

The Pursuit of Happiness in Ethical Consumption; Trade-offs, Values and Endless Ends

Alex Hiller, Paul Whysall, Tony Woodall and Mollie Painter-Morland

Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University

Whilst the moral 'problem' could be considered to be increasing the chances of everyone to start life with an equal chance of achieving happiness (Rorty 1999), in a consumer culture in which ethical consumption is both a part and a consequence (Newholm and Shaw 2007), the potential for unhappiness is rife. Whilst consumers may be morally culpable for their actions (Schwartz 2010), they are faced with their consequences without the benefit of the guidance of 'grand narratives' (Cherrier 2007; Bauman 1993). Further, this may be characterised by uncertainty (Hassan *et al.* 2013), rationalisation, dependency and realism (Eckhardt, Belk and Devinney 2010), or recognition of the role of ethical consumption in relieving guilt from the middle classes and as a source of profit (Littler 2011). Others have suggested the ethical consumer is a 'myth' (Devinney, Auger and Eckhardt 2010), as consumer decision-making is entirely context-specific and based on complex individual trade-offs. Consequently ethical consumption is often framed in terms of its numerous failures (Littler 2011). Unhappy times indeed.

This paper starts with the assertion that (ethical) consumers are engaged in constant trading-off of macro concerns about a wider ethical agenda, with micro concerns of a personal nature (Ha-Brookshire and Norum 2011; Devinney, Auger and Eckhardt 2010; Shaw, McMaster and Newholm 2007; Valor 2007). Often these trade-offs are based on the assumption that 'happiness' can be reduced to a cognitive process

directed at utilitarian outcomes which predominantly derive from self-interested behaviours and which necessarily involve sacrifice (De Groot and Thøgersen 2015; Jagel et al. 2012, McGoldrick and Freestone 2008). However, Rorty (1999) argues that utilitarian thinking falls short by reducing human happiness to the ‘accumulation of pleasures’, Shaw *et al.* (2015) argue that rational choice approaches to trading off have been thought to include favouring self-interest over regard for others, and Bauman (1993) raises questions around the efficacy of utilitarian thinking in service of the happiness of the other.

Drawing on a qualitative study based on phenomenological accounts of consumption, the aim of this paper is to examine the clothing purchase habits of a group of twenty ethically-knowledgeable and principled consumers (members of UK University sustainability research groups) and the role of evaluation and resulting happiness. In service of this aim it recognises that consumption is part of an act of processual identity construction (Cherrier and Murray 2007), rooted in values which sustain individuals as participants in practices (Garcia-Ruiz and Rodriguez-Lluesma 2014), and which are essentially goal-driven (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Baudrillard, 1998). This further recognises the role of values in identity formation as a necessary condition, but also acknowledges that multiple and possibly contradictory values and moral standards may be held simultaneously (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Firat and Venkatesh 1995).

The study finds that in this group’s search for the ‘good life’ there is a keen sense of responsibility that is driven by concerns of an uncertain future. Accordingly, evidence of deontological ethical reasoning and the exploration of values and self-identity

issues revealed the existence of a 'virtuous self' which enables individuals to practice their instrumental values and establish identity within their communities. This accounts for questions about the right thing to do, about how to lead the good life and to become closer to 'the type of person I want to be'. However, this was not borne out in a universally identifiable pattern of 'ethical consumption' as characterised in the literature.

Further, there was strong evidence of a deeply-rooted set of habitual practices where individuals exist in a continuously evolving complex system which makes categorising ethical principles as distinct from other principles or life concerns impossible. Within this complex system different, seemingly contradictory, normative orientations are all employed as individual judgement responds to ever-changing situations, contexts and life stages (Painter-Morland 2011). Significantly, however, the study finds little evidence that values are 'ordered' hierarchically or 'traded off' in compromising one value in favour of another. Informants rarely recounted value conflicts, except in relation to the very contextually-specific utilitarian decision making at the micro-level, and there persisted a level of ease and comfort generally that each individual's values were 'upheld' through their consumption with few complications, compromises or conflicts arising.

Further, whilst the terminal values which guide action were expressed in particular ways, there was little evidence of their role as consistently guiding individuals to 'absolute' ends in the search for fulfilment; whilst instrumental values appear to be connected to 'ends', the ends do not subconsciously guide action. Instead they are constructed in association with individuals' personal and contextual circumstances;

reciprocally determined and entrenched in habits (Anderson 2014). Similar to Schatzki's (1997) conception of teleoaffectivity, Dewey (in Gouinlock 1994) refers to 'ends in view' which cannot be completely conceived until one understands what it is that one must do to arrive at them. Thus, practical judgement is creative and transformative in continuously reshaping new ends.

Thus, following Rorty's (1999) argument that the boundaries of the self are 'fuzzy', this study rejects the conventional wisdom of the self as being constituted by preference rankings (for example Rokeach 1973; Schwartz 1994). In examining the consumption accounts of this group, the sense of a person acting against their own preferences is questioned, and the study finds that the boundaries of the self are flexible and the concept of 'trading off' or ordering values is not evident as a template for action in the pursuit of the good life in daily practice. Seeing the role of values in driving ethical consumption in this way reveals it to not be driven by a particular state of being as an end goal or a 'thing' with a set of associated principles which is then evaluated and resulting in happiness or unhappiness. Instead, as Giddens (1991) has argued in relation to identity, the pursuit of happiness should be seen as a 'life project' which can be seen in the justification of habits and constantly re-evaluated, renegotiated and rehabituated as individuals engage in practice, characterised by 'ends in view', or 'endless ends', as new habits and experiences come into view.

References

Anderson, E. (2014). Dewey's Moral Philosophy. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring) [online]. Available at:

- <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/dewey-moral/>>. [Accessed 22 May 2015].
- Arnould, E.J. and Thompson, C.J. (2005). Consumer culture theory (CCT): twenty years of research. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 31 (4): 868-882.
- Baudrillard, J. (1998). *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage.
- Bauman, Z. (1993). *Postmodern Ethics*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Cherrier, H. (2007). Ethical consumption practices: co-production of self-expression and social recognition. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*. 6 (Sept/Oct): 321-335.
- Cherrier, H., and Murray, J. (2007). Reflexive dispossession and the self: constructing a processual theory of identity. *Consumption, Markets and Culture*. 10 (1): 1-29.
- De Groot, J.I.M. and Thøgersen, J. (2015). Morality and Green Consumer Behaviour: A Psychological Perspective. *Consumption Ethics and the Individual Seminar Series*. Royal Holloway, University of London: 5th February.
- Devinney, T.M., Auger, P., and Eckhardt, G.M. (2010). *The Myth of the Ethical Consumer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eckhardt, G.M., Belk, R., and Devinney, T.M. (2010). Why don't consumers consume ethically? *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*. 9 (Nov-Dec): 426-436.
- Firat, A.F., AND Venkatesh, A. (1995). Liberatory postmodernism and the reenchantment of consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 22 (December): 239-267.
- Garcia-Ruiz, P., and Rodriguez-Lluesma, C. (2014). Consumption practices: a virtue ethics approach. *Business Ethics Quarterly*. 24 (4): 509-531.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge. Polity Press.

- Gouinlock, J. (1994). (Ed.). *The Moral Writings of John Dewey*. New York: Macmillan.
- Ha-Brookshire, J.E. and Norum, P.S. (2011). Willingness to pay for socially responsible products: a case of cotton apparel. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*. 28 (5): 344-353.
- Hassan, L., Shaw, D., Shiu, E., Walsh, G., and Parry, S. (2013). Uncertainty in ethical consumer choice: a conceptual model. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*. 12: 182-193.
- Jägel, T., Keeling, K., Reppel, A. and Gruber, T. (2012). Individual values and motivational complexities in ethical clothing consumption: a means-end approach. *Journal of Marketing Management*. 28 (3-4): 373-396.
- Mcgoldrick, P.J., and Freestone, O.M. (2008). Ethical product premiums: antecedents and extent of consumers' willingness to pay. *The International Journal of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research*. 18 (2): 185-201.
- Newholm, T., and Shaw, D. (2007). Editorial. Studying the ethical consumer: a review of research. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*. 6 (Sept-Oct): 253-270.
- Painter-Morland, M. (2011). *Business Ethics as Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rokeach, M. (1973). *The Nature of Human Values*. New York: The Free Press.
- Rorty, R. (1999). *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin.
- Schatzki, T.R. (1997). Practices and actions: a Wittgensteinian critique of Bourdieu and Giddens. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*. 27 (3): 283-308.
- Schwartz, D.T. (2010). *Consuming Choices: Ethics in a Global Consumer Age*. Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield.

- Schwartz, S.H. (1994). Are there universal aspects in the structure and contents of human values? *Journal of Social Issues*. 50 (4): 19-45.
- Shaw, D., McMaster, R., and Newholm, T. (2015). Care and commitment in ethical consumption: an exploration of the 'attitude-behaviour gap'. *Journal of Business Ethics* [online]. Available at: <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10551-014-2442-y#page-1> <Accessed 21 June 2015>.
- Shaw, D., Shui, E., Hassan, L., Bekin, C., and Hogg, G. (2007). Intending to be ethical: an examination of consumer choice in sweatshop avoidance. *Advances in Consumer Research*. 34: 31-38.
- Valor, C. (2007). The influence of information about labour abuses on consumer choice of clothes: a grounded theory approach. *Journal of Marketing Management*. 23 (7-8): 675-695.