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# Organizational Sensemaking of Non-ethical Consumer Behavior: Case Study of a French Mutual Insurance Company

Bernard Cova[1] · Gerald Gaglio[2] · Juliette Weber[3] · Philippe Chanial[4]

**Abstract** Researchers and managers alike are becoming increasingly interested in the topic of unethical consumer behavior. Where most studies view unethical behavior as something that is identifiable per se, the authors of the present article believe that it only exists because it has been constructed by people operating within a specific context. Hence the efforts made by this paper to explore, at the level of one specific organization, how interactions between employees and consumers might lead to the construct of unethical consumers. Based on a case study of France's AMDM—a mutual insurance company set up to serve a client base comprising motorcyclists—the paper addresses how one group of consumers ends up being categorized as unethical by revealing the existence of a sensemaking process within the target organization. This process develops in three main phases: the nurturing of a shared ethos; the protection of employees' recognized status; and the demonization of any group of consumers threatening this status. Managers incorporating this sensemaking process can avoid or mitigate the negative effects befalling organizations when these kinds of unethical consumer behavior are constructed.

## Introduction

The present paper looks at the unethicality of consumer behavior (Mitchell et al. 2009), including aberrant and deviant conduct as well as subtler forms of opportunism (Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy 2010) that can be harmful to a company and/or other consumers (Fisk et al. 2010). Misdeeds range from fraudulent insurance claims to cutting in line in shops. It is the sort of misconduct that has been increasingly criticized by companies and consumers alike.

Researchers have been working hard to develop precise criteria capable of determining the ethicality of certain kinds of consumer behavior (Vitell 2014). It is questionable, however, whether these kinds of determination really exist. Certainly there is no such thing as absolute unethicality, given the context-dependency of interpretations in this area (Clegg et al. 2007). Another way of saying this is that unethical behavior only exists because a specific subject has constructed it as such. The construction of unethical behavior might be the doing of governmental or parastatal institutions; environmental protection organizations; media and public opinion; or industrial interests (Gordon et al. 2009). This latter category can include companies, being contexts where sensemaking around consumer behavior usually starts with staff members and/or top managers (Suquet 2010).

Until now, researchers' main focus has been to identify consumers' unethical behavior (Berry and Seiders 2008)

✉ Bernard Cova
  bernard.cova@kedgebs.com

  Gerald Gaglio
  gerald.gaglio@utt.fr

  Juliette Weber
  jweber@macif.fr

  Philippe Chanial
  philchanial@gmail.com

[1] KEDGE Business School Marseille, Marseille, France

[2] Université de Technologie de Troyes, Troyes, France

[3] Macif, Paris, France

[4] Université Paris Dauphine, Paris, France

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and/or combat it (Mitchell et al. 2009; Fisk et al. 2010). Conversely, relatively little has been said about what kind of consumer behavior tends to be viewed and interpreted as unethical by actors operating within a particular organization (Jougleux et al. 2013); or about how this affects an organization's management and marketing practices. Yet it is by understanding the different things playing out within the context of a specific organizational situation (Nyberg 2008) that it becomes possible to determine which discourses or interests collide or else coalesce when a particular way of behaving is called into question (Clegg et al. 2007). In contrast to normative, moralistic conceptions of ethics, this kind of approach reveals the tensions between different actors and different ideologies.

The present paper focuses on the specific situation of a company that relies upon a community of consumers who share a similar passion for a given activity (Cova 1997; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). It seeks to determine how a company (customer contact staff and middle management) might construe as unethical a new population that also consumes the very same service that it offers itself. In this kind of situation, the connection between the ethical values conveyed by the company and those defended by its community can be strong. Consumers whose behavior is not aligned with the existing ethical model run a risk of being marginalized. Not behaving ethically might mean violating norms established by the company/community, whether these are norms that people sense in general or else individual ethical judgments. The present study looks at what happens inside an organization when consumers do not behave according to the moral standard defined by the company and its community. In particular, it investigates how organizational micro-practices, enacted in discourse and embedded in power relations, shape ethics in practice (Gordon et al. 2009).

To achieve these research objectives, the study analyzes France's AMDM *Assurance Mutuelle des Motards* (Mutual Insurance of Motorcyclists), a mutual insurance company created by a community of French motorcyclists that was already grouped itself into a self-defense and protection movement called FFMC *Fédération Française des Motards en Colère* (French Federation of Angry Bikers). Applying social economy principles, AMDM embodies the values of solidarity and mutual assistance that are specific to the motorcyclist movement, and which translate into specific kinds of ethical behavior. Alongside these values, however, a new type of consumer has arisen, namely scooterists who have a different outlook and have therefore been construed as being unethical by AMDM employees.

The paper starts with a conceptual framework that accounts for unethical behavior and how organizations might construct this. The second section features findings from a study detailing how AMDM makes sense of

unethical behavior. The final section looks at the sense-making process itself, seeking to understand how this leads to the demonization of those consumers whose behavior is considered unethical, plus the organizational consequences thereof.

## Conceptual Framework

### Unethical Consumer Behavior in Context

Ethical consumption behavior has become a topic of great interest over the past 20 years, generating a great many texts (Muncy and Vitell 1992; Vitell 2014). Studies in this area tend to also scrutinize unethical behavior, at both the individual and group level. Interestingly, unethical consumer behavior is often depicted as something that is quasi-normal and intrinsic to the very act of consumption: 'Government inaction demonstrates the legal character and the banality of unethical consumption behavior' (D'Astous and Legendre 2009, p. 255). Consumers will often admit that they have on occasion behaved unethically (Eckhardt et al. 2010), albeit not always intentionally (Sezer et al. 2015).

Research in this area tends to divide unethical behavior into two broad categories that are actually quite different from another (Moschis and Cox 1989):

– Extreme unethical behavior generally labelled as consumer misbehavior (Fullerton and Punj 1998), deviance (Harris and Daunt 2011) or dysfunctional consumer behavior (Reynolds and Harris 2009). Examples here include shoplifting (Babakus et al. 2004), digital piracy (Freestone and Mitchell 2004) and insurance fraud (Lesch and Brinkmann 2011). The emphasis is on breaking rules. Such fraudulent behavior violates the implied social contract that underpins most exchange relationships. This frees it from social pressure and makes it into a threat for the whole of the social system (Becker 1963).

– A more ordinary form of unethical behavior that is often viewed as being unfair involves certain subtle forms of misbehaviour. These occur when a consumer causes 'harm for a company and, in some cases, its employees and other customers' (Berry and Seiders 2008, p. 30). Such behavior can take the form of inflated or false insurance claims, tax fraud, 'wardrobing' (i.e., purchasing, using and then returning clothing), knowingly exploiting service recovery policies to get compensation, cheating on service guarantees (Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy 2010) or being given too much small change and not saying anything about it

(Mitchell et al. 2009). Emphasis here is on the consequences of the conduct. These are examples of opportunistic or negligent behavior where consumers exploit any and all possibilities that arise without much regard for consequences.

At the same time, boundaries between these two categories of unethical consumer behavior are fuzzy and leave space for subjective evaluations. The same can be said for the boundaries between ethical and unethical behavior. Efforts have been made to measure people's beliefs and opinions about different forms of questionable consumer behavior (Vitell 2014)[1] but the reality is that judgements of ethicality ultimately depend on who makes the judgement.

Whereas some consumer behavior (like illegal downloading) is expressly punishable under the law, there are no formalized social norms to guide most ethical consumer choices. Some actions might be considered unethical according to some 'orders of worth' (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) but ethical according to others. One example is Fuschillo and Cova's 2015 study of when people pass on used but still valid tickets for public transportation networks, car parks, or city tours. The argument here is that the practice might well be deemed immoral since it violates norms laid down by the public or private transport, parking or city tour companies in charge of these activities. Handing over tickets would therefore be construed as exemplifying misbehavior or dysfunctional consumer behavior (Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy 2010). It can also be considered moral since it encourages civic-mindedness among individuals co-existing in a moral economy characterized by particularly extensive social ties (Fuschillo and Cova 2015, p. 267).

It remains that interpretations of unethicality are largely context-dependent (Fisk et al. 2010). This means that ethics cannot be encapsulated in lists of the kinds of norms that inform action (Clegg et al. 2007). Hence the idea that the identification of unethical behavior should be based on 'what is done in a specific situation within a particular context, with the aim of ethics being to develop the capacity to handle these situations' (Nyberg 2008, p. 596). Indeed, the ethical/unethical meanings ascribed to consumer behavior tend to be contextual and temporal, depending upon time and place (Belk et al. 2005). Ethical consumption is considered a complex, culturally constructed phenomenon (Pecoraro and Uusitalo 2014). Research today is concerned with how consumer behavior

is turned into an ethical problem (Giesler and Veresiu 2014); how ethical/unethical consumers are construed; and how meanings of (ethical and) unethical behavior are construed.

## Constituting Unethical Behavior

One precondition for labeling a behavior and characterizing it as unethical or deviant (Becker 1963) is having a subject willing to make such assertions. In terms of the descriptors (Mitchell et al. 2009) used by companies' members to qualify unethical behavior hence unethical consumers ('aberrant consumers,' 'jaycustomers,' 'dysfunctional customers,' etc.), generally it is the organizational vision and assessment of consumer behavior that tends to be adopted. The terms used try to capture the ways in which consumers cheat businesses or public services. They describe a kind of consumer behavior that does not correspond to what the organization in question considers normal, being the benchmark that it had in mind when first developing its product offer and production/distribution/after-sales system (Jougleux et al. 2013). This is tantamount to saying that anything that goes against a company's interests might be considered unethical.

Qualifying a behavior is akin to qualifying a production system. How behavior is understood and interpreted by an organization will have a strong effect on how it is experienced, as well as the action routines it triggers (Jougleux et al. 2013). Studies have shown how organizational actors equate deviant behavior with something that is unnatural and therefore requires constant sensemaking, be it at the microlevel of the interactions between customer contact staff or at a more strategic, macrolevel. One example is Suquet's ethnographic study (2010) of inspection work, scrutinizing fare evasion management in an urban bus network. The findings here showed that customer contact staff has no clear vision of what constitutes deviant behavior, which therefore must be imbued with meaning, through the different ways in which fare evasions are identified, qualified, and eventually enacted. Making sense of certain behavior, in this particular case fare evasion, can be problematic for bus inspectors. 'Their work processes the deviant behavior category which becomes more precise and more meaningful' (Suquet 2010, p 473). Similarly, Suquet's historical analysis (2011) of managerial narratives regarding fraud management on the *Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens* (RATP) public transport system revealed a constant questioning of which actions are the most effective, and indeed of how fraud itself might best be defined. Note that in this process of constructing deviant behavior, an organization's micro and macrolevels interact with one another. One employee might label a certain customer behavior as deviant even if it is legitimized in

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[1] Five criteria have been identified to assess to what extent consumer behavior can be considered as unethical (Vitell 2014): whether an advantage is being actively sought; whether the consumer is benefiting passively from an error; whether the action is perceived as illegal; the harm to the business victim; and whether the consumers in question are not involved in positive actions such as recycling.

formal organizational norms. Over time, institutionalization processes can transform behavior once considered deviant into something normal. Otherwise, certain formalized norms mean that something might be called deviant until the norm in question falls out of use, potentially due to some conflict between organizational subgroups disputing whether the behavior in question is actually deviant or not (Echeverri et al. 2012).

It is the organization that determines which norms must be followed hence how behavior should be assessed. Quite simply, where behavior obeys norms, it tends to be called ethical. Where behavior breaks the norms, it tends to be called deviant, hence unethical. Organizations do not necessarily encounter behavior that might be considered deviant or unethical behavior in the absolute. What they do is contribute to the situational construction thereof. As argued by Clegg et al. (2007, p. 118):

> Researchers and theorists need to know what ethics are politically constructed in what ways in organizations and how certain sorts of behavior are enacted and constituted as (un)ethical social actions by practices of the organization, its management, its employees and the broader community.

An emerging school of thought looking at the concept of ethics as practice (Gordon et al. 2009) suggests that they are embedded in organizational power relations. Hence the present article's decision to explore how one organization's consumers ended up being categorized along ethical lines. It involves an essentialization (generalization of an opinion about a category constructed in reference to the immutability and homogeneity of its constituent population) of ethical consumers—hence of unethical ones as well. It also asks two major questions: how organizations make sense of categories of unethical behavior and enact corresponding practices; and what are the consequences for the organization of waging war against consumer behavior that it considers unethical.

## Methods

Research into ethical/unethical consumer behavior has recently evolved towards the adoption of qualitative methodologies exploring a slew of potential new topics (Papaoikonomou et al. 2012; Sebastiani et al. 2013). These new topics include according to us the description of how unethical behavior is constructed within an organization—thereby responding to the business ethics challenge previously set by Clegg et al. (2007). Consequently, we have adopted a qualitative interpretive methodology that both facilitates exploration and enables a better understanding of the sensemaking practices enacted by an organization's

customer contact staff. All of which explains why the research design involves a single case study (Yin 2003) being envisioned along ethnographic lines (Van Maanen 2011)—the strength of organizational ethnography is to position individuals in a specific work setting.

## Research Setting

The organization at the heart of the present study is AMDM *Assurance Mutuelle des Motards,* a French insurance company that specializes in covering motorcyclists. AMDM is a mutual organization (see Box 1) focused on a specific community of consumers, to wit, bikers. One of its very specific attributes is that contrary to most mutual insurers specializing in professional groups such as teachers, farmers, or military, AMDM provides the unique example of a mutual insurer focused on people practicing a leisure activity, namely motorcycling. Now, motorcyclists exist in a community context that has been widely researched in marketing and consumer literature (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). They are often depicted as the epitome of risk-takers, in the sense that they generally subscribe to the view that appropriate motorcycling style encompasses fast, competitive riding accompanied by appropriate display of riding skills that often includes stunting. This means that AMDM is exposed to organizational and consumption practices underpinned by a very strong ideology. The key is not just corporate values but political values akin to the ones witnessed in responsible consumption cooperatives (Papaoikonomou et al. 2012) where working or consuming is considered a form of militancy as well as a way of resisting the dominant economic and social system. The relationship between *sociétaires* (French word referring to the people with whom one 'founds a society,' i.e., company)—in this case, the customers of a mutual insurance company—is not only a question of affinities but also of a full-blown sense of community. In other words, the signing of a contract is no more than one of many episodes constituting the social relationship that actors develop with one another.

AMDM is born out of the collective French motorcycling movement called FFMC *Fédération Française des Motards en Colère)* founded during the postwar years at a time when the automobile was shaping general traffic norms and laws—often to the detriment of motorcycling, which only started taking off in France in the 1970s, attracting a young generation that was just beginning to discover its freedom. The two building blocks underpinning the FFMC movement were passion and solidarity. Community spirit was strong in a group that counted up to 200,000 members in 1980: 'People who love big bikes view them in the same way as others view religion' (interview with AMDM Communication Manager on the

**Box 1** Mutual organizations in France

The main idea behind mutualism is for peers (primarily professional groups) to organize and protect themselves without expecting any help from the outside (in particular, from the state).

It was during the Middle Ages that the first mutual bodies were formed, built around a concept of mutual aid based on the constitution of powerful, fraternal, or guild-like institutions. The mutual values that could already be seen at the time included collective assistance (solidarity), independence, and community ties. In this sense, mutual aid was already being seen as a strategy for communities seeking to retain their independence, based on the solidarity of social bodies concerned with preserving their identity.

Despite growing concentration, today's mutual organizations, while assuming a wide variety of legal forms, comprise a key sector for the protection of persons and goods. Yet many organizations with roots in the social economy—working alongside cooperatives, volunteer groups, and foundations - are also companies operating in competitive marketplaces where they have to compete with limited liability companies.

Mutual companies are non-profit organizations whose earnings are earmarked for collective purposes (preventative actions, social infrastructure, higher wages, and profit-sharing schemes, even financial market investments). In other words, profits in this sector are not redistributed to shareholders. In the case of mutual insurance companies, the insured are also the insurers, in line with the principle of automatic solidarity. This is because alongside general health care coverage, the idea here is to have the healthy pay into the system to cover those who have fallen ill (or who had an accident). Similarly, mutual organizations generally do not subject new members to a selection process but prefer as a matter of fairness not to differentiate in terms of the treatment that each receives. One example might be a member insuring several cars with an organization and paying the same premium for each.

Lastly, mutual organizations are social enterprises (i.e., they have no shareholders) where power is wielded on a 'one person one vote' basis. Operations are rooted in a procedural democracy principle, with members being expected to take part in local decision-making bodies and the organization's titular representatives carrying out their activities, at least in theory, on a quasi-volunteer basis. The end result is that these organizations stand out due to their dual governance structure involving both elected representatives (political governance) and official hierarchy responsible for day-to-day operations (technical governance).

margins of the present study). To counter the authorities' repression of motorcycling and as part of the battle against road rage, the FFMC movement began in the 1980s, responding to 'the poor treatment meted out to bikers in a society that was pretty rigid at the time,' in the words of AMDM's Communication Manager. FFMC's first goal was to get France's motorcyclist population to stump up the funds needed to start their own insurance company. AMDM was born in reaction to the exorbitant premiums being charged at the time by insurance companies, a policy partially justified by the higher frequency of accidents among this population compared to car drivers. The end result was the launch of a brand new business sector—motorcycle insurance—previously considered unmanageable and above all unprofitable. Despite a lack of political and financial support, and even without the nurturing of an existing organization, AMDM started up in 1983 after mobilizing 40,000 motorcyclists who, working under the FFMC banner, compiled the necessary funds—an event that is unprecedented in modern insurance history.

From the very outset, AMDM adopted a mutual principle (Arnould and Rose 2015) congruent with FFMC's community ideal. Rather than applying risk-based eligibility rules, the guiding principles were prevention, training, experience of riding motorcycles, and the particularity of each machine. In line with this social enterprise logic, AMDM was born in opposition to the dominant economic model and developed its own version thereof, one rooted in the solidarity of its customer-members, being both the parties providing the insurance and the parties receiving

coverage. Any surpluses were spent on AMDM's main goal of getting more two-wheeled vehicles on the road. The underlying principle was mutual in nature since this was the best way for motorcyclists to keep their community going. Indeed, mutualism would become a key element in structuring the growing relationship between the motorcyclists getting coverage from AMDM and the company itself. Customer contact staff embodied this philosophy day in day out, often going well beyond the minimum necessary, acknowledging (and even glorifying) each member's status as a member of the motorcycling community. In short, this was a social movement that became an insurance company—one which remained militant specifically since this helped to cement members' shared identity.

Thirty-two years after its foundation, AMDM has maintained these convictions. With 437 employees, it still operates at a human scale. One constant concern is to ensure that AMDM's governance continue to center on the link between motorcyclists and the company. This translates into relationships between customer support staff and so-called *sociétaire* motorcyclist customers that, unlike other companies, do not prioritize imperatives like time management (limiting the amount of time spent in each phone call, for instance). Customer contact staff at AMDM has learned to develop relationships comprising both economic and social components. Not to mention the fact that there are a number of other opportunities (meetings, movement events) to further develop a non-business relationship. Motorcyclists may start with individual aspirations but this quickly leads to a sense of collective action.

Where three-quarters of all motorcyclists were younger than 25 in the 1980s, the average age today is 42. This is destined to become 'the main challenge that AMDM will be facing in the years to come' (from an internal memo). Moreover, the sociological and commercial practice of driving two-wheeled vehicles has become increasingly widespread due to the rapid rise of scooters (accounting today for more than 30 % of the total number of two-wheeled vehicles in France). The new populations driving such vehicles are quite different in terms of their social profile and age bracket (average of 47). The mutual insurer's employees tend to be somewhat younger (37), although their average age is rising as well. What is at stake now is ensuring that future generations of members, with their different representations of the world and new forms of solidarity, maintain the vision of the project's aging founders.

## Data Collection

To pursue the paper's research aim of discovering the process that middle management and customer contact staff use when constructing ethical and unethical consumer behavior, a dual method approach was employed mobilizing two major qualitative data sources (Belk 2007). Both methods were equal in weight and ultimately incorporated into a single design. Data were collected in its entirety between April 2013 and April 2014 and accumulated in conjunction with concurrent findings to increase the research conclusions' robustness. All of these methods were implemented by the team of five senior researchers who carried out a study over a period lasting several years (2011–2015) to ascertain the social value created by mutual insurers such as AMDM as well as two other leading French mutual insurance companies—an approach that made it possible to contextualize all findings in a broader framework than would have been the case had just one organization been investigated.

Observations and interviews did not start by focusing on scooterists. Instead, this was a theme that emerged unexpectedly during the project's initial fieldwork phases. It fit in with questions pertaining to AMDM's organizational identity, which then became a key research topic. The approach pursued here was rooted in an interactionist reading of how AMDM members view scooterists, in line with Becker's approach to the study of deviance (1963). In his study of marijuana smokers, he considered that deviance is not contained within the acts committed by individuals but in the way 'moral entrepreneurs' view such acts: 'deviant behavior is behavior that people so label' (Becker 1963, p. 9). Similarly, although the present study does not view scooterists (often criticized by AMDM employees) as unethical consumers based on their actual

characteristics and their acts—which were unknown here—they remain interesting because of the way others have looked at them. Our focus was thus on how the organization—embodied in this instance by the voice of its employees—went about shaping and framing the construct of an unethical consumer. In turn, this was used to identify the organization's transformation. In this approach, input or responses from consumers who had been considered unethical were deemed less of a priority. The end effect was that the organization itself became the study's prime focus. Hence the decision was not to interview AMDM consumers.

### Immersion at Two Organizational Sites

Observations were based on researchers engaging in immersions each lasting 2 days at two AMDM offices in France: Montpellier and Marseille. The latter mainly exists to welcome customers and sell policies. The Montpellier headquarters manages claims for material and physical damage by phone. This explains why there were more interviews in Montpellier than Marseille (seven versus four, see Table 1). Three researchers were immersed in both Marseille and Montpellier: one only went to Marseille; and another only to Montpellier.

Researchers in Montpellier had access to functional managers who were on assignment from group headquarters; advisors and administrators answering phone calls from members ringing from anywhere in France to discuss their contracts and claims; and middle managers. The Marseille office, which was smaller in size and had more of a regional remit, more or less existed to facilitate face-to-face meetings with current or potential members discussing the possibility of taking out an insurance contract. Researchers in Marseille had access to commercial advisors as well as the office manager.

Headquarters introduced the researchers before they came to the two sites. This largely involved explaining to people the study's main research question (the creation of social value). Following this, advisors, administrators, and managers made themselves available, first for observations and then for interviews. This order helped researchers learn more about the work being done by the people who they would then interview. It also helped to create an atmosphere of trust that added to the texture of certain phenomena that had been observed previously. Moreover, immersing the researchers in the two sites enriched their real-time observation of employees and laid the foundations for 2-h group interviews with all on-site employees (in Montpellier), followed by long individual interviews focused on specific activities.

Employees were chosen for observation and interviews in a way that allowed for a mixture of profiles in terms of

**Table 1** Respondent details

| Interviewee | Gender and age | Site | Joined AMDM in | Previous company | Position | Experience with two-wheeled vehicles |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Elisabeth | F 25 | Marseille | 2012 | Brokerage | Advisor | Non-motorcyclist |
| Gisèle | F 47 | Marseille | 1990 | None | Agency Manager | Motorcyclist |
| Laurent | M 27 | Marseille | 2011 | For-profit bank/insurance | Advisor | Non-motorcyclist |
| Noémie | F 45 | Marseille | 1999 | None | Advisor | Non-motorcyclist |
| Sandrine | F 38 | Montpellier | 2001 | None | Administrator, claims material damage | Enthusiastic motorcyclist |
| Zaida | F 52 | Montpellier | 2005 | For-profit company | Administrator, claims material damage | Non-motorcyclist |
| Gloria | F 41 | Montpellier | 1996 | None | Administrator, claims physical damage | Motorcyclist |
| Isabelle | F 36 | Montpellier | 1996 | For-profit company | Administrator, claims physical damage | Enthusiastic motorcyclist |
| Adrien | M 55 | Montpellier | 1986 | None | Head of warranty programme | Non-motorcyclist |
| Chantal | F 56 | Montpellier | 1998 | None | Manager, responsible for non-payment | Non-motorcyclist |
| Jacques | M 32 | Montpellier | 2008 | None | Administrator, material damage | Non-motorcyclist |

age, gender, length of service at AMDM, and professional status. The aim here was less to have a representative sample and more to reveal the diversity of attitudes (Silverman 2013) found at AMDM. To understand the process that led to customers being construed as unethical, it seemed crucial that interviews be organized with front desk employees (the Marseille office, the Montpellier center) as well as back-office personnel (Montpellier claims department) and some of the managers to whom they report directly (Table 1). The end result was a relatively small sample, something that is, however, recommended in the case of qualitative research predicated on in-depth exploration. McCracken (1988) has argued that eight long interviews suffice for qualitative research projects.

*Observations and Interviews with Customer Contact Staff*

It is worth noting that the observations were done on a non-participant basis (de Laine 2000). Researchers would spend half days alongside employees at the Montpellier call center, followed by the Marseille office, without interfering in their interactions with members—a passive presence that did include, however, visible note-taking and attentiveness to what was happening. Where researchers were in a position to speak with members they would simply be presented as investigators, a vague role that was easy to live with. Whenever nothing was happening, researchers would engage in informal discussions with employees, either harking back to a previous interaction or else seeking technical details about insurance matters. One other

strength of this kind of organizational ethnography (Van Maanen 2011) is the way it places individuals in their specific work setting. In the present instance, advisors, administrators, and middle managers were studied in the environment where their actions happened. This made it possible to see how things unfolded over the course of the observation period.

The interviews provided verbal materials that would underpin subsequent analysis. The interviews were conducted in such a way as to induce respondents to speak freely about their commercial or administrative activities. An intentionally limited interview brief contained the following instructions: (1) Start by assessing the general context in which the agency or department activity happens, meaning the overall atmosphere and how people felt this had evolved; (2) Then talk about the specificity of AMDM's mutual model and commercial activities; (3) Lastly, evoke concrete working situations by asking for detailed illustrations of previous points made by the respondent (focusing on sources of tension, contradictions in daily working routines, and how people would try to overcome them).

*Interviews with Top Managers*

In an attempt to contextualize employees' discourse within a real organization, senior managers were interviewed on two separate occasions at the Marseille office and Montpellier headquarters. These were open discussions about the particular activities of the office or department in

question. The interviewees were Pascal, AMDM's CEO since 2001—a motorcyclist who first joined AMDM in 1989; Antoine, AMDM Board Member and Director of Operations who first joined AMDM in 1997 after working for an IT consultant—non-motorcyclist; Arthur, Commercial Development Manager helping to run agencies and teams—a motorcyclist who joined AMDM in 2009 after working for a cooperative farmers bank; Michel, a seminal member and Delegate, being a motorcyclist who had joined AMDM in 1985.

Table 2 summarizes the full dataset, showing the profiles of the different categories of people encountered during the study about the sensemaking process or the context of it.

### Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Observations were accompanied by intensive note-taking. The notes were shared after each immersion session and full summaries were prepared systematically, notably by subgroups of researchers following up on sessions held at the Marseille and Montpellier offices. The process also included quarterly progress report meetings. After the research phase was concluded, all of these working documents (and all other written materials) were gathered to build a fuller picture of the things that organizations might construe as unethical behavior, with one main focus being the emerging construct of scooterists, something that had stood out markedly during researchers' field time at AMDM.

The combination of data collection techniques produced a large volume of data that was interpreted separately by three of the five researchers involved in the research process. Interviews were subjected to thematic contents analysis (Neuendorf 2002; Spiggle 1994) identifying themes that were both recurring and structuring, in a way that transcended the interview brief. The focus became the community model that arose through interviewees' words and in reference to the figure of the scooterist, considered antagonistic to the motorcyclist model. The multiple data sources and the triangulation between the three authors strongly supported the research findings' validity. The

insights obtained from the data analysis are outlined in the following section.

## Findings

As noted in the Methodology section, the overall objective of this bi-annual study of French mutual insurance companies was to understand how they created social value. It remains that the construct of a scooterist—the consumer construed as epitomizing unethicality (see below)—was felt throughout the AMDM employee interviews and observations. In mutual contexts involving the creation of social value (Arnould and Rose 2015), it is necessary to have consumers who are minded to act in a way that befits the growing narrative. This explains the present study's focus on organizational sensemaking culminating in the figure of the unethical consumer. The present case study will have responded to a series of questions relating to the construction of unethical consumption behavior. More specifically, it will have demonstrated how organizations make sense of certain categories of unethical behavior and enact relevant practices. Lastly, it will also specify the organizational consequences of combating all the different kinds of consumption behavior that an organization considers unethical.

The present section is structured into two main parts. The first explores the process of sensemaking that led to scooterist behavior being defined as unethical. The second details the consequences of this sensemaking in terms of relationship management with scooterists (and marketing to them). All quotes here have been translated from French into English.

### Sensemaking as a Process

AMDM provides an example of organizational sensemaking (Suquet 2010) involving certain consumers deemed to be unethical. This activity was rooted in a shared ethos. Its translation into action was exacerbated by people's need to be recognized, encapsulated in turn in a discourse in which scooterists were demonized.

**Table 2** The dataset

|  | Front desk employees (process) | Call center employees (process) | Middle managers (process) | Top managers (context) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Observation headquarters (2 days in Montpellier) |  | X | X |  |
| Observation agency (2 days in Marseille) | X |  | X |  |
| Collective interviews (2 times 2 h) | X | X | X |  |
| In-depth individual interviews (average duration 1 h) | X (3 interviews) | X (6 interviews) | X (3 interviews) | X (5 interviews) |

### Developing/Nurturing a Shared Ethos

One of the most recurring themes in this case study was community. A community sentiment connected many employees to most of the consumers (bikers). Somewhat akin to people participating in a subculture of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), AMDM employees and consumers-bikers created a coherent set of shared meanings around biking practices—and by so doing, structured a sense of moral obligation.

> When someone is seriously injured, it is as if a close family member got hurt (Ingrid).

Employees did not view motorcyclists as consumers in the strict sense of the term, despite that fact that they were paying for a commercial service. Employees felt they shared common values, empathizing with customers and yearning for a relationship based on solidarity instead of commercialism:

> Some members—bikers—don't even claim for damages since they consider the damage minimal and do not want the Mutual [AMDM] to have to pay out (Jacques).

This shared community ethos did not only involve customer contact staff or motorcyclist customers but also middle managers. Observations and interviews confirmed that even today, AMDM can be characterized as a missionary configuration (Mintzberg 1980) based on specific values as well as a political project created to defend bikers' subculture. Here, there is no real gap between the way managers and customer contact staff see things. Moreover (and contrary to other mutual organizations), there was not much of a gap at AMDM between the so-called virtuous discourse and actual professional practice. In other words, the values of mutual ethos and community solidarity were in this case more than mere vestiges of a glorious time past—even though the organization provides a commercial service and competes with private insurance companies.

> We're here for the biker community … People seek advice from us even when they aren't customers (Gisèle).

This shared ethos could be witnessed in three types of relationships between employees and biker customers.

*Going Beyond Contractual Duties*  The community feeling was reinforced by the insurance policy that two-wheeled vehicle drivers were buying, a contract based on the mutual obligation of customers paying monthly premiums in exchange for coverage in case of an accident. Based on this mutual and community engagement, relations between customer contact staff and members were not only commercial in nature. If a claim was made, for instance, for a serious domestic accident, employees would often go well beyond their contractual duties and help the member to surmount challenges they would face in their daily lives (Weber 2011). Most employees actually stated that they were selling more than a contract.

> Members stay with us because they are satisfied but above all because we do more than just provide insurance (Isabelle).

This additional soulfulness and quality justified, in several employees' view, the higher premiums that AMDM charged compared to for-profit insurers. During the interviews, there was some discussion about the fact that the type of coverage AMDM offered in case of an accident go beyond monetary indemnities. Although the same provisions were offered by many competitors, what is notable at AMDM was people's pride at providing an insurance service (in the full sense of the term) where they would be more available, helpful, and responsive in case of an accident. This feeling of being different and more ethical resided first and foremost in the conviction that employees would treat members humanely by being very attentive to their individual situations:

> We follow an individualized approach that really focuses on members' concerns, which we try to address much as possible (Chantal).

Thus, key at AMDM was to assume that employees had to find the time to identify real needs and avoid hard selling.

> I emphasize reaching out and building up contacts and relationships more than the policy details (Adrien).

*Familiarity*  Although interactions were mainly over the telephone, they tended to be lowkey and friendly (Price and Arnould 1999). Employees were observed calling members by their first name (after checking this on the file, something that members were aware of). Many conversations started with a simple question about how the other person was doing. When employees had the impression that the member (or potential member) appreciated their efforts, they would start talking about 'doing their best'—an expression heard on several occasions. Whether the interaction was face-to-face in an office or over the phone, a clear sense of being different was always communicated through frequent references to AMDM's history, specifically to the battles that motorcyclists have waged in France. The logic underpinning this cause was that more than car drivers, bikers are vulnerable, fragile, and exposed to many risks, including serious injury and even death. This

objective reality, based on a specific trajectory, justified a different (i.e., more singular and tailor-made) treatment than a for-profit insurance company would provide. In the words of one employee:

> Members tell us that this focus on the individual is not something they find at traditional non-mutual insurance companies (Chantal).

*Motorcycle Expertise* The community in question had already been constituted and was continually being regenerated through its passion for one object, namely motorcycles, preferably powerful ones. Motorcycle brands often tried to take advantage of this connection, sometimes through the creation of communities revolving around the affectionate and even intimate relationship between drivers and their vehicles (Rood and Bruckman 2009). Employees tried to penetrate this relationship and become part of it. They had to be ready to talk about bikes for as long as the member wanted, showing empathy when a motorcycle was about to be wrecked or sold (or when its coverage matured). Members often found it hard to separate from their bikes, meaning that employees were supposed to support them through tough times, almost as if they were in mourning. Further support had to be provided if the bike was stolen—and even if nothing worse happened than getting a few scratches. Showing a shared passion (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) for motorcycles also implied knowledge of their technical aspects and the ability to say, for instance, what a cowling is. On several occasions, it even meant developing a personal experience of motorcycling. One employee explained that she herself had become a biker because she wanted to feel the same passion as members and become a legitimate part of their community.

> It helps to be a biker yourself because conflicts can arise quickly if you don't know what people are talking about (Isabelle).

### Quest for Recognition

A second major theme that came out of this study involved AMDM employees' quest for recognition. In line with Honneth (1996), it is possible to consider that relationships with others were entirely permeated by this desire for recognition, and that the key factor in people's working lives was self-esteem. This could then be opposed to their family lives, where love dominated, or social lives, where respect played a big role. Customer contact staff would experience this quest for self-esteem in the way they related to top managers or customers. The aforementioned community was based on a model where beneficiaries were supposed to recognize the efforts being made to help them. This would

then provoke stronger feelings than, for instance, the recognition that staff members got from management. Evidence for this was the pride with which employees would show off a golden book featuring praise from members. At the call center there was even a 'thank you wall' with email messages pinned up on a board. Another form of self-esteem was rooted in the things that members would say during their interactions with customer contact staff. Out of this high self-esteem grew loyalty and solidarity. Work would be imbued with a collective meaning. Discussions between colleagues would sustain this symbolic dimension of work by building up a group culture (Holdaway 1983). AMDM employees would use edifying stories (involving repeated expressions of gratitude, the 'thank you wall,' etc.), to try to attribute nobler dimensions to mundane tasks.

> They call to thank me for the way I handle their cases (Jacques).

In addition, the atmosphere in the call center was much friendlier than what is generally expected in these modern offices, despite recent requirements that employees should respond to a minimum number of queries within a specific time period. Even so, it is worth noting that employees were not judged on the number of policies they sold. All in all, AMDM employees seemed to find meaning in their work. They acted ethically in the sense that they had a feeling of doing an honest day's work (without 'churning out' contracts), treating all members equitably, and emphasizing human over financial interests. At least for the moment they could rejoice in not having an objectives-driven culture. One employee expressed this by noting differences with his former job at a for-profit insurance company:

> It's more social here, more qualitative. What counts at AMDM is the relationship with the members, the community (Laurent).
> We take more time with real fans who want to talk about their bikes and everything they do (Gloria).

This idyllic panorama did have a dark side, namely that empathy and community sentiments could easily be transformed into limitless compassion. For some employees, bikers were always right. This could sometimes materialized in nepotistic forms of behavior (Rosenbaum and Walsh 2012). Some members, often older ones, could go a long time (with the complicity of the employees) without paying their membership fees yet remain covered—the explanation being that they were part of the community.

This recognition was, however, fragile and assumed reciprocal obligations and major relational expectations. It is not surprising that certain forms of misrecognition came to correspond to this phenomenon of recognition.

## Demonization Discourse

Fieldwork highlighted employees' discourses based on the demonization of a growing section of AMDM's membership, namely the scooterists, who represent today 12 % of the total membership. Studies have already shown that corporate managers and employees often have a tendency to demonize or romanticize consumers (Gabriel and Lang 1995). Some consumers also deploy rhetorical frames that demonize other consumers. In the present case, the motorcycling community embarked upon a process where scooterists would be demonized and transformed into scarecrows or even bogeymen. This process was led by AMDM customer contact staff and backed by motorcyclist customers.

Despite driving two-wheeled vehicles, scooterists are not motorcyclists. Indeed, they were often viewed as the polar opposite of bikers, who were generally associated with fraternal instants. Scootering grew out of certain sociological and technical changes in the two-wheeled vehicle segment. The technological changes in question include rapid expansion over the past 30 years in two-wheeled vehicle ranges, specifically with the advent of scooters of different engine sizes (with some even featuring two front wheels because this increases traction). The sociological changes have included drivers' democratization (and feminization), reflecting lower prices but also motives based more on utility than on leisure and hobbies:

> Society has changed where scooters are concerned. I don't know if it's true or not because I don't have all the facts at my fingertips. But nowadays people think they always need to go faster and be more productive. And two-wheelers are more practical for getting to work in densely populated urban environments (Isabelle).

This difference in equipment (and use) has also changed what scooterists wear compared to traditional bikers:

> We live in a big city and it's really important the way you look. People dress up to go to work, they don't wear leather or jeans. Scooters are good that way. There are even some women who ride their scooters in skirts (Noémie).

Scooterists would often be described as in a rush, incapable of slowing down and operating at a great distance from the kind of passion that most motorcycling buffs would express. In short, scooterists were blamed for not adopting community codes, meaning those signs that people are expected to demonstrate if they want to join a group.

This distancing could also be found in other criticisms of scooterists, often relating to their behavior (interactions with AMDM employees), considered individualistic and utilitarian. Indeed, scooterists ignorant of AMDM's existing community would even be accused of denigrating it when they first approached the company. They were often perceived as a danger for employees' recognition, and indeed for AMDM's overall plans:

> They are more individualistic and just trying to show off. End of story. They couldn't care less about all the battles bikers fought for them in the past (Noémie). Scooterists buy a two-wheelers for practical reasons, especially in Paris. Real bikers are true fans willing to pay higher premiums. Scooterists don't think this way at all, all they want is coverage. I'm not even sure they realise the difference. They comparison shop online… Theirs is a different world with different sensitivities. They don't really care what we say. They ring us while walking around doing something else. The conversations are really short (Gloria).

Scooterists supposedly did not share AMDM's community ethos. A community ethos is defined by a particular set of norms, values, beliefs, practices, and other interactional patterns (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). Communal behavior is encoded and embedded in the group's norms and relies on individuals being educated or socialized into the community. One important facet of communities is the legitimacy of their members. One example might be a Saab brand community member discussing why Saabs are not for everyone but only for those people who really understand it and are willing to commit for the long run (O'Guinn and Muñiz 2005). Implied community norms often reject certain consumers deemed unworthy of the organization and its ethos. The only parties deemed legitimate will be those consumers who adhere to the values of the associated movement and act in line with its ethical norms. In this way and like scooterists, anyone classified as 'the other' could be considered unethical, at least in terms of the way the community ethos defined this.

In other words, scooterists were seen as consumers lacking any real passion for motorcycling. They were ignorant of its history and causes, entertaining an impersonal relationship that undermined whatever meaning AMDM employees find in their work. The fact that AMDM employees tended to be managed by a system that prioritized recognition by customers (i.e., by fellow bikers) more than by any internal reporting lines caused them to demonize fringe customers at odds with the meaning they attributed to their activity. It therefore created conflict not only with their own sense of self but also with their identity. In short, scooterists were involuntarily converting AMDM's employees from advisor-cheerleaders into commercial salespersons.

They then became bogeymen, strawmen, a vision of the future that many employees rejected. This marginalization and rejection crystallized in the stereotypically negative way scooterists were depicted in interviews. They were generally described as young (about 35 years old), male, senior managers (wearing suits), and having only recently taken out a policy. Very mainstream socially and even a symbol of middle-class conformity, scooterists were thought to differ greatly from the stereotypical rebel biker living at the margins of society. Scooterists were often assimilated with 'Parisian yuppies,' playing upon France's North–South and Paris-Province rivalries, which are full of stereotypes (note that AMDM was born in the Southern French city of Montpellier). When scooterists were discussed in cities closer to headquarters, for instance Marseille (where several interviews were conducted), other negative associations tended to surface:

> In Marseille, real bikers come from elsewhere. Someone born locally likes to show off their Momo Design helmet[2] but beyond that they don't belong to any biker clubs… Scooterists are very worried about how they look so in big towns they dress up in John Lobb (note 3)[3] to ride their scooters to work (Noémie).

It did not help when scooterists lived close to employees, quite the contrary. Otherwise, scooterists' focus on appearance was considered very much at odds with bikers' supposedly much more authentic image, with interviewees categorizing here in a manner redolent of the language-based 'typifications' that Schutz has studied ([1967](#)). Employees would apprehend their professional reality via representations that oriented their interpretations and expectations and implied certain attitudes vis-a-vis their actions (for instance, when answering the phone). The end result was a real gap between 'them' (scooterists) and 'us' (AMDM employees and bikers), between unethical and ethical behavior.

> Many don't belong to the biker community, especially the ones driving tiny scooters or mopeds around town, they don't even try to fit in. A biker usually starts by telling us about their bike before talking about anything else. Someone who goes to work on a scooter gets down to business right away, saying they need insurance for the commute (Isabelle).
>
> They're always in a rush. Old bikers like to talk about the company's past… Even calling it by its old name,

MDM. Whereas scooterists just want to talk insurance (Zaida).

The figure of the scooterist, i.e., an unethical consumer, ultimately came to cover people who were not integrated into the community, meaning they would be subjected to a process in which other parties (employees, middle managers, other motorcyclists) ended up demonizing them.

## Organizational Consequences

The joint presence of two groups of consumers (motorcyclists construed as behaving particularly ethically vs. scooterists construed as behaving unethically) created substantial contradictions for both employees and top managers. These contradictions attested to a customer relationship context that had become highly ambiguous. Ambiguity exists in an organization when ambiguous contexts can be identified—and where disagreements about boundaries cannot be resolved (Alvesson [1993](#)).

### Ambiguity in (Dis)organizing Relationships with Unethical Consumers

Scooterists may have been a great source of anger for many employees but they also represented a current and future chapter in the world of two-wheeled vehicles. There is no doubt that they constituted a danger for the community—sometimes in relatively concrete ways. They were generally more prone to accidents and theft. Because this sort of narrow consumerism increased costs for AMDM, it offered an indirect way of broaching the concept of unethical consumers. In the eyes of employees (who cannot be written off as being solely driven by nostalgia), scooterists would pay little attention to the preventative discourse that was AMDM's speciality, given the vulnerability of two-wheel drivers. More specifically, the idea was that scooterists' excessive focus on their vehicle's instrumental function (i.e., seen as way of getting around to run errands) meant that they might forget the social aspect of their behavior, with their driving habits not only affecting their own physical well-being but also passersby potentially. Lastly, scooterists were largely recent members, which according to employees interviewed meant that theirs was a highly volatile segment defined by a certain lack of loyalty (since scooterists were accused of only looking for cheap insurance). In turn, this forced employees to adopt a much more commercial approach, one where they would try to outfox their counterparts and convince them to stay with AMDM. This resulted in there being two levels for interpreting employees' attitudes towards scooterists.

The first attitude involved a sense of resignation and fatalism akin to people viewing the barrier between 'them'

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[2] Momo Design is an Italian helmet brand with a very refined urban look contrasting with traditional motorcycle helmets.

[3] John Lobb Bootmaker is a company that manufactures and retails a luxury brand of shoes and boots mainly for men.

and 'us' as something insurmountable. In turn, this meant that people would adapt their discourse depending on who they were speaking with:

> Mutual discourses may not work very well for those people who want rapid access and aren't too worried about social enterprise… unlike biker enthusiasts, who tend to be very receptive to this kind of thing. Yuppies riding big scooters, they don't care. And remember, the first thing that bikers talk about is their bike, whereas scooterists get down to business right away (Chantal).

The second attitude, which was less widespread, consisted of trying to convert scooterists and integrating them into the community:

> These are people who got a two-wheeler not because it's their passion nor for the values but for practical reasons. Yet we shouldn't ignore them. For the moment nothing is being done to bring them into the fold at AMDM. But why not? I think it could be useful to try and transmit our values to them, inculcate them. Although this might be quite challenging (Isabelle).

Communities are normative. As such, brand consumption means complying and aligning with a tribal norm (Goulding et al. 2013). The newcomer gradually learns to become a fully blown participant in (hence an accepted member of) the community by acquiring certain skills and internalizing the group's values and norms. Yet it only happened very rarely that scooterists would acquire these competencies and values. Attempts to convert and integrate them rarely succeeded—something that encouraged many AMDM employees to view the antagonism with scooterists as permanent—despite the fact that AMDM clearly saw them a potential growth area. The question then becomes which attitude the organization's management should have taken towards unethical consumers who, whether or not they liked this, were destined to account for a sizable proportion of the future client base.

### Ambiguity in (Dis)organizing Marketing Strategy Towards Non-ethical Consumers

Mirroring theses issues, just as the present study was being conducted (2013–2014), top management started to change course. AMDM's reputation was clearly connected to the biker community representing its core market (and for a very long time its sole target). The segment had become less captive, however, with for-profit companies bringing in new and more competitive offers. According to Arthur, 'We better not get stuck in our old ways… We aren't the only people insuring motorcyclists today.' In response and reflecting their strong position in the two-wheeled vehicle

market, top management expressed a desire to grow market share with scooterists. This could be problematic, however, due first to high theft rates for the most attractive scooters and also because of scooterists' specific behavior. Six of the top ten two-wheeled vehicles stolen in France are scooters, with the Yamaha T-Max coming top. It may be easy to lock up one's scooter but many scooterists forget to do it, as noted in a survey carried out in September 2013. Second, scooterists present a much higher frequency of material accidents than the bikers because of the urban use of their vehicles (roughly from two to three times more vs. bikers in 2014).

In 2014, AMDM's portfolio featured ten two-wheeled vehicle policies, each varying depending on the type of usage. Two of the policies were specific to scooters (Urban Scoot and Maxi Scoot) with eight targeting motorcyclists. The new ambition was to be perceived as a company willing to insure all kinds of two-wheeled vehicles and not just motorcycles. As Arthur put it, 'At AMDM we don't have any segmentation and are ready to insure everything… Eligibility rules are minimal'—especially because scooterists are not always bad customers for the insurer to have. They may have higher theft rates than motorcyclists but their corporeal accident rates are lower.

Adapting the mutual insurance company's discourse to scootering has remained challenging, however. This can be witnessed in the advertising campaign that was launched in spring 2014. The theme was the motorcyclist community's shared sense of freedom, with a strapline of 'Assuming freedom means insuring freedom.' The four visuals chosen for the press campaign showed actors in situations symbolizing different kinds of bikers riding huge motorcycles. A 30-s spot had an enthusiastic father transforming his daughter's bicycle into something looking like a raging Harley Davidson. None of the visuals showed any scooters. The campaign was meant to reassure employees in their motorcyclist convictions.

Once the researchers completed their observations, however, things began to change slightly. According to the company, the campaign launched in spring 2015 seeks to 'Conquer anyone who does not yet realize that AMDM is willing to insure motorcyclists and scooterists alike,' irrespective of their profiles or practices. Carrying on from the 2014 visuals with a slightly different strapline 'Insuring freedom means assuming freedom,' the company has prepared a fifth visual focusing this time on scooterists. Having said that, the crux remains the ideology of freedom that motorcyclists hold so dear.

## Discussion

The paper's main contribution lies in the process of constructing the figure of the unethical consumer (Clegg et al., 2007), being the key aspect in the AMDM case study and

ancillary findings. The question here is what happens inside an organization when consumers do not behave according to the moral standard defined by the company and its community. The answer is the demonization of one category of consumers, in this case scooterists, by employees who prefer another category, bikers, even if both groups have a lot in common. In the present instance, both own two-wheeled vehicles hence suffer frequent accidents. Both need insurance. Even so, they have been subjected to very different discourses and practices within AMDM. What this case study has highlighted are the organizational practices materializing within a context defined by a process of organizational sensemaking (Suquet 2010). In the present instance, this can be represented in three phases (See Fig. 1).

The first phase, Nurturing of a shared ethos, derives from AMDM's origins and relates to employees and motorcyclists' shared ethos. This phrase relates at a broader level to the organization's constitution and to the initial customer segments around which it was built and developed. Where the segment in question is a unique one featuring the characteristics of a subculture (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) or community/tribe (Cova et al. 2007), there is a strong possibility that an isomorphism existed between the outside world (consumers) and the inside world (employees), meaning that both ended up sharing one and the same ethos.

The second phase, Protecting employees' recognized status, involves employees developing and maintaining a certain form of recognition, something that they could get mainly through their relationships with the consumers-bikers. This is the phase where such recognition starts to stabilize. It is also a real human resource management problem for companies today. Employees seeking consumer recognition do this because it is part of their job as customer contact staff. Just as importantly, they also do it because the organization's internal recognition system is showing signs of weakness.

The third phase, Demonization of a group of consumers, which is happening today in AMDM, has seen the emergence of new consumers whose behavior has been deemed unethical by employees. These consumers are threatening both the mutual's shared ethos and the recognition that

employees have enjoyed until now. All of which explains why scooterists are being demonized. Demonization is always a sign that the sensemaking process is quite advanced and might endanger the company's very survival. The fact that senior management shares the ethos of its employees but also its customer base explains in part why it takes many people so long to become aware of this phenomenon.

Past research has already studied the case of market-marginalized consumers (Adkins and Ozanne 2005)—like plus-sized consumers (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013)—and the way they seek greater inclusion in (and more choice from) mainstream markets. It has also studied the long process involved in legitimizing a consumption practice such as gambling, saving it from its previous status as a marginalized practice, culturally associated with organized crime, to the point where is has now become a mainstream activity that everyone can consume (Humphreys 2010). In both cases, it is the whole of society that has been responsible for the way in which these consumers and their behavior are constructed and legitimized. The present student complements these studies in the way that it looks at practices leading to consumers' marginalization within a particular organization. More specifically, the present research resides in the field of organizational anthropology (Luthans et al. 2013; Wright 2004). Its contention is that organizational sensemaking culminates in the manufacturing of unethical consumers. This is akin to the 'consumer fetishization' process described by Arnould and Cayla (2015), although it does differ in several ways. The fetishes that these authors evoked were positive and attractive figures born out of marketing studies; they were endowed with quasi-magical powers mainly wielded by company executives; and they were associated with a tendency to consult oracle-like persona representing ideal-type consumers attributed enduring first names. At AMDM, on the other hand, scooterists were negative figures (*vade retro*) born out of telephone conversations or face-to-face meetings with ordinary workers. They were not endowed with magical powers—but nevertheless caused a great deal of resentment that led to marginalization.

Insofar as the existence of a sensemaking process causes some consumers to be marginalized, this can affect that way in which an organization manages the behavior that its
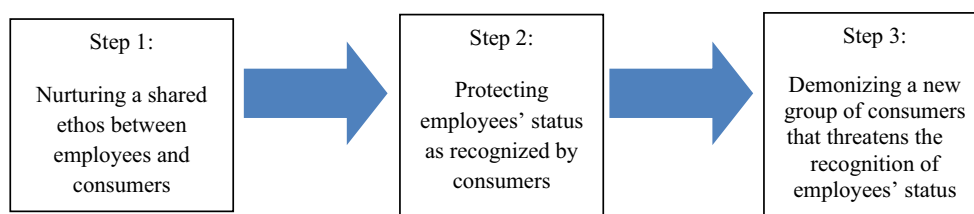


Step 1: Nurturing a shared ethos between employees and consumers → Step 2: Protecting employees' status as recognized by consumers → Step 3: Demonizing a new group of consumers that threatens the recognition of employees' status

**Fig. 1** The process of making sense of unethical consumer behavior

employees call unethical. The general consensus is that organizations can combat behavior they consider unethical (Harris and Daunt 2013) by acknowledging these behaviors and managing them effectively (Berry and Seiders 2008). Consumer misbehavior affects frontline employees, managers, and managerial strategies (Fisk et al. 2010). In combating unethical behavior, companies tend to adopt more proactive and preventative approaches rather than responsive measures aimed at loss limitation (Mitchell et al. 2009). Similarly, where certain consumers' behavior is being construed as unethical—as happened at AMDM— the important thing is to anticipate events before the demonization phase actually begins. Senior management must weigh the recognition that employees get from consumers against whatever major recognition actions are being carried out internally. Employees will then have less of a sense of being endangered in case the customer base shifts towards new segments that are less beholden to the original community ethos. Similarly, senior management needs to open up to these new consumer segments quite overtly by involving them in co-creation processes that will see them working together with employees—the purpose being to get everyone to cooperate and define the means for achieving greater integration, along with the practices that should grow out of this. After all, consumers 'are more likely to follow the rules (i.e., behavioral expectations) if they know what the rules are and ideally have a say in them' (Fisk et al. 2010, p. 425).

The question then becomes which strategy is appropriate for a company facing an employee-driven sensemaking process, once this has reached and crystallized its demonization phase. Totally marginalizing a growing fringe of AMDM's customer base—scooterists—would damage its growth prospects in a difficult competitive environment that requires the company to seek areas of further expansion. Four possible strategies exist. All are based on the idea of alignment, defined here as a matching process between two parties (Corsaro and Snehota 2011).

One might be to realign the disaligned scooterist customers. It would be challenging to convert scooterists to an AMDM mindset reflecting its history and mutual modus operandi. One possibility at this level is to place greater emphasis on prevention (theft, accidents), being topics with which potential new members are not necessarily familiar. In turn, this could pave the way for a new narrative that— without glossing over AMDM's history—no longer emphasizes this one aspect or the community dimension but focuses instead on the present, using a prevention discourse publicizing how the company differs from its competition. In a similar vein, a realignment of community-oriented employees is already starting to occur in the sense that staff members are becoming increasingly sales-oriented instead of simply providing advice.

A second strategy might involve accepting the disalignment of scooterists and pushing this logic to an extreme. This would be tantamount to trivializing things by letting them stay as they are. This would consist of no longer covering scooters and motorcycles, just motorcycles above a certain engine size. Having said that, this realignment strategy could be very dangerous. There is, for instance, a legal question whether insurers could refuse to cover a motorcyclist or scooterist for reasons not relating to specific risk factors. The end result might be to endanger AMDM's very survival.

A third strategy might acknowledge the disalignment with community-oriented employees and thus replace them by younger ones characterized by highly commercial profiles. This latter strategy is quite brutal, however. It may not even be feasible given the company's history, and also given employment legislation in France, which can be very protective of existing staff members. It remains that a total or widespread replacement of current staff members is neither possible nor desirable given the consequences for working community, meaning the way this would upset people's sense of serenity.

A final strategy might involve dividing up the company in a way that has yet to be specified but which could feature two different business units, with one dedicated to insuring motorcycles and the other scooters. Note that for the moment, it would appear that AMDM's management has yet to consider this possibility.

## Conclusions and Limitations

The present text centers on a case study showing how a three-phase organizational sensemaking process culminated in the construction of unethical consumers. The process was repeatedly scrutinized in a context defined by the specific history of the organization in question. The end result has show how very context-dependent constructing unethical consumer behavior can be. It is a process that materializes in organizations whenever the elements ensuring employee recognition are undermined by the emergence of a new fringe of consumers who differ greatly from the original customer base.

Given that the study is limited to a specific cultural context, it would be interesting to complement it with investigations in similar organizations operating in different cultural contexts. Notable possibilities here include GEICO (Government Employees Insurance Company), which after initially targeting US federal employees and certain categories of enlisted military officers, has grown to provide insurance to a wide range of customers. GEICO seems to have expanded its customer base without undergoing any major crises. One possible explanation might be

the difference between its initial target (a professionally oriented community comprising workers) and the one that AMDM was set up to serve (a leisure-oriented community comprising enthusiasts).

Further research is needed to gain a better understanding of how organizations construct unethical consumer behavior. Possibilities include studies focusing not only on employees but also on senior managers and consumers themselves. What might be particularly interesting with this latter group is their reaction once they become aware that an organization and/or its employees are trying to marginalize them.

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