

## **Volunteering and Social Capital Stream**

### **'Consuming values in a social market: models of civil society volunteers choose to create through the consumption of social values'**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Voluntary action is lauded in Western societies because of its positive contribution to the maintenance of civil society. What is less well accepted, however, is common agreement on the relative value of different activities in a social market. Indeed, it can be argued that the social market within which volunteers work is a contested terrain as different organisations and individuals jockey for public sympathy, charitable donations, philanthropic favour and governmental support.

There is much academic debate on the welfare mix in contemporary Western societies, the role of third sector organisations in that mix, and how that sector should or should not be supported to deliver support to beneficiaries. Attention is also given to the issue of how and why individuals come to give their time to causes within nations and between them. One issue that has been less well scrutinised, however, is why people choose to champion one cause over another.

In this paper, we address this issue by drawing upon theoretical analysis which has its origins in the sociology of consumption. We do this to show that the choice of one cause over another is not dependent upon intrinsic moral values alone. Instead, we argue that choice of social causes is heavily mediated by the process of choosing the kind of society a person wishes to live in. While this may, on the surface, seem like an obvious point, we argue that many such choices are made in a culturally bounded social market where, for a number of reasons, some issues can or cannot be considered as legitimate foci of attention.

In the paper we draw upon the work of Mary Douglas, anthropologist, who has argued that when people consume products in the consumer market, they engage in a process of 'cultural refusal'. By this, it is not argued that consumption is a negative process, but instead, that people simply do not notice or pay attention to some products because they are alien to them in cultural terms. The positive point Douglas makes is that when people choose one product over another, they are making wider cultural decisions about the kind of society that they want to live in.

In this paper we develop Douglas's notion of cultural refusal in the context of 'shopping around' for social values. We intend to show that, as observed in the consumer market, people who give their time to causes do so for much deeper cultural reasons than they may be consciously aware of. In so doing, we do not adopt a crude class-, age-, gender-based analysis whereby it is argued that certain causes appeal more to particular demographic categories of people. Instead we argue that there are consumer niches which also operate in the social market.

Such niches should not be confused with single issue political campaigns or particular beneficiary groups, but instead refer to the complex inter-relationship between many factors including *personal interests and wants, values arising from power relationships, abstract notions of social need, and unstated notions of cultural hostility*. This theoretical paper concludes that dominant conceptualisations of social capital adopted by third sector organisations are framed by deeply rooted cultural notions which may support vested interests rather than tackling fundamental inequalities.

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