

CONSUMER MODELS, CONSUMER POLICY AND MARKET INTEGRATION IN THE
EUROPEAN COMMUNITY:
CONSUMER IN A STRAIN BETWEEN MEMBER STATES AND COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

Ever since the beginnings of European integration the Single European Market has represented the foremost objective and has served as a lever for achieving an “ever closer Union among the peoples” of the Member States. The integrated market requires the removal of all national barriers to intra-Community trade, and the equalization of competitive conditions for producers located in different Member States. National consumer regulation, even if it does not discriminate between domestic and foreign producers, can disintegrate the European market by imposing additional costs for exports into different Member States. Furthermore, effective competition within the market calls for a consumer who reasons economically and makes ‘informed choices’. This notion of a European self-governing and knowledgeable consumer who bases his consumption decisions exclusively on careful economical considerations differs significantly from the notion (and debatably empirical reality) of the consumer in some Member States. This paper compares the role and place of consumers in European and in German law by using consumer models – operative notions of consumers as extracted from economical, legal, social, and cultural studies. It shows how the European information-focused consumer policy has emerged as a necessity from the vision of the European integrated market. In Germany, on the other hand, the origins of the consumer movement can be linked to the broader notion of the welfare state. Consumer protection is consequently more ethically motivated and concerned also with consumers whose abilities to acquire and process information are limited. In view of these differences the paper examines the ongoing reconstruction of national consumer laws under the European influence, and the

challenging task put before national courts. Furthermore, the paper argues that the relation between consumer protection and consumer sovereignty is not linear, and discusses the question of the 'optimum' level of consumer protection. It contends that different policies can fulfil consumer interests to a similar degree. The choice of consumer policy on the one hand is related to the system of values and vision of society, and on the other hand is a complex function of the existing conditions, such as balance of political power, governance structure, history, culture, and habits.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>I</i>	<i>Central problem of consumer policy in the European Community: conflict between open borders and consumer protection</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>II</i>	<i>Consumer policy and consumer models</i>	<i>8</i>
1.	The dual character of consumer policy and the role of consumer models	8
2.	Consumer sovereignty as the meta-goal of consumer protection	13
3.	Consumer preferences and their realization	16
a)	Identification of wants: role of cultural and social factors	17
b)	Decision about purchase: role of information	20
4.	Specific consumer models	21
a)	Hyper-rationality model of sovereignty: fully informed consumer	22
b)	Active information seeker model of sovereignty.....	23
c)	Bounded-rationality model and consumer sovereignty	24
d)	Passive glancer and consumer sovereignty.....	25
e)	Snatcher and consumer sovereignty	26
f)	Confident consumer model of sovereignty.....	27
g)	Credulous consumer and consumer sovereignty	28
<i>III</i>	<i>Conflict between market integration and consumer policy in the EC and national consumer protection</i>	<i>31</i>
1.	Development of consumer protection in the EC and Community powers as interpreted by the ECJ	32
a)	Source of legislative power of the EC in the field of consumer protection	32

b) ‘Eurosclerosis’, increased usage of adjudication and extensive interpretation of Community powers by the ECJ.....	34
2. The role of adjudication in the establishment of the internal market and its impact on national consumer protection measures.....	37
a) The importance of mutual recognition for the establishment of the internal market.....	38
b) Limited recognition of the principle of the country of destination.....	39
c) Market integration and cultural diversity in European case law.....	42
aa) Culturally specific product notions and local traditions	42
bb) Consumption habits and product selection as a way of social distinction	46
cc) Linguistic problems	47
dd) Misleading advertising	48
ee) Price advertising and free commercial speech.....	51
ff) Adequate labeling – requiring a multi-lingual consumer?.....	52
gg) Marginal upholding of national consumer protection measures and the underlying models.....	54
hh) Conclusion.....	55
3. Harmonization of laws at the Community level	57
4. Conclusion: information, transparency, consumer choice and the model of the ‘active and critical information seeker’	59
5 Consumer in a strain between national and European consumer policy: Germany ..	61
a) Consumer protection through law on unfair competition.....	62
aa) Misleading advertising and the model of the ‘passive glancer’	63
bb) Pressure from European law on German consumer protection.....	66
b) General contract law: notion of consumer as a vulnerable contract partner	67
c) Ethically versus economically motivated consumer protection.....	70
<i>IV European and national consumer policy: reconciliation or domination?</i>	<i>73</i>
1. Information as a road to consumer sovereignty	74

a)	Role of consumer information in a competitive market	75
b)	Limits of information-focused consumer policy	76
aa)	‘Not quite active’ information seeker	78
bb)	‘Informed irrational’ choice.....	80
cc)	Failure of provider information	83
2.	Impact of power balance in the Community on consumer protection	85
a)	Maastricht and post-Maastricht changes in the Treaty	86
b)	Reaffirmation of political control by the Member States over the Community	88
aa)	Change in the power balance between the Community and the Member States	88
bb)	Significance of the subsidiarity principle for the scope of Community competence.....	89
3.	Shaping the European consumer policy	93
a)	The best, not the highest level of consumer protection	94
aa)	Consumer protection measures beyond information duties.....	96
bb)	Protective models – self-fulfilling prophecy	97
cc)	Consumer policy and the vision of society	98
b)	Cases of hardship, subsidiarity, and the role of the national states.....	101
c)	Fostering trust and building the market: the confident consumer.....	103
<i>V</i>	<i>Conclusion and outlook</i>	<i>107</i>
	<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>116</i>
	<i>Index of cases</i>	<i>123</i>