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# Revisiting ‘The Myth of the Ethical Consumer’: why are we still not ethical shoppers?

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“*The myth of the ethical consumer – do ethics matter in purchase behaviour?*” (Carrigan & Attala, 2001) appeared in the *Journal of Consumer Marketing* in 2001. In the article, we examined the context and nature of embryonic ethical consumerism, and studied young consumers in the UK to elicit their attitudes and behaviour towards ethical consumption, corporate social responsibility and corporate irresponsibility. Ethical consumption, environmentalism, political consumerism and social marketing had little voice in mainstream marketing literature at this time. Research by scholars (for example, Peattie, 2001; Shaw & Clarke, 1999; Prothero 1990) questioned the scale of green consumerism in the UK, attempting to identify and understand the needs of ethical consumers and pondering the weak relationship between what consumers said and what they did regarding responsible consumption. Few academics wrote about marketing ethics, and even fewer studied ethical consumer behaviour. In the UK, for example, the policy and practitioner landscape was also very different: no ban on smoking in public places (introduced in 2007), no charges for plastic bags (established 2014-15), or compulsory household recycling<sup>2</sup>. Corporate criticisms focused on issues such as sweatshop manufacturing; the ethics of marketing tobacco, baby formula and sugary foods, or glamorising anorexic body images. In some ways, ethical consumerism in the UK and elsewhere in 2017 looks very different, but in others, we face the same complex and wicked problems, and seemingly insurmountable challenges to motivate consumers and marketers to act ethically. Responses since 2001 to the issues raised in the article regarding ethical consumption and marketing ethics, both within academia and practice, might appear woefully inadequate. Over the years scholars have tried to identify and define the ethical consumer, questioned the very nature and existence of the concept, speculated on the reasons for the seemingly intractable ethical attitude-behaviour gap, reflected on the role of ethical consumption within mainstream marketing and, as the nature and issues surrounding ethical consumption have broadened and deepened, increasingly questioned the agency of the ethical

<sup>2</sup> In 2001 landfill tax was £7.00 a tonne not over £80; as costs increased, this regulatory policy eventually drove household recycling rates from 12% (2001) to 44.9% (DEFRA, 2016; Vaughan, 2013).

consumer within a neo-liberal economy that has increased consumption at its core (Shaw, Chatzidakis, & Carrington, 2016; McDonagh & Prothero, 2014).

In 2001 our article highlighted several entrenched barriers to ethical consumption. These included: few commercial rewards to being an ethical company, and even fewer penalties to being an unethical one; competing stakeholder interests leading to corporate ethical paralysis; a consumer disconnect between production and consumption such that ethical consumers represented the minority, and most consumers were either informed and complacent, or uninformed and bewildered about consuming ethically. Consumer attitude-behaviour gaps (Hassan, Shiu & Shaw, 2016) persisted despite commercial research suggesting there was a market for ethical goods, while value-action gaps remained as companies 'greenwashed' their credentials (Peattie & Crane, 2005). Consumers said they would pay more for ethical goods, but would also buy cheap unethical goods; social responsibility featured little in their purchase decision (Boulstridge & Carrigan 2000). Consumers sought price, value, quality, and brand familiarity, driven more by personal than societal reasons (Ulrich & Sarasin 1995). Even accounting for some of the methodological missteps (Carrington, Neville & Whitwell, 2014) that might have impacted on the reliability of some early research, when we reflect on our knowledge and understanding of the ethical consumer in 2001, the ethical consumer in 2017 appears as mythical as ever. Even so, many scholarly, practitioner and policy shifts have taken place over the last few years, and I believe this should give hope for the future of the ethical consumer. For example, discourses of green and ethical economies, such as 'circularity' or 'alternative consumption networks' are more frequently articulated in mainstream policy. These highlight a growing spectrum of interpretations of ethical and green economies that stretch from ecological modernisation proposals to more radical degrowth change (Gibbs & O'Neill, 2017), some of which are discussed further below.

## **The Elusive Ethical Consumer: what we know, past and present**

In 2001 the mainly North American or UK-centric research had an overarching bias towards green and environmental issues. Although sustainability is a recognised 'mega-trend' (McDonagh & Prothero, 2014), and environmental concerns remain at the core of ethical/responsible consumer behaviour, what it means to be an ethical consumer has grown, shifted and evolved to capture new and forgotten behaviours that tackle social and economic justice. Grassroots social movement organisations now target ethical consumer choices, and social network ties reinforce

commitment to their goals (Parigi & Gong, 2014). In some cases, traditional activist forms of participative protests (e.g. boycotts and rallies) have been replaced by non-contentious collective actions. The growing body of ethical consumer research illustrates this: we recycle (Gilg, Barr & Ford, 2005), reuse (Cooper, 2005), buy less (Scott, Martin & Schouten, 2014), buy green (Ramirez, Jiménez & Gau, 2015), buy Fairtrade (Andorfer & Liebe, 2012); downshift (Moraes, Carrigan & Szmigin, 2012); community garden (Bos & Owen, 2016); save energy (Rettie, Burchell, & Riley, 2012); celebrate and desire vintage (Turunen & Leipamaa-Leskinen, 2015); even repurpose waste through initiatives like cafés that serve junk food (Cadwalladr, 2016) and mend throwaway items (Repair Cafés, 2016). New ways of consuming, such as sharing, pooling, renting, borrowing and ideas of liquid consumption (Bardhi, Eckhardt & Arnould., 2012), the shared economy and experiences over products are moving ethical consumer research into new areas. These alternative spaces of consumption provide ethical choices that both reduce and rebalance consumption more responsibly, and challenge throughputs of excess consumption and waste. The 2001 article notes the work of Vance Packard and Ralph Nader, longstanding critics of the power imbalance between marketers and consumers, and early pioneers of the ethical consumer movement. Such criticism of the dominant social paradigm has grown across the research community (Carrington et al. 2014). Geels et al. (2015) suggest we are going forward from ‘reformist’ solutions that focused on pursuing green innovation and green purchasing, to embrace more ‘revolutionary’ approaches that radically critique the mainstream materialist and capitalist dominant social paradigm in favour of frugality, sufficiency and localism, and increasingly moving towards ‘reconfiguration’ that argues for transitions in socio-technical systems and daily life practices. As well understanding how knowledge that was forgotten can inform future ethical consumption, new technology is changing how we perform ethical consumption and connect communities, with initiatives such as Olio’s food sharing app connecting neighbours and local shops (<https://olioex.com/>), local currencies like the Bristol Pound (Ferreira, Perry & Subramanian, 2015) or the Questionmark fruit and vegetable provenance app that helps consumers protect workers’ rights (<http://www.thequestionmark.org/en>). Creative policy change supports ethical consumption choices, such as the Swedish government’s 2017 Budget initiative to cut tax rates on minor repairs to bicycles, shoes and clothing and provide tax refunds to consumers who repair their white goods (Anon., 2016) While we remain reluctant as ever to identify ourselves as ethical consumers (Davies & Gutsche, 2016), increasingly our actions suggest we are, albeit inconsistently (Szmigin, Carrigan & McEachern, 2009).

Just as the 2001 article was snapshot of UK consumers, scholarly work continues to emerge from the Global North (particularly Northern Europe), but there are new streams of literature that capture and acknowledge the (often very different) experiences of ethical consumers in other market contexts (McEwan, Hughes & Bek, 2015). The attitude-behaviour gap's persistence leads us to recognise the inadequacies of explaining the social behaviour of consumers in one culture based on another (Shukla, 2012). We are acknowledging the cultural pluralities of ethical consumers (Sankaran & Demangeot, 2011); global South consumers tell different sustainability stories to those found in the global North (Monkhouse, Barnes & Stephan, 2012). We concede prevailing standards of appropriate conduct within social practices and conventions are not necessarily conducive to the pursuit of ethical consumption (Cherrier & Belk, 2015). We now recognise the complex impact that context has on ethical consumer experiences, priorities and concerns (Devinney, Augur & Eckhardt, 2010) and not only are research agendas exploring these, but new business models that encourage ethical consumer behaviour are being shared and replicated in a trickle down, trickle up and trickle across manner (Atik & Firat, 2013).

Our 2001 paper speculated that catalytic events might nudge us towards greater responsibility in business and consumption: for example, the internet would expose wrongdoing and offer a platform for collective activism on a global scale (this was a pre-Facebook, Twitter and Instagram world). We reasoned a more informed consumer might make better ethical boycotting and buycotting choices. Twenty four hour news media reported many corporate scandal stories since 2001, but consumers seem no more inclined to boycott offenders or choose more ethically. For ethical consumers the power of negative and positive information remains inconclusive. But the global sharing of knowledge regarding corporate responsibility and irresponsibility has gained some traction among concerned consumers (Micheletti & Follesdal, 2007). Perhaps the biggest challenge for ethical consumers with this knowledge is how to navigate the complex and conflicted contemporary consumption landscape. As in 2001, consumers struggle to separate the authentic from inauthentic or ambiguous ethical claims (Annunziata, Ianuario, & Pascale, 2011). While label heuristics still matter for an often passive ethical shopper (McEachern, 2014), consumers still lack the ethical literacy to process information and trade off complex and sometimes conflicting criteria, and the opportunity and motivation to practice responsible consumption in their everyday shopping (Carrigan & Bosangit, 2016).

## The Emergent Ethical Consumer: what we still don't know

Despite these ongoing challenges, research has helped us realise how complex ethical consumption decisions are. We now know that multiple factors influence consumer perceptions of corporate social responsibility (Eckhardt, Belk & Devinney, 2010), and the jostling of emotions that takes place within the consumer decision making process (Gregory-Smith, Smith & Winklhofer, 2013). Studies of the instrumental, relational and moral motives underpinning consumer behaviour highlight a multi-level, multi-agent conceptualization of consumer responsibility, and identify micro, meso, macro and supermacro levels of influence such as families, consumption communities, governments, corporations, non-governmental organizations, as well as personal motivations (Caruana & Chatzidakis, 2013).

We now accept that being ethically informed will not change most people's consumption behaviour, and this is driving new research streams that recommend policy/contextual changes and practice theory approaches alongside persuasion by education (Hegarty, 2016; Warde, 2013). The success of the carrier bag charge demonstrates how even a small charge of 5p can disrupt behaviour, and alter habits (Carrigan, Moraes & Leek, 2011; Whitmarsh, 2016). More fundamental lifestyle changes are needed to significantly impact on the global waste problem, but these small changes may create behavioural spillover that future research can investigate further (Thøgersen & Crompton, 2009).

In 2001 the paper highlighted how only some products captured the wallets of ethical consumers, for example, Fairtrade chocolate and tea. Today consumers still rarely scrutinise the ethical credentials of many products, but they are now willing to pay a premium for ethical chocolate, and there is a growing sector of producers, retailers and consumers who are trying to make, sell and buy more ethical offerings (Humphrey, 2016). The distance between production and consumption remains problematic to engaging ethical consumer action, but social movements are fuelling the growth of markets for local goods that create social change (Kurland & McCaffrey, 2016). Researchers and practitioners are trying to forge better connections between ethical consumers and their purchases (Cook, 2004); food and tourism (Lang, 2016; Sims, 2009) have been increasingly successful; less so other goods such as clothing or electronics (see Ian Cook's <http://followthethings.com/>). The desire to scale up local movements and initiatives such as the Bristol Pound (Ferreira et al., 2015) is challenging, and perhaps only suitable for certain projects – suggesting that ethical consumption needs both local and global action (Carrigan et al., 2011).

In summary, if we are to grasp why consumer actions persistently contradict their values, we need to develop and refine research approaches to better identify, understand and predict the

needs of the ethical consumer. We know consumer responsibility manifests itself flexibly, demonstrates ethical considerations that are product and situation specific, are subject to attitude-behaviour gaps and impacted by complex contextual influences. Motivating the ethical consumer requires appealing to ethical concerns that are already rooted in their daily practices. Investigation of the socio-spatial embedding of conditions in particular locations that encourage and shape new sustainable and ethical transitions should be pursued (Gibbs and O'Neill, 2017). We need to study whether protected, local communities of ethical consumption and practice can transform mainstream economies, and the struggles and tensions involved with doing so. This may help challenge deeply entrenched positions and views about economic growth. Ethical consumer research is replete with social acceptance bias; more creative research techniques and tools could reduce this problem through research that is grounded in real world observations (Thrift, 2007). For example, Askegaard & Linnet (2011) use phenomenology to bridge the gap between the broad nature of social theories and anthropological work where the research is embedded in the study setting. This approach, increasingly used to study the complex interactions of the everyday that incentivise or discourage ethical behaviour, sheds light on consumers' real, lived experience as a basis of knowledge. While big data and survey methods offer important macro level insight, qualitative approaches deliver micro level knowledge of the mundane repetitions and habits of social behaviours in peoples' lives, why they endure and where disruption can occur (Evans, 2011). This is where future research can add value, by greater use of techniques (on and offline) such as participant observation, assembling objects or documents that hold meaning and the compilation of audio-visual materials.

Consumer cynicism remains strong, selective ethics still operate, and we need more ethical consumer spillover across product categories. Greater choice editing at source (e.g. supplying 'ugly' not just flawless fruit and veg), better ethical retail context management (e.g. applying track and trace or 'blockchain' technologies to ethical food and clothing), and policy interventions will all help. Consumers want to believe their choices make a difference. Since 2001 there is evidence that the collectivities of ethical research, policy, practitioner, and regulatory actions are effecting change but there is still much to do. While it feels sometimes that we are no closer to identifying and understanding the ethical consumer, this may be because what we have discovered since 2001 is that the ethical consumer is multifaceted, fluid and elusive, subject to individual, contextual, cultural and emotional vagaries. Frustrating – yes – but rich grounds for future study in the next 15 years.

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