Title

**“Consumer Identity and Moral Obligations in Non-Plastic Bag Consumption:
A Dialectical Perspective”**

Abstract

According to many, we live in an era of autonomy, choice, enterprise and lifestyles. Consumers are active agents who exercise informed and autonomous responsibilities in relation to their values and concerns. This language shows the act of ethical consumption as a personal choice arising from individual concerns. In contrast to this liberal view, the conservatives claim that consumers need to obey prescriptive and proscriptive set of ethical norms in order to consume ethically. This study takes on a third approach and considers consumers both as subjects of moral obligations (the conservative view) and as actors of their life (the liberal view). The analysis of nine existential phenomenological interviews performed on consumers who use environmentally friendly bags for their grocery shopping shows how both liberal and conservative views are co-productive in the development of ethical consumerism. The dialectical interplay between social norms and self-identity evolves through time and context across five main components: community of meaning and support, emotional affiliation, localized access to political discourses, personalization of the practice, and identity formation. All five elements are intertwined around the use of a symbolic possession at the level of local and mundane micro-social encounters.

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Introduction

A substantial amount of work in public policy, business ethics and consumer behavior reveals that public authorities can influence ethical behavior among consumers. For example, economic incentives such as lowering price using green taxes, improving the quality of public transport and city layout, or developing regulations on eco-labeling and ethical standard requirements can positively impact individual ethical behavior (Cropper and Oates, 1992). Similarly, governments use diverse promotional tools such as advertising campaigns on recycling of waste, energy saving, or non-smoking behaviors that remind individuals of their moral obligations toward others (Stern, 1999). In addition to economic incentives and promotional campaigns, public policies are found to influence ethical consumerism through social and moral norms (Thøgersen, 2005). For example, by focusing on behaviors motivated by social approval (or disapproval) and on consumers' perception and understanding of morally responsible behavior, public authorities in Norway implemented non-smoking behavior as the social norm (Nyborg, 2003). These prescriptive and/or proscriptive norms are rules for behaving; governing what should or should not be done by certain types of actors in given circumstances (Williams, 1968).

Regardless of the tools used by public policy-makers, influencing ethical consumerism requires finding a consensus between consumer rights (choice) and moral obligations (solidarity). It implies defining which consumer goods and consumption practices have ethical meanings or standings with respect to cultural, economical, political, social and technological environments. Finding such consensus is the focus of a global contest between the liberals, who think it is and should mostly be based on individual identities, and the cultural conservatives, who believe in structural interventions. For the cultural conservatives, the ethical stand of consumption practices should be externally defined via a transcendent authority. That is, a higher authority should delineate between good and bad, define what the ethics of consumers and producers is, and prescribe how consumers should consume and how producers should produce. This normative approach to ethical reasoning suggests that something is considered unethical if it falls outside the boundaries set by a particular set of rules or codes (normative ethics). One major assumption in this approach is that consumers are passive subjects who need to learn and obey prescriptive and/or proscriptive ethical norms. It positions consumers as individualistic and apathetic individuals who participate in ethical consumerism in an effort to affiliate with others and to achieve social recognition and acceptance. In

consumer behavior research, a cultural conservative approach focuses on identifying what social norms consumers use when acting ethically.

By contrast, the liberals or cultural progressives believe that externally imposed ethical norms about what one ought to do as a consumer do not have dominant power. For them, consumers look at their own conscience. That is, individuals have the capacity to subjectively and pragmatically engage in the world in which they live and contextually define the appropriate ethical stand when acquiring, consuming, and disposing of commodities. This perspective emphasizes a dynamic participation of consumers in political and social issues. In liberal modes of government, individuals are asked to govern in the name of their own freedom and autonomy. Animated by the spread of the internet, the burgeoning of self-help groups, and the accessibility and diversity of activist groups and social movements, consumers are empowered and can express their ethical values. Under this line, consumers are active individuals and ethical voters. They can, bearing in mind their individual limitations in terms of finances, time, cognitive capacity and knowledge, use consumption as a potential resource for changing and influencing political actions. Under this approach, we might term ethical consumption behavior as personal actions performed by a singular agency to underline the individual nature of both the ethical act and the reasons of this ethical act. The term singular agency was developed by Gilbert (1992) and later discussed by Bagozzi (2000) to emphasize that a consumer can be considered as an individual entity with goals of his/her own who acts so as to achieve these goals (Bagozzi, 2000; Gilbert, 1992). In consumer behavior research, a cultural progressive approach focuses on identifying what personal concerns or values individuals use when acting ethically.

While considering both approaches, this paper does not have the pretension to settle the debate on whether ethical consumerism should originate from individual consciousness (the liberalist bottom-up approach) or from structural regulations (the conservative top-down approach), nor does it have the intention to render the divide between the agentic and the structural invisible. In this study, the focus is on locating both individual identity and political/cultural/social discourses in an historically-situated and contextualized ethical consumption practice. Considering both agentic and structural influences in ethical consumerism can be identified as a middle-out perspective. It considers the socially situated nature of behavior and re-emphasizes consumption as work, accomplished by consumers solving the problems of their day-to-day existence. This kind of analytical position opens space for exploring the dialectical interplay between public policies (economic incentives, advertising campaigns, and/or social norms) that act upon consumers' perception of moral obligations toward others and

singular agency that reflects consumers' individual expression and power. As such, it encourages relevant questions including: how are individuals motivated to positively respond to politically charged norms and obligations, not just in a single situation, but in the long-run trajectory of their lives? How are ethical norms passed along in chains, sometimes acquiring greater resonance, sometimes losing it? Do some individuals internationalize social norms in their day-to-day practices more than others?

The Study

This study considers the history and development of a routinized and socially embedded form of ethical consumption behavior by looking at the development of reusable green shopping bags consumption and the deinstitutionalization of disposable plastic bags in shopping centers. First introduced in the United States in 1957, disposable plastic bags for bagging groceries at stores flourished in the 1970s and 1980s, replacing paper bags for that purpose. However, the expansion of plastic bags seems to have reached its limits. Since the 1990s, governments in countries such as Australia, South Africa, Ireland, Canada, New Zealand, or the Philippines are imposing taxes on plastic bags and regulating their use. As a consequence, several supermarkets increasingly discourage shoppers from using plastic bags. They offer alternative reusable shopping bags, provide information on environmental damage associated with plastic bag consumption, and encourage consumers to pack as much grocery in one bag. For example, in response to the Australian National Packaging Covenant that calls for a drastic reduction in use of plastic bags, the Coles Myer supermarket started offering in November 2003 re-usable environmentally friendly green bags at the cost of AU\$1, while still offering disposable plastic bags to its consumers.

The efforts by Coles Myer, the largest Australian supermarket, to deinstitutionalize the use of plastic bags, provide an analytical context in which the principles of ethical regulations and the possibility for individual ethical positioning are combined. This context allows study of how the dialectical interplay between affirming one's identity and internalizing social norms encourage the development of ethical consumerism. To capture this interplay, the study looks at consumers' meanings regarding green-bag consumption practices. Here, the concept of meanings represents the identification by a social actor of the hidden or explicit purpose, motivation, intention, aspiration, and expectation of his/her action. Fundamentally, stories of past, present, and anticipated future actions emphasize the construction and internalization of meanings. In this respect, this study looks at consumers' narrative on their green

(reusable) shopping bag consumption practices using two primary forms of humanistic inquiry: existential phenomenology and hermeneutic interpretation (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio, 1989).

Before the main data collection, observations of participants and non-participants in green bag consumption were conducted in a nearby Coles supermarket using ethnographic method. Three levels of involvement in observation were performed: the observer as participant, the complete observer and the complete participant (Grills, 1998; LeCompte and Schensul, 1999). The 15 hours of observation combined with casual conversations showed that green-bag shoppers are not gender specific and combine all ages. Moreover, all individuals who had been using green bags for more than one year and had assimilated the practice in their shopping routines were carrying two green bags or more.

Nine existential phenomenological interviews were performed in a major Australian city. The informants were selected in a Coles supermarket holding in their hand or carrying in their trolley at least two reusable green shopping bags. Each selected informant was observed during their grocery shopping and approached after they had paid for their purchase. The researcher explained verbally the purpose of the study: trying to understand consumers' grocery shopping activities and offered to meet later at a convenient place and time for a face-to-face interview. There was no financial incentive or gift offered for participating in the study. One aspect of the selection process was to recruit a variety of green bag consumers with differences in age, gender, status, education, and occupation (see Table 1). The reason for this was to access a broad range of experiences, which in turn provides useful information for finding similarities between ethical consumption experiences (Pollio, Henley, and Thompson 1997; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989; Thompson, Pollio, and Locander, 1994). Due to an emphasis on depth of understanding, the respondent pool was small: nine informants. In terms of the *Journal of Consumer Research*, the recommended number of informants for interpretive research should range between 3 and 20 (Thompson, 1997).

The interviews were audio-taped. Each informant was given a pseudonym and was assured of anonymity and confidentiality. The purpose of the interview was to attain the consumer's first-person description of his/her specific practice. Toward this aim, and responding to growing academic debates on the ideology, the discursive power, and the performative nature of research, data collection was performed by three research assistants trained in phenomenological interviewing and unaware of the specific purpose of the study (Heiskanen, 2005). Moreover, the three research assistants were not Australians. This cultural distance invited informants to provide the necessary information on the cultural, social, economical, political, and environmental aspects of their practices. Each

interview began with small talk to help the informant become comfortable with speaking into a recording device. During the interview, lengthier and more detailed descriptions of thoughts and feelings were encouraged using questions and probes. The context of the interview gradually helped to unveil each respondent's subjective meaning of their grocery consumption practice and ultimately their use of green shopping bags. Each interview lasted between one and three hours. The hermeneutic analysis resulted in defining the hidden or explicit meanings consumers assign to their green shopping bag consumption practices. In each informant's narrative, five themes emerged: community of meaning and support, emotional affiliation, localized access to political discourses, personalization of the practice, and identity formation. The following section provides insights on each theme. While only selected illustrative informants' story are presented, it is also important to keep in mind that all narratives reflected each theme.

Results

Community of Meaning and Support

None of the informants came to the supermarket to form friendships and socialize; they came to shop and buy. Shopping at the Coles Myers supermarket, they all want to be effective and fulfill their individual grocery needs in order to get back to their own lives, which they see as mostly taking place outside of the supermarket. They focus on their grocery shopping list, glance at diverse isles for ideas or cheaper prices, but get frustrated when the line at the cashier is too long. Although routinized grocery shopping was revealed to be mostly an individual and local practice, each informant was quite aware of the "others" when describing their green shopping bag consumption.

The theme of community of meaning and support surfaced in all informants' narrative. Some informants felt that participating in Coles green bag action added an extra dimension to their environmentally conscious behaviors and made them aware that others were also environmentally conscious; others explicitly stated that they bought and used green shopping bags to support a community. In either case, the green bags were symbolic possessions that were used to communicate membership to an environmentally conscious local community. For example, Olga, a married 32-year-old woman with two children, only uses the green shopping bags when going to

Coles supermarkets. Olga has a collection of reusable bags: she has the pink ones from the florist, the orange ones from an art show, the black ones from the newspaper agent, and the green ones from Coles. The different-colored bags have diverse purposes. For instance, she strictly uses the pink one for going to school, and always has the green ones in the back of her car to do her grocery shopping. For Olga, “the green ones are nice and strong for the supermarket shopping.” Later in her story, Olga mentioned that “people who do not use green bags for their shopping are lazy and couldn’t care less.” By carrying the particular green bags in the supermarket, she differentiates herself from the lazy people who couldn’t care less.

What is of intriguing interest here are informants who undertook green bag consumption in order to support others. In their case, it appeared that the importance of shared participation and communal support was more important than the practice itself. For example, Ralf, a lecturer in international business, rightly believes that Coles green bags are made of plastic. He feels that buying a Coles green bag instead of using disposable plastic bags is more damaging to the natural environment. Ralf sees himself as an environmentally conscious person. He is a vegetarian, mostly consumes ethical products and refuses to own a car. When describing Coles’ actions toward lowering plastic bag consumption, Ralf confers that “Coles is using the green bags to make even more money and abuse its consumers.” However, Ralf has bought four green bags in the last two years and uses them for his weekly shopping. The rationale behind his behavior is to encourage other shoppers to use their bags and increase people’s awareness of the problem of plastic bags. Later in the interview, Ralf mentioned owning several other types of reusable shopping bags, which he acquired while traveling in Japan and in Europe. The ones in Europe are totally recyclable and much more environmentally friendly than Coles’ green bags. Ralf’s decision to use the green bags instead of any other ones lies on a perception of communal actions with the other Coles’ shoppers.

This conception of community of meaning and support seems to indicate that ethical consumer practice is a shared consumption used symbolically to bind autonomous individuals into a small world of meaning and community. This finding intensifies the relevance of micro-situational encounters and shared participation as vital elements of ethical actions.

Emotional Affiliation

The visibility of using (reusable) green shopping bags instead of plastic bags acted as a symbolic possession for social comparison, building a sense of recognition. Being recognized by others and recognizing others created an emotional connection among green bag shoppers. For example, when Richard sees other people carrying green shopping bags, it makes him feel happy. Richard is a 21-year-old male studying industrial design. He has been doing his grocery shopping at the same Coles supermarket for the past three years. Two years ago, a course he took in industrial design on the subject of system stability informed him about environmental degradation and global warming. Aware of these issues, Richard started recycling and gradually noticed people walking in the city carrying reusable shopping bags. When he saw the green bags sold at Coles supermarket, he bought four and decided to refuse plastic bag consumption. Recycling and refusing plastic bags at the supermarket were the only things Richard felt he could contribute to environmental preservation until one year ago, when he participated in Clean Up Australia, a day on which everybody is supposed to clean their local communities. When carrying his green shopping bag, Richard expresses his difference from the other people who do not care, and feels happy to affiliate with the good people who are also using green bags and therefore “care about their environment.” In contrast, forgetting the green reusable shopping bags at home and having to accept the plastic bags offered by the cashier made Richard feel “terrible” and “guilty”.

The feeling of guilt in taking and carrying plastic bags instead of green shopping bags in the supermarket was expressed in most informants' narratives. When Tasmin, a married woman aged 38, describes taking plastic bags for her grocery packing, she feels that “maybe the next person is thinking that [she is] a bad person”, and feels “guilty” about her actions. Tasmin is a strongly committed green voter and so are all her friends. In regard to the green bags, she is “really impressed at how, with the green bag, people are really aware” and she mentioned twice during the interview that all of her friends use green bags. The green bags are for Tasmin a projection of consumers' environmental awareness and their commitment to the green party. She mechanically affiliates her local day-to-day practice of green bag consumption with her global awareness of environmental degradation. Her guilt and fear of people's perception when she takes plastic bags at the counter denotes her sense of similarities and difference with the others shoppers. Likewise, when Magee intentionally asks for plastic bags that she will “use to pack food in her freezer”, she feels very guilty. Her feeling of guilt was expressed when she described the act of taking the plastic bag at the cashier and carrying it to her car. Interestingly, the use and dispossession of the plastic bag at home did not denote any guilt. Informants' guilt of taking plastic bags at the supermarket disappeared when they were

describing their use to collect the garbage or nappies at home or to retrieve and dispose of the dog's feces in the park.

The distinctive emotional feelings associated with carrying green bags (happiness, being good) and carrying plastic bags (guilt) reflect a shared consciousness akin to social identity and social categorization. The visibility of taking and carrying reusable green shopping bags instead of plastic bags allowed informants to position themselves within particular groups of consumers. In the grouping of people who are mutually engaged in green bag consumption, informants felt good about themselves. Avoiding consuming plastic bags reminded them that they were different or even better than others. When deviating from their group affiliation, informants felt guilty.

Localized Access to Political Discourses

In all narratives, the use of green (reusable) shopping bag reflects an assimilation of politically constructed discourses on the problem of disposable plastic bag consumption in the supermarket. For the informants, referring to political discourses available in their localities and incorporated in their daily experiences allowed them to locate themselves in a wider landscape of ethical meanings. For example, Olga read articles providing “information about how long does it take the plastic bag to break down, and if they go in the sea then how many animals get killed.” Gradually being informed by the press, she realized Coles’ efforts to lower plastic bag consumption and also noticed that several “stores like David Jones definitely don’t. For everything you buy they give you a plastic bag.” For Richard and Rosy, the information was on display at the Coles supermarket, nearby the green bags. For them, going and interacting at Coles brought awareness on environmental issues and as Rosy mentioned, she recently realized that “Coles also has a box until February where you put your old Christmas cards in to recycling.” The information on the environmental issue of plastic bag consumption was brought to Philippe by his friends at the youth hostel. Philippe’s friends always pack their grocery in green bags. Their behavior and a few discussions on the subject stimulated Philippe to acquire three green bags. Clearly, informants’ practice of green bag consumption is not an event but a process that required learning about the environmental impact of plastic bag consumption. The learning occurred while informants were performing their day-to-day activities.

Personalization of the Practice

The use of green shopping bags and the acquisition of their symbolic meanings did not imply a loss of individuality. On the contrary, informants were able to choose and reveal their affiliation to the reusable green shopping bag community at the time and the place of their convenience. Some informants use the green bags solely for their grocery shopping; and others extend their affiliation outside of the supermarket and thus vary their level of commitment to the community. For example, Tasmin uses her green bags “to carry academic books and bring wines to friends’ parties” and “basically all the time.” She believes that carrying her green bags to diverse parties and around different localities encourages others to use and re-use green bags. The diversity in commitment and involvement toward carrying and using the green bags reflects informants’ power to incorporate or not that practice into their self-definition and their ethical inclination.

Similarly, the experience of non-participation in plastic bag consumption was not necessarily similar between each informant. While some informants strongly rejected taking plastic bags at Coles supermarket, others acknowledged needing a few plastic bags for their domestic use. For example, Tasmin who has a dog? would consciously take plastic bags every week at the supermarket. Interestingly, Tasmin puts the few plastic bags inside her green shopping bags. The plastic bags will be used later in the week to “pick up the dog’s poo.” Similarly, Olga takes plastic bags “for rubbish and for throwing things like nappies” and Magee takes some to store the food in her freezer. The mix of consumer practices shows consumers’ autonomy and freedom to express and shape their identity within the constrain of their day-to-day experiences.

Identity Formation

The process of learning about green bag consumption and exercising the practice over the years contributed to informants’ formation of their identity. At the time of the interview, informants identified themselves with being a vegetarian, a vegan, a recycler, a green voter, an environmentally conscious consumer, or an ethical citizen. However, each informant’s story clearly details an evolving and processual identity. The word “processual” indicates that identity is not something that is constructed and then finished but is instead always under construction. For example, three years ago, Richard “did not know [he] could have an impact and contribute to protecting the environment.” Although he “was concerned about the environment”, he was not reflecting on a possible link

between his day-to-day consumption practice and environmental degradation. All he thought was that the government and polluting industries were responsible for environmental damage. When seeing the importance of recycling in his community, Richard realized the link between waste and environmental degradation and decided to recycle his cans and glass bottles. Later, Richard noticed people carrying reusable green shopping bags. He bought four and started using them for his weekly shopping. At the time of the interview, Richard wishes that “if [he] had a choice, [he] would never use plastic bags” and participates in Clean Up Australia day. In Richard’s story, the practice of green bag consumption plays a vital role in shaping his identity as an ethical/green/environmentally conscious consumer. Similarly, the process of acquiring the symbolic meanings of green bag consumption helped Christian reach a new level of ethical reflection. Christian bought reusable green bags at Coles supermarket mainly because they “have an amazing convenient size and you can carry things very well; even if it is very heavy, you can still carry things in your hands” and because “they are inexpensive.” Although the purchase and use of the reusable green bags started as a convenient act, the repetition of the practices prompted Christian to reflect on the environmental impact of plastic bag consumption. While shopping, he noticed Coles’ posters describing the relation between using green bags and preserving the environment. During the interview, Christian confessed being concerned for the environment and that green bags “are better for the earth.” Since Richard has been consciously using green bags for environmental consideration, he started to deliberately restrict his use of water when showering and to “put the garbage into the garbage bin if they are provided when you walk.” The locally based practice of green bag consumption helped informants to position themselves with respect to a more macro-social structure provided by political discourses. Such positioning was gradual and evolved as the green bag consumption practice became a routinized activity. Hence, participating in green bag consumption practices shaped not only what informants do, but also who they are and how they interpret what they do.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that reusable green bag consumption and the desinstitutionalization of plastic bag in supermarkets combines both consumers as subjects of moral obligations (the conservative view) and consumers as actors of their life (the liberal view). On the one hand, buying, carrying, using, and reusing green (reusable) shopping bags at the Coles supermarket binds individuals in support of a community of meanings. The

meanings are to be found not only in a simple association with the symbolic green bag but also in the localized social encounters that make categorization meaningful. On the other hand, the practice of green bag consumption is shown to reflect self-identity and to foster identity formation. That is, the individuals' ways of participating in green bag consumption practices, their ways of fitting such practice within their day-to-day constraints and their ways of constructing meanings respond to and contribute to their identity. As such, using green shopping bags reflects politically constructed social norms and obligations toward others, and at the same time the practice echoes consumers' identity and individual experiences. The dialectical interplay between social norms and self-identity evolves through time and context and is co-productive of ethical consumerism. The co-productive process occurs through a community of meaning and support, emotional affiliation, localized access to political discourses, personalization of the practice, and identity formation. All five elements are intertwined in the use of a symbolic possession during micro-situational encounters at the level of the local and the mundane.

The five themes emphasize that ethical consumerism is a practice that involves resources, framework and perspectives that can sustain an individual engagement into an action. In order to be adopted by consumers, the practice has to be accessible, visible, and incorporated in day-to-day activities. In addition, individuals need to access information about the practice and to learn to participate in the practice itself. The information on the practice is provided when consumers perform their routinized day to day activities. In order for the ethical practice to become an unreflective part of consumers' life, a period of practical learning on the practice such as: not forgetting the bag at home or refusing plastic bags at the cashier, needs to occur. This know-how is acquired through the development of the practice itself. Over time, participating in the practice and experiencing micro-situational encounters with other participants and non-participants gives rise to an awareness of plastic bag versus green bag categories. It is the repetition of the practice in an historical and social context that gradually creates a new level of reflection and gives meaning and structure to the act of ethical consumption. At this level, the practice of ethical consumption connects questions of government and politics to the space of selves and localities.

The relation between a local practice and political discourses allows individuals to situate themselves as they experience everydayness in specific historical and social context. Referring to political discourses gives individuals the ability to hypothesize about others' behavior and to take interpretable actions. The internalization of social norms becomes a way of expressing one's identity. At the same time, such internalization changes who individuals are and creates new and evolving selves. Because the choice of buying, carrying, using, and reusing

green shopping bags at the supermarket over a long period of time reflects and shapes one's identity, it is not a "free" choice, but a situational one. It enables the self to situate and construct itself as it experiences everydayness in its specific historical and social context.

Conclusion

In an attempt to find a unifying common ground between the liberalist view "let man know and trust him" and the conservative view "let man learn and obey," several philosophers and sociologists have presented a third way of defining what is and what is not ethical. For Etzioni, society should establish a wide dialogue that links communities. He calls this establishment of the *New Golden Rule* a dialogic position that could define the ethical consumer versus the not-ethical consumer (Etzioni, 1996; 1997). Similarly, Habermas calls for discursive ethics that would establish a consensus in an ideal speech situation. The ideal speech situation occurs when free and uncoerced participant debate occurs (Habermas, 1990).

In addition to the dialogic position of Etzioni and Habermas, this study emphasizes the importance of social practices. Nothing is ethical or unethical unless it is manifested in interpretable and symbolic actions. Political speeches on normative ethics may attempt to establish normative ethical practices, but the effects that they enact may be rather small. The analysis of consumers' narrative on their green shopping bag consumption shows the importance of locally based and visible ethical practices. While experiencing, performing, adopting and sustaining locally based ethical acts during mundane day-to-day activities, consumers develop an awareness of ethical versus unethical categories. Such awareness allows consumers to position themselves with respect to a more macro-social structure provided by political discourses.

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Table 1: Informants

	Age	Gender	Occupation	Marital Status	Children
Rosy	67	Female	Retired	Widow	5
Richard	21	Male	Student	Single	0
Olga	30	Female	Interior Designer	Married	2
Magee	30	Female	landscape architect	Married	2
Christian	24	Male	Student	Single	0
Sharon	37	Female	Musician	Partner	1
Tasmin	38	Female	Lecturer	Married	0
Johannes	20	Male	Bar tender	Single	0
Ralf	36	Male	Lecturer	Single	0