

# **Spirituality at the Test of Consumption: The Concept of the “Practitioner-Researcher” in the Context of Qualitative Studies Conducted for Industry: A “Borderline Case” of the Production of Knowledge (Being and Doing)**

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*There is currently a rise in food ethics and consumer concerns. A spiritual dimension is also invested in everyday objects and gives a new sacredness to consumption and food. These new issues are perceived by industry as less and less rational and return to a symbolic legacy sometimes forgotten postmodern societies. A "quest for meaning" consumerism emerges as opportunities for strong differentiation (process, technological, marketing, social) on the market. The article aims to highlight the relevance for industrialists to value research that deals with new spiritual phenomena, the impact of religious cultures in innovation strategies (at the company level, such as of the consumer), as well as the impact of the globalization of trade and spiritual mixing in daily consumption.*

*Keywords: spirituality, god, innovation, industry, creativity*

## **INTRODUCTION**

An article in the newspaper *Le Monde*, published in 2017, entitled "*L'entreprise, nouvelle horizon des anthropologues?*" [Companies, the new horizon for anthropologists?] deals with the links between industrialists and anthropologists on innovation issues<sup>1</sup>.

Beyond the growing attractiveness of companies for the human and social sciences, the entire "consulting" sector seems to be impacted by this dynamic. Strategy consultants who are "converting" to anthropology by proposing new support services<sup>2</sup> to historical firms such as Roland Berger, who are developing centres of expertise dedicated to the user-centred approach while delegating part of their "consulting missions" to anthropologists<sup>3</sup>, without forgetting the creation of communities of professionals specialised in human and social sciences<sup>4</sup>. Thus, everything seems to indicate that anthropology is on the way to becoming an expertise almost like others in the context of support measures for innovation. However, the reality that is emerging is more complex: a competitive market, a plethora of expertise claimed by various actors and often far from anthropology, a near saturation of consulting and support services that claim an "ethnological aspect" and a hybridisation between design and anthropology where some people see in the expression of the former, the applied execution of the latter<sup>5</sup>, to use Matali Crasset's words. Like Janus' face, anthropology reflects a reality with two faces: that developed by academic and/or professional actors and that developed by new experts such as industrial designers.

In response to these societal and professional context effects, anthropologists deploy differentiation strategies: being an expert on energy, consumption, mobility or being a reference in the field of visual documentary film-making. In this article, another possible path will be presented, that of the "practitioner-researcher" through a unique value proposition: the study of the spiritual aspect as a lever for understanding consumer behaviour in a hyper-modern situation. To illustrate our point, we will analyse the context of the emergence of this new problem from the perspective of the strategies developed by industrialists (first part) in order to display the tension between the different challenges initiated by user-centred methodologies with regard to the results of research conducted on behalf of an industrialist (second part). The objective of this article is to highlight the impact of the role of spirituality in the innovation processes of industrialists viewed through the prism of the tools and methods developed by "practitioner-researchers" in order to understand the complexity of the social logics at work, between testimony and theoretical contributions.

## ANTHROPOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY: PRINCIPLES AND METHODS

### What is Spirituality Applied to the Field of Consumption?

In the West, social science research shows a resurgence of spirituality in the sphere of everyday life. No sector seems to escape this trend and even consumption appears to be sacred to individuals seeking an ideal in life. This renewed positioning of consumption reflects a quest for meaning that drives individuals in the West, but also outside the West (Parise, 2017). This phenomenon can be observed in several markets: literature, magazine press, healthcare (development of ayurveda in France), tourism (near-saturation of requests for accommodation for retreats of a few days in large French monasteries), food or specific sales outlets (Rituals, Aveda, Ishana).



The RÉSURRECTION brand offers organic crackers. It plays on Judeo-Christian symbolism to satisfy consumers' quest for meaning: logo with reference to the divine halo, as well as its slogan "the recipe for happy hungers".

From a theoretical point of view, spirituality in consumption represents a growing market, characterised by a demand that is diverse in its expressions (care, cultural products, food) and demanding for relational quality, being eager also for new and sometimes exotic spiritual experiences (trips to the East, renewed interest in traditional cultures and desire to return to nature). This spirituality in consumption can be defined as follows: "the spirituality of a consumer experience is an action of self-transformation, in a commercial context, motivated by a search for meaning and wisdom in an immanent or transcendent perspective" (Poulain, Parise, Badot, 2016). This concept is seen as a situation of anxious interlocution with the world, having, as B. Malinowski explained about its use by the people of

the Trobriand Islands, a primary social function of reducing anxiety (Merton, 1997). The social sciences have taken up this field of research, in particular the sociology of religions (study of the construction of spiritual paths of a new type: combination of spirituality, therapy, psychology and personal and professional development) with the work of Champion (1997), Hervieu-Léger (1999), Lenoir (1999) and Mayer (2004); but also the study of consumer behaviour through ethno-marketing. Research focuses on spirituality, materialism and the need for meaning in consumption (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry (1989)).

Spirituality and consumption allow the objectification of a new relationship with consumption and everyday life, while identifying the motivational elements that will structure an individual approach to consumption that will have an overall impact on society as a whole. The current era is characterised not by a break with the classical theories of the cult of performance (Alain Ehrenberg, 1991) (it is no longer a question of having something in order to be someone – we seem to have entered into the age of "doing"), but by the modernisation of the theories of individual performativity which revive the more classical theories surrounding consumption, such as those of Baudrillard (the sign value of consumption), the Frankfurt School (the development of mass culture) or Veblen (ostentatious consumption). Thus, the spiritual consumption approach aims at responding to several motivations: health, well-being, inner peace, search for meaning, return to nature, and previous experience. These elements structure the behaviour of the individual (called hypermodern), which is characterised by two notions, that of excess and that of self-renewal (Poulain, 2004).

As a result, the quest for meaning on the part of individuals leads companies to think of an experience in the store or at home, called experiential. In this new vision, a sensitive approach allows the individual to reconnect with his inner self during his journey in the store. The senses will thus be mobilised: smell, noise, light or references to another place will contribute to building an apparently new experience of consumption while blurring the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, between ordinary time and sacred time. While Camus (2008) focused on the spiritual experience of the consumer in some supermarket chains such as Biocoop or Nature & Découverte, others such as Badot focused on the Abercrombie brand (Badot & Lemoine, 2008), showing the importance of a holistic approach to the purchasing process. Some researchers have focused on the real and symbolic function of objects of modernity and everyday life, such as household robots (Parise, 2017) or food (Parise, 2019) in a situation of dietary transition.

### **Tools, Methods and Creativity, Tested by the Rites of Hyper-Modernity**

Following this logic, the association of the two terms "business anthropology" and "spirituality", which at first seem contradictory, actually reveals a new industrial challenge: that of understanding not only consumer behaviour, but above all the holistic perspective of its practices and representations by making what is called an anthropological detour. It is no longer a question of observing practices, but of understanding the impact of representations (conscious and unconscious) on usage, purchase or non-purchase behaviours. In this new approach to innovation, manufacturers will use what they call in their vernacular language "professionals in the field" and/or "consumer experts". Indeed, the objective is often the same, to understand the practices of individuals with regard to a food, product or service that they market or would like to market. This approach does not aim at calling on experts with an exclusively theoretical vision of their research work applied to an industrial theme, but to call on experts who combine theoretical knowledge of the subject with practical skills to set up a field methodology reconciling academic requirements and constraints of the sponsors.

We were thus able to conduct research on various themes: the divine principle of fermentation for an agri-food company (2018), the impact of disruptive foods on everyday food production through the case of halal wine for a French agri-food wholesaler (2018), rethinking the transition between ordinary time and sacred time for the largest entertainment park in Europe (2019), or identifying the resurgence of magical thinking among 18-39 year olds on behalf of a confectionery manufacturer (2018). We also accompanied a Swiss retailer through a prospective study on the future of food (2018).

## **SPIRITUALITY AT THE TEST OF THE OBJECTS OF MODERNITY: ANTHROPOLOGY AS A FRAMEWORK FOR A RENEWED UNDERSTANDING OF REALITY IN INDUSTRY**

### **The "Practitioner-Researcher", a New Way for Non-University Research?**

If we start from the initial premise that hyper-modernity requires us to grasp the complexity of consumer behaviour as a whole – and therefore the mobilisation of more classical theoretical models – it seems necessary to re-examine the boundaries between so-called "academic" and "applied" anthropology. Indeed, the study of the spiritual applied to the field of consumption is not self-evident. It is necessary to show reflexivity about one's own practice in order to reconstruct the individual or professional path that led the researcher to position himself on this research theme and on the conditions of production of theory. It is interesting to note that this posture seems to be justified by two distinct dynamics of actors' interplay, both in the academic field and in the field of industry; by way of comparison, the researchers in Theology with whom we conduct our research work at UNIL (the University of Lausanne) are all personally or professionally involved in some form of religion; questioning *de facto* the neutrality of scientific statements. For the first dynamic, we were trained in the anthropology of religions, a discipline in which spirituality is one of the sub-themes addressed; then in the anthropology of consumption, offering a reading of society this time not by the cosmogonies of the world, but by everyday objects. These two complementary training courses have enabled us to build a structural-functionalist vision of the fields of research, where the methods transmitted by the anthropology of consumption have been embedded in the theories of religious sciences. For the second dynamic, it is necessary to question the framework of application of anthropology: recruited as an Anthropologist Project Manager within an international industry specialised in small household appliances, in parallel with a university affiliation within the "Religion and Food" research program of the ILTP<sup>6</sup> of UNIL in Lausanne, we were asked to find a meaning to the consumption or non-consumption practices that the company observed in its customers. As a logical follow-up to the teachings received by our peers, we positioned ourselves as experts in spiritual consumption. This allowed us to be part of the respective currents of thought of our former scientific directors as well as to strategically position our research work within the industry. This theme is only rarely addressed outside university and even less by the "consulting" sector which is, as we mentioned in the introduction, very competitive.

However, this dual posture, both of disciplinary fields and industrial expertise, has led to the construction of a specific identity as a "practitioner-researcher", a strong differentiating factor compared to other "business anthropologists" and a guarantee of coherence between actions and discourse. This term makes it possible to define the posture "of a professional and a researcher who conducts his research on his professional field, or on a nearby field, in a professional world presenting similarities or links with his environment or his field of activity" (De Lavergne, 2007, translated from the original French). As De Lavergne explains, the qualitative research of the "practitioner-researcher" represents a "borderline case" and calls into question the ethical and methodological dimensions of our discipline, through the search for a space of interconnection between the professional and academic worlds; leading the individual to produce what could be called "ordinary innovation" because of the existence of mono-referential frameworks. Indeed, the "practitioner-researcher" claims a new identity constituted by the interaction between two worlds: a practitioner who researches, and a researcher who practises. At the intersection of these two realities, the "practitioner-researcher" must assume that "the professional activity generates and directs the research activity, but also in a dialogical and recursive way, that the research activity regenerates and redirects the professional activity" (De Lavergne, 2007, translated from the original French). Following an inductive approach, the study of the evolution of Western food behaviours and new food ethics has led us to deconstruct the logic of consumption, while imposing a grid of interpretation sensitive to the observation of food practices among industrialists.

### **The Culture of Juice and Dietary Transitions as an Indicator of Spiritual Craftsmanship**

An experiment conducted in 2016 for a French industrialist<sup>7</sup> illustrates well the specificities of an applied research approach of "practitioner-researcher" dealing with spiritual matters. The objective of this



study was to understand the individual and collective logics surrounding the transition from an omnivorous diet to a vegetarian diet (from flexitarian to vegan) among a group of specific individuals ("the cultural creatives"), in order to propose a renewed experience of using small household appliances that would take into account the evolution of their aspirations. To do this, it was necessary to build a research protocol based on rigorous observation in the field and which made it possible to offer discussion spaces to all the individuals interviewed in order to generate a feeling of togetherness. This was not far from reminding us of the socialising effect of palaver trees in Africa, for example.

The experiment lasted two months and alternated different phases of research: a qualitative study in the homes of 50 individuals in dietary transition, the organisation of self-directed meals between participants and at each other's homes (5 participants at each dinner) and a closing dinner (15 guests, moderated by "research practitioners" from the CNAM, the ESCP and UNIL) which aimed at making the participants position themselves from a reflective point of view with regard to their own practices, and to do so in groups. This last field phase was formed with a specific methodology, which took up the research dynamics developed by *cinéma-vérité*. In Paris during the summer of 1960, Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch went to meet Parisians in order to understand how "they manage their life". The themes covered are varied: love, work, leisure, culture, racism, etc. The format of the meetings is long, alternating face-to-face interviews and group dinners. They seek to "bring out the truth in their words, at least to designate the mask that reveals it"<sup>8</sup>. At the closing dinner, the aim was to understand the issues and obstacles that the individual in search of meaning places in consumption, but also to understand how and why the consumer can be understood in his spiritual dimension through the juxtaposition of two sociological mechanisms: the quest for individual meaning that influences the consumption of individuals and the adaptation of consumer goods and services to these new social expectations. It is important to note that the themes addressed in this last phase of the research protocol emerged spontaneously during the two previous phases in the speech of the participants, and that we based our follow-up on the anecdotes or life stories that the participants had mentioned in the group during the second phase of the study.



Photograph of Phase 2 of the study. It is a self-managed dinner at the home of one of the participants. The anthropologist piloting the study (Fanny Parise) is present and a participant serves him a glass of wine.

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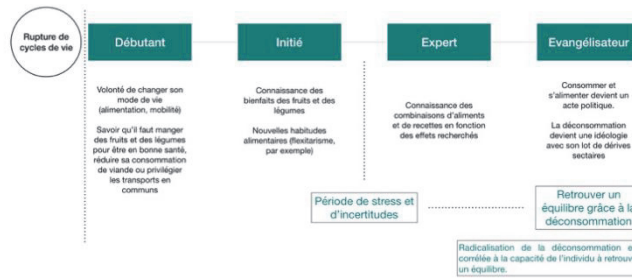
The summary of this experiment, presented through an ethnographic documentary, serves as a starting point for understanding a multifaceted social phenomenon that proposes a reading of society at the micro-social level through uses and representations of consumer goods, but also at the meso-social level through the evolution of lifestyles and lifestyles; a summary that makes it possible to propose a new observation of a consumer who no longer only wants to acquire or use goods or services, but who is in search of himself when he consumes.



### **The Main Lessons of This Study**

Through life experiences and anecdotes, the participants co-constructed or reconstructed a cosmogony of everyday life, made up of "do-it-yourself", consumerist interweaving and various socio-cultural syncretism: making a dietary transition to a vegan diet is not an insignificant thing, but is full of meaning. As the study shows, this transition is accompanied by a holistic vision of life, where the invisible and the visible aspects are mixed. Eating is first and foremost about meeting social codes and standards. The reference system that initially governed the social space of the eater in his own society is evolving in response to the effects of the food context (food scandals, media coverage of slaughterhouses, rise in meat prices, etc.), but also societal factors (economic crisis, rise in unemployment, scarcity of resources, rise in energy prices, hybrid war, etc.), which have led to anxiety-provoking behaviour and subsequent changes in certain diets of the population. We do not only consume a transformed product (by ourselves or by others), we consume hope in a better life. This idealised future becomes accessible through consumer goods. We were able to identify a typology of four consumer profiles that correspond to stages of integration of vegetarianism into their daily life.

**FIGURE 1**  
**TRANSLATION OF TABLES**

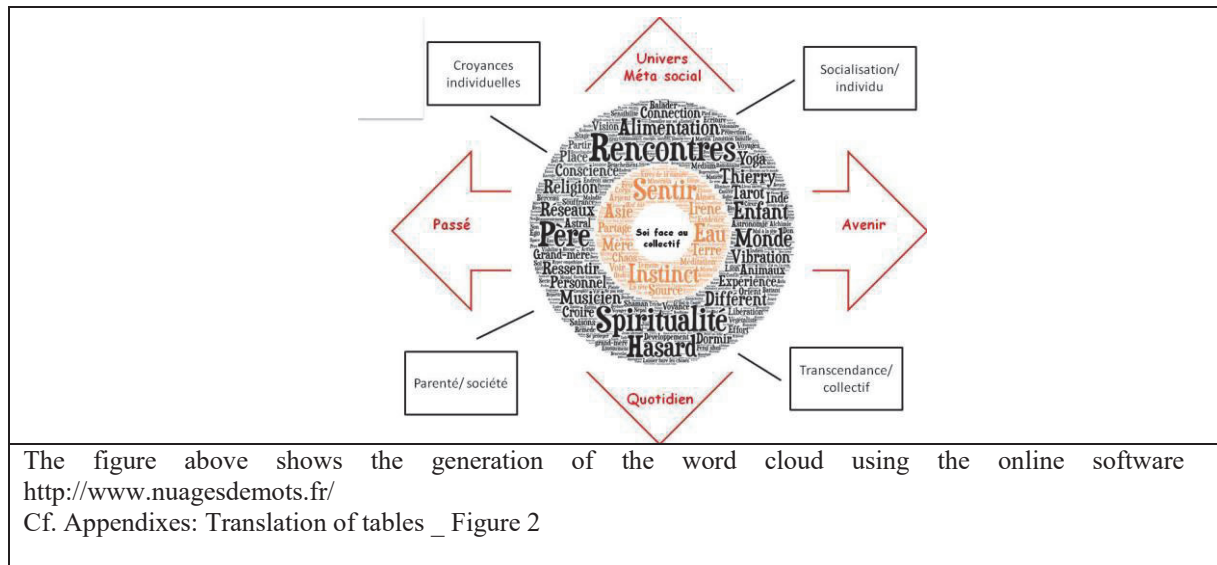


Étude réalisée en 2016.

Cf. Appendixes: Translation of tables \_ Figure 1

Different themes were discussed in the evening. We analysed the recurrence, as well as the proximity of the occurrences previously identified by theme for data processing. The generation of a cloud of words, following this inventory-forming work, allowed us to organise the ethnographic documentary in different stages, structured by the identified axes, as illustrated in the figure below:

**FIGURE 2**  
**TRANSLATION OF TABLES**



More specifically, this case study makes the double temporality of the construction of spiritual experience for the individual visible. There is a correlation between past (children) and future experiences. Two participants explained that they had a grandmother who "saw things" or that growing up near a spring or talking to animals as a child contributes to daily life experience as adults ("refusal to accept animal suffering", for example). On the other hand, a young woman who grew up in a "very" Cartesian family did not flourish in a model where professional career was viewed as constituting social success. By fleeing the West for 8 months, she left in search of herself in India where the exorcism of her woes allowed her to rebuild herself in Paris. Others still feel torn between their individual beliefs and the transcendent force of the collective. The first one explains that she does not "believe in these things" but

that has witnessed them. The story of the “professional” breaking of a spell over her father by a medium using an egg marks a break between the visible and the invisible. Thus, a forty-year-old explains to a thirty-year-old the link between the development of certain diseases (cancer), the symbolism of bodily objects (rings) and relationships with ancestors. This relationship with the world, where we are no longer interested in the symptom but in the cause, produces major changes in the daily lives of individuals: diet (vegetarianism, veganism, raw food diet, mono-diet,...), domestic security (wifi) and social organisation (practice of Yoga, no longer taking the subway, regeneration training in the forest,...). However, not all of them attribute the same filiation to these "phenomena" that generate concrete consumer actions, between spirituality and superstition.

Eating less meat or removing it from one's diet, but also buying organic food or becoming a deconsumer (Parise, 2018), is part of a dynamic of "positive thinking" and a desire to distance oneself from an invisible, frightening entity. Others still assert themselves in opposition to spirituality or superstition, even though they structure their daily lives with practices similar to others. While spirituality is associated with instinct and chance and reflects a sensitive experience, consumption (more particularly food here) is more a part of a relationship with oneself, turned towards others. Eating is consuming, and consuming is acting. At the end of this experience, a cleavage seems to emerge between individuals who adhere to a spiritual, even esoteric way of life, and those who, in order to live better, decide to consume differently: they consume a symbolic register that they eventually appropriate.

### **Dietary Transitions and Spiritualities: Deconstruction of Consumer Imaginations and Marketing Adaptations of Research Work**

It is interesting to note that, within the framework of this research protocol, it is not the "practitioner-researcher" who has imposed a spiritual interpretation of dietary transitions on the sponsors, but rather the inductive approach specific to qualitative surveys that has led to a shift away from observing practices to identifying other levers of innovation, such as the imagination here. Indeed, the first phase of home interviews revealed that some devices such as juice extractors<sup>9</sup> that accompanied the dietary transition of "cultural creative" people, and which, despite their technical barriers (food that gets stuck, difficulties in assembling the device), ergonomic barriers (weight, bulk) and commercial barriers (high purchase price), were highly appreciated by individuals. Further on, the "chaotic" experience of use was part of a daily purification ritual necessary in the process of building a new food identity; only the number of revolutions per minute of the screw mattered: the slower the screw turns, the more the juice will be alive<sup>10</sup>. This tension between improving the fluidity of experience sought by the sponsor and the individual's ability to ingest food which is “living” but above all magical, far from the scientific discourses of food process or nutrition experts, led to a reorientation of the second phase of the study. It was no longer a question of technical optimisation or product affordance but of understanding the dimension perceived as irrational for the sponsor of the logic of food use and consumption with this device, in order to propose a use experience consistent with the representations of individuals.

Following this study, the sponsor relied on the system of representation of individuals regarding the integration of fruits and vegetables into their lives. Indeed, the experiment revealed that there seemed to be a link between the colour of the food and its effect on health. Through juice cures, individuals can "connect to the universe" and/or protect themselves from visible strains (work, family) and invisible strains (illness, vengeful spirits, etc.). Some sectarian and extremist movements have capitalised on these beliefs by proposing original solutions, such as "one garlic and beet juice per day", which is claimed to be more effective than chemotherapy in the fight against cancer. The company has capitalised on this new knowledge to support individuals in consuming fruit and vegetables thought to be as good for their conscience as they are for their health, by creating a "color attitude". This approach made it necessary to stop thinking in terms of electrical appliances and to have a systemic vision of all appliances in the same category in order to offer individuals a holistic approach to fruit and vegetable consumption (and at the same time work for employees in project mode and no longer by "product"). At each moment of the day, each desire or family member corresponds to a colour, which in turn refers to specific ingredients and equipment (as illustrated by the visuals below):





The example of "color attitude" illustrates the different stages that lead to "innovation" with the human sciences and here with anthropology. Thanks to a methodological approach based on three fundamental pillars – meeting again after a while (studying over time and not meeting consumers once for an hour, as traditional innovation firms do), making an anthropological detour (agreeing to detach oneself from a brand, a product or a use in order to understand the whole material and symbolic system of the individual) and demonstrating methodological creativity (a "co-constructivist" approach), the industrialist has provided unexpected answers to his problems because it has observed reality in a different way. It started from a concrete problem: how can I increase my PDM in the raw food<sup>11</sup> category (and thus get people to consume more fruit and vegetables)? This transformed itself into an anthropological issue: what is the place of fruits and vegetables in the daily lives of people in situations of food transition? The exploratory field phase then identified a variable common to all the interviewees: that of the spiritual dimension of the individual in the face of his daily life and dietary changes. By opting for a grid of sensitive interpretation of the field and taking into consideration the symbolism of individuals in their consumption of plant products (in particular between green which cleanses and red which takes away bad substances), the industrialist has created an accompaniment which is appropriate for the needs of individuals and in coherence with its growth logic, far from the so-called techno-centric approaches of industrialists.

## CONCLUSION

The anthropology of consumption and religion offers a new perspective of phenomena relating to consumption and innovation, both for the discipline and for industrialists. Anthropology thus presents itself as a possible lever for understanding the market and innovation, thanks to tools and methods that make it possible to go beyond user-centred approaches. Anthropology makes it possible to demonstrate the importance of going beyond the simple observation of a use to understand the socio-cultural complexity of the market.

The attractiveness of companies for this type of approach leads to a hybridisation of "non-university" anthropology which, paradoxically, returns to the classic tools and methods of its discipline. As the case study in this article illustrates, practicing business anthropology does not mean abandoning the scientific protocols practised by university researchers. On the contrary, so-called contract research allows budgets and access to study fields to be obtained under conditions that are often more favourable than traditional academic research. The challenge of scientific rigour in the light of the requirements for deliverables made by industrialists leads to the adaptation of the "shape" of the tools, but not their operating mechanism. Following the methodological pillars presented here, namely: reconnecting with time, anthropological detour and methodological creativity, the research carried out with a sponsor brings both scientific knowledge and strategic visibility for companies. Further on, this approach also makes it possible to raise awareness among a wider audience of anthropological tools, methods and theories.

Finally, it seems important to stress that if industrialists are increasingly called upon to deal with the triptych "consumption – spirituality – innovation", it is not because of erudition but because the tools and methods used previously have not made it possible to provide relevant answers to their questions. However, more and more manufacturers are convinced that objectifying the gap between the discourse and practices of this customer will only be achieved through in-depth studies that require both decentralisation and confidence in new methods that challenge the pre-existing innovation rationales.

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## ENDNOTES

1. [https://www.lemonde.fr/o21/article/2017/01/24/l-entreprise-nouvel-horizon-des-anthropologues\\_5068458\\_5014018.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/o21/article/2017/01/24/l-entreprise-nouvel-horizon-des-anthropologues_5068458_5014018.html)
2. <https://www.hackingculturalbeliefs.com/>
3. <http://imprudence.fr/design-fiction-futurs-souhaitables.html>
4. For example, Anthropik (founded by Dominique Desjeux) and Alcor Institute (founded by Dominique Roux)
5. <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/les-masterclasses/matali-crasset-le-design-comme-une-anthropologie-appliquee-0>
6. Lemanic Institute for Practical Theology
7. Groupe SEB, world leader in small household appliances
8. [https://www.lemonde.fr/cinema/article/2011/10/18/chronique-d-un-ete-et-un-ete-50-la-jeunesse-des-trente-glorieuses-dans-l-objectif-de-jean-rouch-et-edgar-morin\\_1589783\\_3476.html#YohluTwkebZOxjqo.99](https://www.lemonde.fr/cinema/article/2011/10/18/chronique-d-un-ete-et-un-ete-50-la-jeunesse-des-trente-glorieuses-dans-l-objectif-de-jean-rouch-et-edgar-morin_1589783_3476.html#YohluTwkebZOxjqo.99)
9. A juice extractor is a tool that separates the juice of fruits, herbs, leafy vegetables or other types of vegetables from their fibre using a screw that rotates slowly without heating the food, unlike a centrifuge.
10. So-called live food is food that has not been heated to a temperature above 42 degrees. There is said to be a switch between raw and cooked at this temperature. The followers of live food promote a raw way of life. For the individuals in the study, "live" juice represents a juice that is directly assimilated by the body, and where the absence of fibres prevents the body from carrying out digestive processes that would tire the body.
11. In the industrial sector raw food also relates to the devices that allow fruits and vegetables to be processed using electrical devices without cooking them.

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