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Ethical consumption: Uncovering personal meanings and negotiation strategies

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine how individuals define ethical consumption (EC) and then how they negotiate ethical consumption as they move from one country to another. The authors explore these questions by reporting on and interpreting the evolution of their understanding of EC and their own ethical consumption behavior, the EC practices that have endured over time and national contexts, the tensions they encountered in maintaining EC practices in these transitions and the adaptive strategies they used to manage those tensions. While there has been research on the tensions faced by individuals practicing EC, there has been a paucity of research investigating those tensions from a cross-country and longitudinal perspective. Moreover, although several studies have focused on EC purchase practices of specific goods (e.g., athletic shoes, fair-trade commodities), none has considered this question in the context of purchases of basic needs categories – food, water, energy, transportation and housing. Each of the three authors has been able to maintain his or her own *personal* consumption ethic in spite of living in different countries. Whenever consumption practices emanate from, and are imbedded within, a strong ethical framework of values that informs EC, each was able to make the necessary adjustments to overcome the obstacles and points of resistance across countries. Even in those situations involving considerable inconvenience and discomfort, each used adaptive strategies that allowed retention of their consumption practices. Among those strategies employed by the authors were choice of community in which to live, self-regulation and self-reliance.

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1. Introduction

This paper is an exploratory study that examines longitudinal and cross-country perspectives of what ethical consumption (EC) means to individuals when consuming every-day basic needs and how they practiced such behaviors or negotiated the tensions in these contexts. Although there have been numerous studies on this topic in the last three decades across a wide variety of disciplines, the term EC does not refer to a clearly defined set of practices, but rather a range of consumption behaviors that are motivated by several moral imperatives (Newholm and Shaw, 2007; Caruana, 2007; Carrier, 2012; Lewis, 2012). Such imperatives range from animal welfare, labor standards and human rights, health and well-being, and ecological sustainability (Lewis, 2012). However, the majority of studies on EC have been done in affluent countries

in North America and Europe (see reviews by Newholm and Shaw, 2007; Cotte and Trudel, 2009) with very few cross-country comparisons. Some notable exceptions to these include studies by Belk et al. (2005) and Devinney et al. (2010). These authors who examined EC behaviors and motivations in both affluent and poor nations in North America, Europe, Australasia, East Asia and South Asia concluded that regardless of ethical beliefs or economic status, consumers were either not concerned about ethical issues or did not behave ethically. However, in these studies, the ethics of consumption that are examined are those determined by the authors – use of products that harm the environment or made under poor labor conditions and counterfeit goods. Furthermore, in examining EC behaviors, these studies present specific narrow scenarios such as the purchase of athletic shoes, bath soaps or counterfeit luxury goods. Their conclusion that EC behaviors are largely a myth assumes that everyday or ordinary consumption is amoral or practiced without concern for ethical considerations. However, others argue that ordinary consumption practices arise from cultural norms that an individual encounters and negotiates every day

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and that economic, political, social and environmental processes are intertwined (Varul, 2009; Hall, 2011; Shaw and Riach, 2011; Pellandini-Simanyi, 2014a). Therefore, an understanding of everyday consumption practices can provide clues to how ethical consumption becomes delineated at the individual level. There are few studies that examine this aspect of ethical consumption.

Studies that examined everyday ethical consumption behavior and how tensions in practicing them are negotiated have typically been conducted on consumers living in one location or country. For example, participants in Shaw and Riach's (2011) study were in a city in New Zealand, Hall's (2011) in the North West of England, and Pellandini-Simanyi's (2014b) in Hungary. Although Varul (2009) compared consumers' fair-trade consumption as an everyday ethical practice in two countries, Germany and the UK, it did not examine how such practices would change when consumers moved to other countries. While researchers have studied the ethics of immigrant populations in the context of questionable or unethical consumer behaviors (e.g., Swaidan et al., 2006), we did not find any published study (in English) that examined how EC practices were formed through everyday consumption of basic needs for immigrants or expatriates.

Changes in consumption norms over time due to age or life-cycle stages, technological changes, social or economic transformations and globalization have been studied in diverse fields such as marketing, economics, sociology, anthropology, geography and history (e.g., Schiffman and Kanuk, 2009; Shove, 2003; Trentmann, 2004; Clarke, 2008; Eckhardt and Mahi, 2012; Jackson, 2004).

The purpose of this article is to understand what EC means to us through introspecting on our experiences in negotiating everyday ethical consumption issues in multiple contexts across time. The authors have all lived and worked extensively in different countries. Our reflection on these experiences as consumers raises several questions. What does ethical consumption mean to us as individuals? What factors influenced our EC practices? How did we negotiate ethical issues around consumption? Did any of our EC practices endure over time and locations? Exploring our experiences as consumers across time and space provides not only a cross-country but also a longitudinal perspective to the dialog on EC.

In the next section, we explain why we used introspection as a methodology to examine our everyday consumption practices and whether and how these practices were informed by ethical beliefs. We also explain why and how we chose a sub-set of 'categories of needs' to serve as a common frame of reference to introspect across time and space for each individual and also to compare behaviors across individuals. In the third section we include a brief version of our narratives. In the fourth 'Discussion and implications' section, we compare and contrast our everyday EC practices across countries and time. In the fifth section, we draw conclusions.

2. Methodology

2.1. Personal and interactive introspection

Our methodology involves a two-phase iterative process that draws from both the auto-ethnographic tradition (Holbrook, 2006; Brown, 2006) and the interactive-researcher introspection technique (Ellis, 1991). The two phases are Personal Introspection (PI) followed by Interactive Introspection (II). In PI, "the researcher studies him/herself; the researcher and subject/informant are the same person, and there are no other subject/informants" (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993, p. 341). We enlarge on this characterization by including *all three authors* as a *subject/informants*. In II, each researcher stimulates and reacts to

the "emergent experiences" of the other researchers over several interactive rounds (Ellis, 1991). This feedback loop is extended further when each subject/informant updates, where possible, his/her initial "findings" from the first PI stage. Analogous to an exhaustive-snowballing sampling technique (Lavrakas, 2008), this process continues in an iterative manner until no new aspects of self-discovery emerge.

The PI-II method has evolved from a research tradition in consumer behavior known as *Consumer Culture Theory* (CCT) that addresses the "sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption," Arnould and Thompson (2005, p. 868). Researchers in this tradition have employed various qualitative methods including different forms of introspection such as researcher introspection and interactive introspection (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993). Holbrook (1986) introduced the term *Subjective Personal Introspection* (SPI) and has used this method in several studies (1987, 1988, 2005), explaining that "SPI focuses on impressionistic narrative accounts of the writer's own private consumption experiences" producing "an essay that sheds light on some aspect of humanity as reflected in the everyday life of the consumer" (Holbrook, 2005, p. 45).

Gould (2012, p. 453) coined the term *Consumer Introspection Theory* (CIT), writing, "it (CIT) functions in terms of single versus multiple person introspection, autoethnography, and other practice variations: narrative versus metacognitive introspection; ground versus hypothesis-driven introspection and introspective thought exercises." The auto-ethnographic tradition has spawned numerous consumer behavior research variants over the years as a number of investigators have employed similar if not exactly identical methodologies (Ellis, 1991; Gould and Stinerock, 1992; Minowa et al., 2012; Woodside, 2004; Banbury et al., 2012).

Like other exploratory research methods, the PI-II method has limitations that need not be problematic if the results are considered as tentative and exploratory in nature rather than conclusive or representative of any particular population (Malhotra, 2009). A second concern when presenting past reports might be distortions due to memory lapses. Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) suggest that these could be mitigated through consulting diaries/records of that time. Although one of the researchers kept diaries/letters that document changes in her consumption practices due to migrations, we mainly relied on our memories. All of us vividly remember major changes in our consumption practices due to our migrations to other countries as it was something we often discussed with friends and family. We were also reminded about the differences in our consumption practices as we traveled back to our home countries for short vacations. A third concern that Wallendorf and Brucks point out is that as with focus groups, "the potential exists for unintentionally leading informants to re-produce reports that mirror the researcher's own verbalized introspections, while... discouraging comments that are inconsistent with the researcher's introspections" (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993, p. 354). While this might be problematic for some groups of subject/informants, we do not believe this to be a serious weakness in our project. Each subject/informant is a mature, senior professor (1) who is unlikely (at our time of life, level of education and degree of professional development) to be influenced to "reproduce reports that mirror" anyone else's view, and (2) who feels strongly about issues central to the research topic, ethical consumption. Each has been living and thinking about consuming ethically for many years; our ideas and habits-of-life are by now well formed.

Ultimately, however, our research questions cannot be delved into very deeply by methods other than introspection. As Arnould and Thompson (2005, p. 870) write, "consumer culture theory focuses on the experiential and sociocultural dimensions of consumption that are not plainly accessible through

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