Abstract

Objectives
This research is part of the conceptual framework of consumer agency. It explores how young Chinese students envision sustainable consumption and the extent to which they feel able to commit to it.

Methodology
A qualitative study is conducted with 28 young Chinese students and supplemented with secondary data to improve understanding of the Chinese context.

Results
Four dimensions of agentivity/governmentality of sustainable consumption are identified: participation, conformism, distancing, resistance. These are underpinned by three factors: the perceived power of the state vs the market; trust in the various market mechanisms vs the state; and the diversity of experiences (local or international).

Managerial implications
This article offers recommendations for developing sustainable consumption in the light of individuals’ perceived ability to act (agentivity) and their relationship to institutional power (governmentality).

Originality
The dialogical principle “unites two antagonistic principles that are inseparable and indispensable for understanding the same reality” (E. Morin). Thus, agentivity and governmentality are bound together to enable us to grasp the dimensions of responsibility perceived by consumers in terms of sustainability and to guide the decisions of organizations with regard to these dimensions.

Keywords: Agency, governmentality China, responsible consumption, sustainable development.