly illustrate this trend, Consumers International (CI) (formerly the International Organization of Consumer Unions, IOCU) was formed in 1960. CI is an umbrella organization for consumer movement organizations concerned with the interests of consumers in the marketplace, and currently boasts membership from 115 countries. Billing itself as the *Global Voice for Consumers*, it has indeed played a pivotal role for the advancement of consumer education.

Shortly after IOCU was formed, work behind the scenes by two American consumer educators led to President John F. Kennedy's (JFK) expression of four consumer rights, in 1962 (safety, choice, voice and information). Despite the aforementioned decades-long presence of consumer education courses in public school systems, the JFK initiative often is equated with the origins of the history of consumer education, regardless of the country in question. Shortly after JFK's 1962 presidential address, a 1967 task force, for the inaugural federal department of Consumer and Corporate Affairs Canada (CCAC, now Industry Canada), completed a survey of consumer education in Canada. The intent was to aid the new department in its development of recommendations around consumer education. Between 1975-1981, the European Council of Ministers of Education embraced five consumer rights, including consumer education. In 1986, the same council adopted a resolution on consumer education. A task force in Australia published a report on consumer education in 1979, and its approach to consumer education was used by IOCU, already familiar with JFK's contributions. Further international examples abound, most referencing JFK's 1962 presidential address.

The four rights grew to seven over the next 20 years. After 1962, President Nixon added the right to redress in 1969. President Ford added the right to consumer education in 1975. CI added the right to a healthy environment in 1982. After IOCU lobbied for ten years, the United Nations endorsed the *UN Guidelines for Consumer Protection* in 1985, extending the seven consumer rights to eight, adding the right to basic needs. Although the UN did not advocate for any particular conceptualization of consumer education, its initiative institutionalized consumer education at the global level.

A quarter century has passed since the UN guidelines were adopted. Since then, the 21<sup>st</sup> century global marketplace has emerged as a complex, nuanced context, necessitating renewed socialization processes through consumer education. Evolving from the conventional approach of preparing consumers to protect their self-interests relative to the power of businesses, efforts to conceptualize consumer education have become more refined, progressive and innovative. During the 1990s and 2000's, around the world, consumer education was augmented from global, citizenship, peace, ethical, moral, political and sustainability perspectives. These initiatives were predicated on the assumption that consumer education should benefit society as a whole, and the environment for generations to come. These innovations augmented the previous focus on short-term, individual self-interest in a competitive economy through consumer freedom of choice. Consumer education initiatives now call for social

responsibility, moral accountability and ethical obligations to other humans, to more-than-human beings and species, and to the planet (all planetary co-habitants).

As we stride into the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we must ensure that innovations to consumer education continue to unfold. I recommend they take direction from the new sciences of quantum physics, chaos theory and living systems theory. The old, Newtonian, empirical science, holding sway during consumer education's last century, embraces a machine and clock metaphor. This approach assumes the world is gradually dying, running down to nothing. Things are seen as separate, linear, isolated and not connected. Individualism is rampant. Competition, a win-lose mentality and relentless growth to stave off eventual decline prevail. The new sciences assume the universe is dynamic and evolving, comprising interconnected, self-organizing, living systems, continually emerging in their complexity and richness.

New approaches to consumer education are needed because the ramifications of consumer decisions are no longer confined to the individual or to the family unit. The global marketplace, shaped by an ideological quagmire of neoliberalism, top-down globalization, political conservatism, and capitalism, entrenches structural violence. As a result, purchases made by consumers almost always harm other persons, species and/or the environment, whether intended or not. Consumer educators need new philosophies, ideologies and paradigms that augment the recent trend of peace-, ethical-, sustainability- and citizenship-focused consumer education. Complexity, integral and transdisciplinary thinking, all examples of the new sciences, can provide powerful new perspectives for consumer educators, enabling them to reframe consumerism so it can be seen as interconnected with the common good, the human condition and planetary integrity.

First, complexity thinking is very promising. It provides a powerful framework from which to prepare people to deal with complex, emergent, wicked problems in the marketplace. The term wicked is used to describe global problems such as poverty, health pandemics, water and energy, climate change and oppression of off-shore labourers and producers. Often, these problems are exacerbated by consumption. Complexity economics views the economy as a complex system, which follows the same laws as all complex, dynamic systems, understood using complexity theory. It assumes that people can self-organize (reorganize and regroup) and change their approach to being a consumer as they learn about other ways of seeing themselves in this role.

Consumer educators can gain deep insights from recent efforts to reconceptualize economics so that it moves away from the basic neoclassical principles of individualism, reductionism, rationality (reason), homogeneity, linearity, equilibrium (balance), maximization of utility, and optimization. These tenets have provided the philosophical foundations of consumer education for years. Complexity economics introduces a new set of assumptions that can underpin consumer education initiatives: complexity, change and evolution, adaptation, self-organization, emergence, nonequilibrium, chaos and tensions, patterns and networks, and holistic, synergistic interconnections and relations between individual and aggregate agents.

Second, global consumerism, as a prevailing ideology, plays a powerful role in the creation of people's consciousness and the consumer culture. It deeply shapes beliefs, feelings, ideas, values and worldviews of humans. Consumer educators need an approach that respects consciousness and many perspectives. An integral approach fits the bill. A main assumption of integral thinking is that as soon as people begin looking through the integral lens, everything has the potential to come into focus. Once that lens turns and clicks, people gain clarity and are able to make better decisions for the future.

This improved decision making happens because an integral vision assumes people will try to touch all bases, try to respect and learn from many perspectives as they problem solve life's dilemmas, including consumer dilemmas. These key perspectives stem from the inner self, the physical self, the community, and the collection of world systems; respectively, I, It, We and Its. Ken Wilber refers to these as the four quadrants that comprise a whole or integral approach to life.

From an integral stance, the goal of consumer educators would be to help people consume in such a way that mind (I), matter (It), meaning (We) and the web of life (Its) are all taken into account, or at least be aware that while acting in one quadrant, the other three realities exist. The intent is to teach consumers to be as comprehensive, inclusive, and caring as possible, striving for deep clarity of their

consuming situation and the wider context. Rather than excluding points of view (any of I, It, We and Its), consumers would strive to adopt all views that are useful for dealing with their current consumer dilemma and do so by looking for things they would otherwise ignore; they would employ an integral approach informed by all levels of human consciousness.

Third, another exciting approach that consumer educators can consider is transdisciplinarity. Many will be familiar with interdisciplinarity (between disciplines). Trans means to crisscross, zigzag and/or go beyond borders, especially transcending the borders between academic disciplines and civil society. Conventional consumer education draws mainly on economics, especially the classical, neoliberal economics noted before. The intent is to redress the power imbalance between consumers and business, notably with government intervention in the form of consumer protection. The overall goal is to protect and ensure consumers' rights. With the advent of the consumer movement, civil society did become engaged with issues related to the consumer interest (witness the success of IOCU, now CI). But, CI still strives to balance the interests of consumers relative to business, lobbying for consumer protection to ensure consumer rights.

Consumer education predicted on transdisciplinarity would teach people to be concerned with the common good, the human condition, environmental integrity and the wicked problems associated with their interface with modern day consumerism. Instead of focusing on facts pertaining to protecting consumer rights, transdisciplinarity would help consumer educators envision consumer knowledge as emergent and complex, focused on moral obligations and shared, joint responsibility for the world and each other. Rather than just facts and information, consumers would be taught to value relationships and to look for patterns of like minded or divergent thinking, which can challenge the dominant economic paradigm shaping the world right now. In this context, everything is *in-formation*, changing due to the synergy (energy) created when people jointly problem solve or ponder the nuances and complexities of what it means to be a socially responsible consumer in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The complex *consumer knowledge* that is created is alive, forever changing, never static.

Within this dynamic consumer-knowledge creation process, notions of what counts as *consumer reality* would expand from just the economic sphere to include many other spheres of reality often marginalized in conventional consumer education: political, historical, social, ecological, spiritual, cultural and aesthetic. Consumer educators would teach that solutions to the wicked problems exacerbated by modern consumption are best solved by a meeting of the minds at the borders between these many spheres of reality. New notions of order and chaos would be taught. Instead of understanding chaos as disorder, educators would teach consumers that chaos is order emerging. In the midst of the tensions inherent in dealing with complex consumer issues along many levels of reality, order and new insights are always emerging. A new respect would be gained for fluctuations, uncertainties and disturbances, appreciating that novel solutions to modern day consumer dilemmas will emerge from the chaos.

The logic that informs this chaotic problem solving is called inclusive logic, different from the old science logic of exclusion. The latter assumes that the space between things is flat, static, empty and dead. From this stance, consumer educators can readily assume there is no link between consumers' behaviour to protect their self interest and the impact on invisible others. The logic of inclusion assumes the opposite, that the space between things is alive, in flux and deeply dynamic. It is within this space that dynamic change and evolution occur. Consumers would be taught to be inclusive during their purchase decisions, ever mindful of others, the larger human condition, and planetary integrity. They would be socialized to believe that their notion of what is true about being a consumer holds until they encounter views informed by other realities. As consumers worked to problem solve together, a community of consumer-citizens would be created that is part of something bigger than themselves.

Consumer knowledge as an open, emergent complex structure; consumer realities comprising a range of spheres beyond economics; inclusive logic for problem solving: these are all trademarks of a transdisciplinary approach to consumer education. Couple this with integral thinking and complexity theory, and consumer educators have a profoundly rich repertoire of vanguard philosophical, ideological and paradigmatic orientations for 21<sup>st</sup> century consumer education. Such is the vision of this book, with its balance of conventional and emergent thinking.