

Public burden during the energy crisis? Discursive representations of vulnerable consumers in UK written media

Patricio Sanchez Campos ^{1a}, Samantha Gallage ^a

^a Nottingham University Business School, Marketing Division, Nottingham, UK.

The aim of this paper is to explore media representations of various vulnerable consumer groups risking access to the energy market during the current energy crisis.

Along with the rising cost of living, generated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, consumers are facing a significant increase in their energy bills. In the UK alone, families are expected to spend 10% of their family income, which is double the amount of 2022, just on gas and electricity during the current winter (Vrana et al., 2023). Governments have called this a social emergency (Thomson, 2022).

In such a crisis, vulnerable groups who have limited access and power in the marketplace (Baker et al., 2005) are mostly at risk. This is evident with elderly consumers, subsistence consumers who live in poverty, disabled consumers that are choosing between “eating and heating” (Butler, 2023, p.1). To combat this, the UK government launched Energy Bills Support Scheme EBSS in October 2022 (UK Government, 2023).

However, this scheme has been highly condemned, and public media discourses have produced conflicting discourses about the government's intervention in paying for private services. Some press articles argue that the scheme is unsustainable - paying the energy bills with public money is a burden to public finances and private goods should be paid privately; while others call for a “social tariff” for those in real need, and a structural change in the energy market (e.g., bringing the energy sector back to public control). In the highly marketised UK context, this is a controversial decision that goes against the principles of market mechanisms (Harvey, 2005). According to Polanyi's theory of disembeddedness (Polanyi 1944, 2001), this state intervention could uncover a failure of the market in the energy sector, and it might reveal a countermovement of society's intention to re-embed the market into its social institutions (Polanyi, 1944; 2001).

In this context, understanding how the beneficiaries of the scheme are represented in the media discourses will be beneficial since media contributes to constructing meanings in the consumer culture (McCracken, 1986). If the market meanings are skewed towards paying private goods privately, there is a risk of excluding the most vulnerable groups from the market. Further, consumer perception of government interventions is paramount for its success. Yet, this is an unknown.

We will use a Critical Discourse Analysis to analyse discourses from two leading UK newspapers, having contrasting views. Search criteria with keywords will be followed using Nexis to search articles published from January 2022 to January 2023. A Textually Oriented Discourse Analysis will be conducted (Fairclough, 1992, 2003).

¹ Corresponding author: Patricio Sanchez-Campos. Email: patricio.sanchezcampos@nottingham.ac.uk

We expect to extend the Theory of Disembeddedness (Polanyi, 1944, 2001) to explain the benefits for the government in supporting vulnerable consumers in a privatised sector. Furthermore, this paper will broaden the understanding of the impact of media discourses in representing the identities of vulnerable consumer groups. Findings will also be useful for policymakers and civil society to comprehend and better communicate public involvement in privatised sectors such as energy when the society might be in crisis.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Energy Crisis, Marketplace, Vulnerable consumers

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