

Consumer Ethics Research: Reframing the Debate about Consumption for Good

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Abstract

Consumer ethics is an underdeveloped specialism of business and marketing ethics, within which most publications have focused on bad rather than on good ethics, and on consumer dishonesty rather than on consumer idealism or consumer responsibility. This conceptual paper explores the latter perspective, and examines how we can seek to understand "consumer social responsibility" from perspectives such as consumer citizenship, political consumerism and consumer decision making. Much of the literature dealing with positive ethical dimensions of consumer behavior is limited to augmentations of conventional models of consumer behavior and the decisions rules that operate within them. This paper argues for the need to move beyond this to create a more radical, holistic and balanced approach to further developing the field that takes greater account of factors such as consumer life-style, moral intensity, and intention development. The paper also demonstrates the interconnectedness of consumer ethics and marketing ethics, and discusses and illustrates this by using the development of Fair Trade initiatives as an illustrative context. This is useful because Fair Trade products represent one of the more established market sectors that depends upon ethically orientated responses from consumers.

Keywords

Consumer ethics, consumer behavior, business ethics, Fair Trade

Introduction

"Business ethics as an academic field deals mainly with moral criticism (or self-criticism) of business behavior. Within a market economy, business behavior is not independent from consumer behavior and consumer acceptance. Perhaps, there is even some justice, i.e. that businesses get the consumers they deserve and vice versa. Rather than criticizing business alone (as consumer activists tend to) or passing on the blame to the market and to the consumers (as businesses tend to) it seems more fruitful to consider issues such as Fair Trade, social and environmental sustainability on the one hand and consumer dishonesty on the other as a shared responsibility of business and consumers..." (Brinkmann, 2004, p. 129, slightly modified). This new Millennium has seen a renewed and intensified interest in issues of business ethics and corporate social responsibility. This has been partly driven by a wave of concern about the conduct and governance of business in the wake of scandals such as Enron, Global Crossing and Parmalat. It also partly reflects a growing interest amongst consumers, policy makers and businesses themselves, in forms of production and consumption which are more sustainable and more ethically orientated. This is typified by a growth in demand for ethical investment products, organic produce and Fair Trade goods.

Marketers involved in the marketing of ethically orientated products, or marketing scholars seeking to better understand this process, are hampered by the fact that the research knowledge base about consumers and their behavior from an ethical perspective is relatively weak (Auger et al., 2003). This is particularly true in comparison to the research base concerning companies and their behavior from an ethical perspective. When we discuss "business ethics", we almost always do so in terms of the ethical conduct of a "business" as an entity. There is therefore considerable overlap between the field of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and business ethics. However, in reality "business" is also a process conducted through a myriad of relationships involving many parties. A discussion of "busi-

ness ethics" could therefore as easily focus on the ethics of the customer rather than of the producer or seller. From a marketing perspective, this should indeed be the starting point, since the marketing philosophy, if implemented properly, should orientate the business and its behavior around the wants, preferences and priorities of its customers. In practice however, this is rarely the case, as Carrigan and Attalla (2001: 563), point out "despite increasing attention to marketing ethics, the buyer side of the exchange process remains under-researched".

If we wish to apply the existing research base to a consideration of an ethically orientated consumption issue (for example Fair Trade or ethical farming practices), a number of specific weaknesses in the existing research base become apparent, including:

1. A narrow and outdated view of what constitutes the ethical dimensions of consumer behavior, particularly in comparison to our evolving understanding of the ethical dimensions of corporate behavior;
2. A tendency to consider consumer behavior from an individualistic perspective, rather than from a collective perspective;
3. An emphasis on understanding the ethical dimensions of consumer behavior by simply augmenting existing models of consumer decision making. This has led to the downplaying of differences between ethically-orientated consumption and more mainstream consumption, and to some ethically important dimensions of consumer behavior being neglected.

Without these weaknesses being understood and corrected as the research agenda for ethical consumption matures, then it will hamper the development of both ethical marketing practice and scholarship. This conceptual article therefore aims to:

- + Explore the weaknesses in the research base on, and our understanding of, the ethical responsibilities of consumers, to develop a more balanced view of consumer ethics which can act as a basis for the future development of the research agenda;
- + Provide some different perspec-

tives on how a concept of “consumer social responsibility” might be framed and understood;

- Illustrate some of the challenges involved in applying an ethical perspective to consumer behavior, and some of the differences between conventional and ethical consumer behavior, particularly by considering the practical context of Fair Trade marketing.

Business and Consumer Ethics: Corporate and Consumer Social Responsibility

“Corporate social responsibility refers to an organization’s obligation to maximize its positive impact on stakeholders ... and to minimize its negative impact. There are four kinds of social responsibility: legal, ethical, economic and philanthropic...” (Ferrell et al., 2002, p. 73).

Several observations can be made regarding our understanding of the parts that the consumer and the company play within the field of business ethics, and the relationship between them. Firstly, the concept of CSR has become widely accepted, and most companies and commentators now subscribe to the view that businesses have moral responsibilities that go beyond meeting the needs of their customers and shareholders. Indeed it could be argued that there is at least thirty years of “widespread acceptance of the idea that a corporation should exhibit socially responsible behaviour” (Holmes, 1977: 433) and that all that has evolved is the concept of what socially responsible corporate behaviour constitutes in practice. For companies, the contemporary CSR agenda requires them to manage relationships with their many stakeholders in a way that meets and balances their various, and sometimes conflicting, expectations and interests. However, the view of the customer that persists within mainstream business scholarship and practice has not changed and evolved in the same way. The view of customers is still largely as amoral, self-interested, rational-economically motivated individuals, with no responsibilities other than to meet their own needs, and honor their end of any bargain with companies. The ‘ethical consumer’ is still treated as an exceptional or abnormal specific sub-type of consumers in the mainstream marketing literature and is the subject of specific books and research papers (see for example *The Ethical Consumer*, Harrison et al., 2005; or Thøgersen, 1999).

Secondly it is worth noting that just as there is a business ethics field that focuses on the ethics of business organizations, there is an emerging research field of “consumer ethics”, which seeks to describe, understand and praise or criticize consumers, for their behavior as moral behavior (as opposed to consumption ethics which tackles the ethics of liberal capitalist economic systems). However, there are some important differences between the two fields. One difference is scale and breadth. Compared to research into business ethics (and marketing ethics) that focuses on companies, there are few publications about consumer ethics (Brinkmann, 2004). In his “state-of-the-art” paper, Scott Vitell claims that consumer ethics has one main theoretical research model, the Hunt-Vitell model and one main empirical research tradition, with the Muncy-Vitell Consumer ethics scale (1992) as a common denominator (Vitell, 2003, pp. 34-35, cf. also Vitell and Muncy, 2005). Vitell’s implicit claim of having invented, developed and dominated this specialty field is probably justified. Another difference is in emphasis and balance. The business ethics literature that focuses on firms concentrates on ways to encourage good ethical behavior amongst businesses and the benefits of doing so, rather than dwelling on corporate misdeeds. By comparison, among the few publications about

consumer ethics, most seem to deal with consumers as the “bad guys” and less with the potential for consumers to act as “good guys”. Part of the reason for this may reflect how the disciplines are oriented. Much of the business ethics literature is ultimately inward looking, and interested in concepts of enlightened self-interest and the “win-win” benefits that may accrue from ethical behavior (Mohr, et al., 2001). In consumer ethics, it is more difficult to make a case for ethical behavior for the good of the consumer (beyond the benefits of a clear conscience, high self-esteem and staying out of jail). The focus therefore tends to be more outward looking the impact of the consumer’s actions on others and particularly on the financial interests of businesses, which perhaps explains the emphasis on negative behavior and negative impacts.

Finally, an interesting concept is that of the “ethical product” that brings together the ethical company and the ethical consumer. The conventional approach to such products is to see the ethical dimensions of a product as an augmentation which can be linked to the product itself, its marketing, the corporation behind it, or even the country it originates from. However, as Crane (2001) points out, there are a number of complicating factors relating to how consumers perceive ethical product augmentations, and about the marketer’s ability to manage the ethical dimensions of a product “when many of the important decisions which shape the perceived ethics of any product offering occur beyond the organizational boundary. Firms which seek to address ethics as a product or brand issue will need to look not only at their own activities but also those of their parents and subsidiaries, and perhaps more importantly, those of firms throughout the value chain”. (Crane, 2001 p. 370). Crane’s conclusion is that there is no such thing as a definitive “ethical product”, but only ethical product attributes and augmentations relating to any number of possible ethical dimensions, which the customer must recognise, believe, value and, ultimately, buy into.

To further develop the field of consumer ethics, it would seem helpful to distinguish between the more established tradition of research into consumer misdeeds and the emerging body of research into consumers as a force for good. The authors therefore suggest the label of “Consumer Dishonesty” for the former, and “Consumer Social Responsibility” (ConSR) as a label for the latter. Within the latter tradition, a few empirical studies have dealt with consumer behavior as voting behavior (see e.g. Dickinson & Hollander, 1991; Dickinson & Carsky, 2005), or more generally with socially responsible consumer behavior in terms of consumer idealism (see e.g. van Kenhove et al., 2001). It is these dimensions of consumer social responsibility (ConSR) that are the focus of this paper, and that will be important for the development of market for ethical products (something which policymakers worldwide are relying on to contribute to the achievement of a number of social goals).

One way to envisage the concept of ConSR could be simply to define it as analogous to the four dimensions of CSR already mentioned above. Therefore it would be “... a consumer’s obligation to maximize his/her positive impact on stakeholders ... and to minimize his/her negative impact. There are four kinds of ... responsibility: legal, economic, ethical and philanthropic...” (Brinkmann 2007, p. 88). This is not unreasonable since an individual has a responsibility to respect the law, and could be viewed as having an economic responsibility to support themselves and/or contribute to their household. Ethical and philanthropic parallels are less clear cut, but still possible to draw parallels, particularly in relation to social norms about behaviors such as honesty or charitable giving. Companies are expected

to behave in a moral fashion partly because society grants them certain privileges (such as a secure legal framework, access to an educated workforce, use of economic infrastructure) and therefore society can have legitimate expectations about how businesses should behave in return. Much the same could be said about individuals, and that just as society grants businesses a license to operate (that can be revoked), so society grants individuals a license to live as free citizens that means abiding by society's rules and expectations.

Using the analogue of CSR amongst producers to understand ConSR amongst consumers provides some helpful insights, but not a complete picture. A key difference in ethical expectations of businesses compared to individuals is probably that our expectations of moral behavior go beyond simple social norms, to reflect the scale and power of large businesses, and the influence that they can wield within society. The same cannot be said for individual consumers, whose individual philanthropic gestures or ethical decisions will be unlikely to have a meaningful impact. However, collectively consumers have the potential to wield considerable power, and when mobilized through the power of the internet or other media they can sometimes combine to wield it very effectively through boycotts or other forms of campaign to promote change (Auger et al. 2003; Clouder and Harrison, 2005).

Same Concept – Different Labels? Consumer Citizenship and Political Consumerism

A concept of ethical consumerism as an approach to consumerism that seeks to meet society's expectations, particularly in terms of collective consumer influence, brings us towards a view of ConSR or consumer ethics that is reflected in publications under the labels of "consumer citizenship" or "political consumerism". Both of these concepts seek to integrate the inward-looking and personally-orientated perspective of the consumer with the outward-looking, publicly-orientated perspective of the concerned citizen, which have traditionally been seen as separate (Korthals, 2000).

Gabriel and Lang (1995) define a consumer citizen as 'a responsible consumer, a socially-aware consumer, a consumer who thinks ahead and tempers his or her desires by social awareness, a consumer whose actions must be morally defensible and who must occasionally be prepared to sacrifice...' As McGregor (2002, pp. 5-7) notes "If people were sensitized to see themselves as consumer-citizens, a sense of morality, ethics and community could emerge again in the world. What is needed instead is to reinvent citizenship ... and... (to) reinvent consumers. Citizens and consumers tend to see themselves in narrow roles... The time is right to merge the notions of consumer-citizenship leading to an opportunity to socialize people to be responsible, socially aware consumers willing to make reasoned judgements and sacrifices for the common good..."

When it comes to "political consumerism", a recent Nordic conference report refers to the following definition (Boström et al., 2005, p. 9, quoting Micheletti et al., 2003): "consumer choice of producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices. It is based on attitudes and values regarding issues of justice, fairness, or non-economic issues that concern personal and family well-being and ethical or

political assessment of favorable and unfavorable business and government practice. Regardless of whether political consumers act individually or collectively, their market choices reflect an understanding of material products as embedded in a complex social and normative context which may be called the politics behind products..." According to the same authors, there is disagreement amongst researchers in the field as to whether political consumerism has a realistic potential to act as a force for good, or whether ultimately it would be an anachronism, since any consumption increase is problematic because it is unsustainable (ibid., p. 9-10).

Whether there is a difference between consumer citizenship and political consumerism could perhaps be a question of degree and ordering of motives. The consumer citizen aims to change their consumption to do good, the political consumer perhaps seeks to create change for good through their consumption. From either perspective, understanding exactly how ethical dimensions are reflected in consumer decision-making processes is crucial. It is perhaps worth noting that when the effectiveness of collective consumer action is discussed, it has usually been from the perspective of their ability to impact on unethical companies through boycotts (Friedman, 1991), and it is only recently that more attention has been paid to their ability to encourage positive change through patronage or "buycotts" (Friedman, 1996; Duffy et al., 2005).

Understanding Responsible Consumption: A Consumer Decision Making Perspective

Consumer researchers and ethicists alike seem interested in how freedom of choice is handled, how information is handled, and how choices are made, using more or less rational criteria. This commonality of interests explains the popularity of decision-making-process models of varying degrees of complexity in the consumer behavior and the business ethics literatures. This encourages us to conceptualize consumer ethics around an integrated decision making model. As a starting point, an "ethics" model could be used (such as extending the above-mentioned Hunt-Vitell marketing ethics model (1993) to consumer ethics, as suggested by Vitell, 2003). Alternatively a standard consumer behavior model could be used, such as Fishbein and Ajzen's inherently rational 'Theory of Reasoned Action' (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980) or its extension the 'Theory of Planned Behavior' (Ajzen, 1991), which are then augmented by including a variable "ethical awareness" or "ethical significance" somewhere in the chosen model (for an example of such an application see Chang, 1998; or for an example that includes a critique of the TPB see Shaw, 2005; and for a comprehensive discussion of such modeling approaches, see Jackson, 2004). A key challenge is to include varying levels of "moral intensity" (Jones, 1991) in such models without either overstating or understating its relative importance. For this reason simply extending the Hunt-Vitell model may not be ideal, and instead there could be benefits in seeking to adapt other models or develop alternative models as a first step towards a future synthesis model which could transcend the usual models of consumer behavior and consumer ethics. Exhibit 1, originally inspired by the Ferrell et. al. 2002 model, represents an attempt to begin such a synthesis.

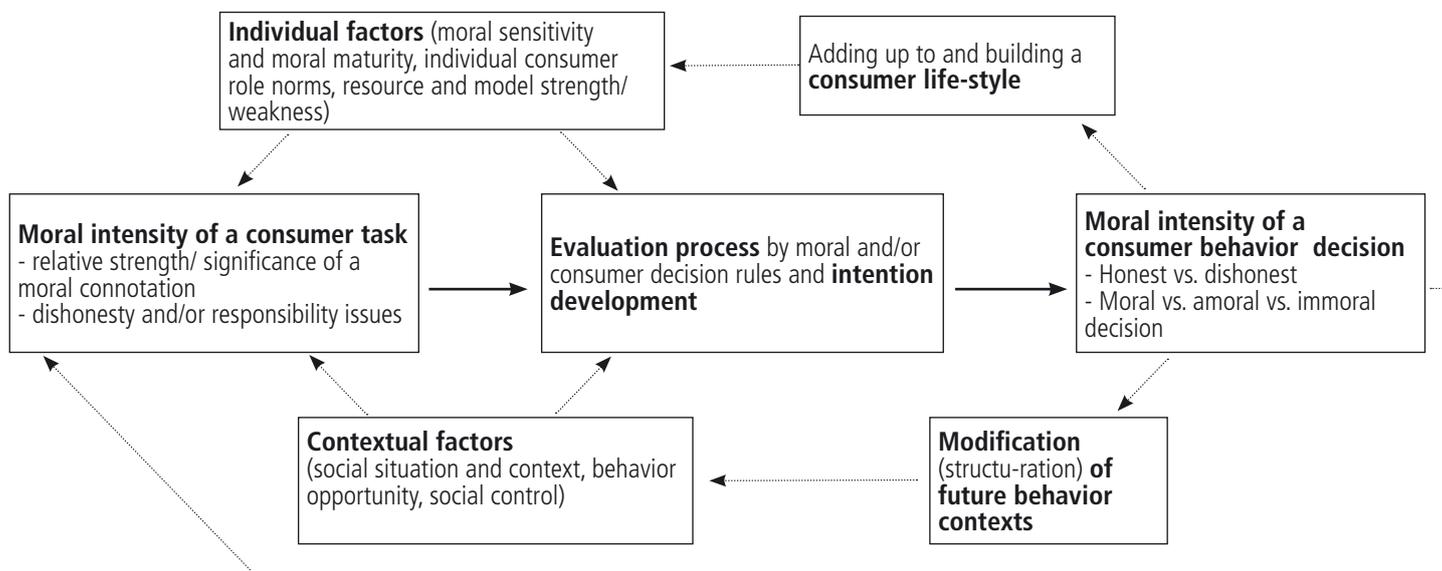


Exhibit #1

The golden rule of reading models applies here, of starting with the dependent variable, in this case a decision and the immediate process preparing it. A typical everyday example could be the consideration of Fair Trade labeled coffee or bananas in a given choice situation. The more deliberately one intends to use one's purchasing (or non-purchasing) behavior as voting, the more reasoning and reflection one would expect to find before the decision (or vote) in favor of "good", or against "bad", companies or countries (cf. e.g. Klein et al., 2002, Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). Since the morality of consumer behavior is a variable rather than a constant, a concept of ethical or moral intensity is crucial within the model (Jones, 1991, Ferrell et al., 2002, Crane and Matten, 2007). Moral intensity refers to how morally "significant" or "serious" a given task, handling process and situation is. Both actors and outsiders might define, for example, insurance cheating involving insignificant amounts as morally neutral, or buying factory-farmed hen eggs as morally bad. Moral intensity is co-determined by individual moral sensitivity and moral maturity (cf. Brinkmann, 2004, Exhibit #2) and by social-situational contexts, (e.g. reflecting more deeply when buying a gift compared to buying less socially 'visible' products for one's own daily use). Unlike the original Ferrell model, this model repeats moral intensity on the output side of the model, and then links it to the input side via a feedback-loop. This loop allows self-observation by the actors themselves, as well as observation and evaluation by spectators, to focus on the moral intensity of

a decision (low or high; not interesting or alarming; worse than or better than "average") so that every "good" and "bad" ethics decision represents an example which can create and reinforce future moral intensity. As a simple example, leading Fair Trade products typically reproduce on their packaging a story of how Fair Trade schemes have helped particular farmers in poorer countries. Such stories provide a positive reinforcement for consumer about both the value of the purchase and the moral intensity of Fair Trade as an ethical issue and thereby generate consumer involvement with Fair Trade since: "Stories are able to involve, captivate and entertain consumersstories are able to communicate and persuade" (Escalas, 1998: 267). There is also an important narrower feedback from outcomes to a reproduction (or structuration in the Giddens sense) of contexts, and not least an aspect of life-style building by decision-styles and consistencies.

The key element of the model is ethical examination or evaluation, and the development of a conclusion or decision. This box includes all kinds of typical moral philosophical approaches, including clear or implicit deontologist, utilitarianist, or perhaps virtue ethicist or discourse ethicist approaches. While anticipation and evaluation of consumer behavior consequences is only implicitly included in the model (under utilitarianist evaluation), exhibits 2 and 3 provide typological illustrations of the decision rules and for the moral intention components that will operate within the model.

Rule type	Description	Relative importance of morally right-wrong criteria (if applied)
Compensatory	weak ratings on one criterion can be compensated by a strong rating on another one – the alternative with the best summarized ratings is chosen	moral attractiveness (and moral questionability) of an alternative counts relatively, i.e. can compensate weak rankings, but can also be compensated by competing criteria
Conjunctive	minimum acceptability must be present for each relevant choice criterion	minimum moral acceptability must be present and can't be compromised
Disjunctive	minimum acceptability must be present for each relevant choice criterion and exceeded for at least one among them	if minimum acceptability is present for all other criteria the degree of moral acceptability decides
Lexicographic	after ranking the criteria by importance choose the best alternative on the most important criterion	moral acceptability is ranked as highly important and dominates the choice
Eliminative	determination of minimum cutoff for each criterion and remove worse alternatives	determination of minimum moral acceptability and remove unacceptable alternatives

Exhibit #2 How “moral intensity” shows in purchase-decision rules (source: Brinkmann, 2004, p. 135)

	Public motives	Private-social motives	Private-caring motives	Private-hedonism motives
Engagement roots	Political participation	Generated by social networks	Experience and interaction	Feelings and identity creation
Expression	Boycotts, “buycotts”, ethical investing	Group-conformist consumer behavior	Caring consumer behavior which reduces worries	Alternative/ innovative consumption, excitement
Influencability	Media, campaigns	Social network, roots, aspirations	Concrete experience and worries	Fashion, innovations, new self-realization and pleasure

Exhibit #3 A typology of primary ethical shopping motives (source: Etisk forbrug..., 2003, p. 21; authors' table construction and transl. from Danish).

The Interrelationship between Consumer Ethics and Marketing Ethics

Consumer behavior and (consumer) marketing exist in a close and interdependent relationship, with each shaping the other, and it is logical to view consumer ethics and marketing ethics as highly interdependent, too. As an academic subject, consumer behavior is a social science-based specialty field within marketing, which tries to describe, understand and predict consumer decision-making as a function of demographic, psychological and sociological variables as “independent” variables, and perhaps as interacting variables. Based on such knowledge and understanding, marketing can then try to function as an “intervening variable”, between such “independent” variables and “dependent” variables, such as decision-making processes and choices on different levels.

The model in Exhibit 1 suggests that for the consumer marketer seeking to promote responsible forms of consumer behaviour (such as encouraging Fair Trade purchases) there are several potential (and not mutually exclusive) alternatives to explore beyond simply making relatively ethical products, or at least ethical product attributes, available. Consumers can be encouraged to adopt more ethically orientated lifestyles, to recognize the moral intensity of particular types of purchase (particularly agricultural commodities) or to consider the moral dimensions of a particular purchases within their decision making process. Marketers can also work to develop a purchase context within

which ethical products are easily available to provide purchase opportunities and in which social pressures encourage consumers to consider and purchase ethical products. Two key types of intervening variables within consumer behavior models that marketers can manipulate in order to encourage responsible consumption are therefore: situations (such as opportunity, availability and immediate context) and information. In this paper it is more natural to focus on the latter, on consumers' information processing related to where and when they shop, how much of what to buy at what price, which brands, according to which rules, with what post-purchase evaluations, and with more or less “help” from marketing.

Following from this one could reason that desirable ends, such as the promotion of Fair Trade, need to be founded on efficient marketing decisions, with an optimal mix of moral argumentation; theory-based marketing techniques; relevant, reliable data; and relevant models of consumer behavior as consumer information behavior (one could also add that the more moral the marketing appeals, the higher the need for moral integrity or at least moral credibility of such marketing, and in the behavior of the company behind it; see Crane, 2001). In a next step, such “useful” information and models could be grouped by products, consumers and situations which they relate to, and persuasion work could focus accordingly, simply using more or less traditional and sophisticated marketing, for a presumably good purpose.

By combining the various perspectives developed in this pa-

per, we can now apply such a view of consumer behavior and marketing to a practical context, in this case the buying and marketing of Fair Trade products.

Consumer ethics in practice – the case of Fair Trade

Of all the potential manifestations of ethics in consumerism, Fair Trade represents one of the most important. Collapses in global commodity prices have damaged the economies of many poorer countries to the extent that the livelihoods, well-being and independence of an estimated 1 billion people are now threatened (UNCTAD, 2003). Tackling global poverty depends to a large extent on establishing fairer prices for commodity products, and therefore there are clear opportunities to position the purchasing of Fair Trade products as an issue with a high degree of moral intensity within consumers' minds. In the absence of a clear theoretical foundation in the academic literature, multiple more practitioner-led definitions of Fair Trade have emerged, the most widely used coming from the umbrella network FINE: "Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, which seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers – especially in the south. Fair Trade organisations (backed by consumers) are engaged actively in supporting producers, awareness raising and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade."

Curiously this definition does not mention ethics, and makes only a relatively oblique reference to consumers, casting them in a relatively passive role as supporters. It also positions Fair Trade at the very macro level of international trade, and it is here that much of the discourse about Fair Trade takes place (e.g. see Brown, 1993, Rice, 2001 or Leclair, 2002) rather than at the level of the behavior of individual consumers. The reality of Fair Trade is that its success will depend on consumers actively seeking out and purchasing Fair Trade products, at least partially, for ethical reasons. This means that Fair Trade represents a bridge into ethical or even political consumerism because it "...unveils for northern consumers the people, places and relations behind the commodity, helping launch the politically crucial leap from passive consumerism to active engagement" (Hudson and Hudson, 2003: 1).

Although Fair Trade is an important dimension of ethical consumerism, the discussion of ethics in relation to Fair Trade mostly takes place in a very broad, philosophical context (see Sugden, 1999; Barnett, et al. 2005). Relatively little research has focused on linking consumer preferences and behavior to perceptions of the ethical dimensions of Fair Trade consumption, and to clarify exactly what it is the consumer perceives themselves to be 'buying into' (Golding and Peattie, 2005). As Crane (2001) notes, there is relatively little empirical research about what consumers perceive to be "ethical" in Fair Trade products.

In seeking to encourage consumers to consider ethical dimensions in their evaluation and decision making processes for commodity product, Fair Trade acts to reverse the disconnection between producers and consumers that has emerged after many decades of the growth of mass markets, mass production and globalized production and consumption systems in which the marketing process, but little else, has come to connect producers and consumers. Fair Trade seeks to develop new "social bonds" between producers and consumers (Raynolds, 2000; Murray & Raynolds, 2000; Raynolds, 2002; Renard, 2003; Bryant and Goodman, 2004) in a way that will develop a com-

mitment on the part of the consumer to consider the ethical attributes of products and discriminate in favor of those that also benefit the producer. However, much of the research into Fair Trade continues to discuss the benefits to the consumer of Fair Trade consumption, in terms of personal psychological benefits (Gould, 2003) or hedonistic benefits (Newholm, 2005). This limits Fair Trade purchasing motives and behaviours only to a location on the far right hand column of the table in Exhibit 3, and seems to be at odds with the underlying purposes of Fair Trade marketing.

The reality is that Fair Trade consumers will vary in their motivations and their degree of intensity and loyalty towards Fair Trade products. Humphrey (2001: 11) categorizes consumers according to their social conscience and response to Fair Trade as follows:

- + Loyal Fair Traders: Those dedicated to buying Fair Trade or products from marginalized businesses where possible and can afford any price premium.
- + Conscience with Convenience: Those who choose Fair Trade if available nearby but do not go out of their way to specifically buy Fair Trade products.
- + Product First, Ethics Second: Those who buy with a product focus while ethical criteria may swing the choice of equivalent products in favor of the one which will bring social benefits.
- + Product focus: Those for whom ethical criteria have no bearing on the purchasing choice. Some of this group may be deliberately disapproving of ethical claims because of a belief that the free market will deliver all requirements.

Whilst the first of these embodies political consumerism, the second two represent stronger and weaker forms of the consumer citizen. The last category will only tend to contribute to the growth of Fair Trade markets by accident, although this is possible since some research has indicated that certain consumers mistakenly view the Fair Trade label as an indicator of technical product quality.

In considering the influence of information as an intervening variable in the marketing process, Fair Trade marketing presents a different case to either conventional consumer behavior contexts or to many other ethical consumption contexts. Partly this is because Fair Trade is a field in which a key influence on the consumer's decision making process is unusually far-removed from the consumer themselves. In conventional consumer behavior theory, the emphasis is on the relationship between the seller and the customer through the marketing mix that they offer to the consumer. In addition to the mix's conventional "Ps", the market offering will embody elements like the branding and reputation associated with the product and producer and (depending on the market structure) the branding of the retailer supplying the product. In most markets the nature of the means of production, and the identity and nature of contributing suppliers, will be hidden from consumers (although there are exceptions to this, for example means of production signifiers such as "organic" or "hand made" may be used as quality indicators, and some retailers such as UK supermarket Sainsburys have taken to identifying specific farms from which products like eggs and meat originate. Also certain products will highlight the inclusion of specific branded ingredients such as brands of chocolate or alcoholic drinks to act as indicators of quality).

In Fair Trade markets, consumers are provided with information that relates not just to the product the customer consumes, and to the means of production behind it, but also to the structure of the market and the distribution of economic benefits within it. Although the concept of the welfare of "the producer"

is embedded in the Fair Trade market offering, it represents a very vague concept in comparison to issues like the quality of the coffee (which consumers can sample directly) or the branding of the retailer. It is perhaps for this reason that campaigns to promote Fair Trade products from companies such as CafeDirect and the Day Chocolate Company have sought to personalize the concept of “the producer” through marketing communications with a focus on the stories of individual farmers and the benefits they receive from Fair Trade.

Without clarity amongst consumers as to exactly what benefits Fair Trade products provide and to whom, there is the danger that Fair Trade will be positioned in consumers’ minds simply as “a good thing”. This will leave Fair Trade products vulnerable to competition from a variety of other “good” products with ethical credentials relating to other elements of sustainability (such as organically grown) or to products adopting cause-related marketing linked to other social concerns. Fair Trade marketers need to build a distinct “brand identity” for Fair Trade that clearly embodies its ethical dimensions and social benefits. However, this is somewhat undermined by disagreement within the movement itself as to how the products should be marketed, and how the product category should be grown (Golding and Peattie, 2005).

As Hira and Ferrie (2006) note the market development of Fair Trade is also hampered by issues of consumer and retailer awareness, definition, confidence in certification and question marks about its long-term practical impact within commodity markets.

In terms of situational variables and their ability to provide a context that encourages the consumption of Fair Trade products, there are several developments that are encouraging the growth of the market. Increased availability of Fair Trade products within major retailers, and the development of Fair Trade offerings from established mainstream brands have increased the opportunities for consumers to buy Fair Trade products. However, there are questions over whether the growth of Fair Trade consumption will be best served by working through the existing supply context or whether a more radical challenge to the existing situation and supply context is required. Hira and Ferrie (2006) highlight the distinction in Fair Trade marketing between the radical approach that seeks to transform the trading system through a growth in alternative trade organizations, and the more moderate reformist version that seeks to work within existing channels and structures.

The emergence of schemes such as the Fair Trade Towns scheme within the UK also helps to develop a social context within which Fair Trade products achieve more widespread awareness and in which there is the potential for social and institutional pressures favouring the purchase of Fair Trade products grow. There are now over 240 Fair Trade towns within the UK. For each one:

- + the local council must pass a resolution supporting Fairtrade, and serve Fairtrade coffee and tea at its meetings and in offices and canteens.
- + a range of Fairtrade products must be readily available in the area’s shops and served in local cafés and catering establishments (for which targets are set in relation to population) and also be used by a number of local work places and community organizations;
- + a local Fairtrade steering group must be established to ensure continued commitment to Fairtrade Town status, and to attract media coverage and popular support for the campaign.

Each of these dimensions helps to create a place-based context in which citizens as consumers will be encouraged to con-

sider Fair Trade products as a purchase alternative and to consider the ethical attributes of products within their purchase decisions.

Another opportunity for the development of Fair Trade markets is through the promotion of more ethically orientated consumer lifestyles. Although some elements of the literature view ethical consumption as a function of hedonistic self-indulgence, there is also evidence that it forms a part of consumers’ self-identity and their social relationships (Schaeffer and Crane, 2001; Szmigin et al. 2007). As such it may be possible to promote the consumption of Fair Trade products as part of a responsible and desirable lifestyle (although authors such as Wright 2004, and Szmigin et al. 2007 question whether consumer lifestyles primarily built around self-gratification can make more than a tokenistic contribution to the creation of a fairer world). To develop more responsible lifestyles our understanding of consumer behaviour needs to move beyond single, isolated purchase decisions which have little meaning or impact (for either purchaser or beneficiary) to understand purchases as patterns and routines. Such concepts of routine development or reproduction can be extended beyond thinking in terms of patterns of decisions to broader concepts of life-style. Life-style denotes how individuals (or households) typically decide, use their freedom of choice and allocate their purchasing power and time, within a range given by their more material living conditions. It is perhaps illuminating that the Norwegian NGO *Fremtiden i våre hender* (Future in our hands) which uses life-style as a key concept in promoting Fair Trade, originates from a publication, *Alternativ livsstil*, which even non-Norwegian speakers can deduce is dedicated to promoting alternative lifestyles.

The role of Fair Trade purchasing in relation to self-identity, lifestyle and consumer behaviour is also interesting in relation to the recent entry of Nescafé into the Fair Trade market for coffee through its “Partners Blend”. There is a danger that for some consumers who view their lifestyle and identity as “non-mainstream”, and include the purchase of Fair Trade products as part of an alternative lifestyle, the emergence of Fair Trade brands from such major brand names will lessen its attractiveness. There is also a danger that amongst consumers who associate Nestlé with the concentration and globalization of the food industry, and with specific scandals such as Nestlé’s marketing of infant formula milk, that their adoption of Fair Trade will be seen as devaluing the concept’s ethical credentials. Given that Partners’ Blend accounts for less than 0.1% of Nestlé’s imports, their critics are concerned that it represents only a token gesture. Similarly recent media coverage accusing retailers of marketing Fair Trade products at premium prices to generate more money for themselves, rather than to give more money to producers, also risks undermining consumer belief in the concept, and in who it actually benefits.

It is ironic that the adoption of Fair Trade products by major retailers and by major brand names, which was once viewed as essential to creating a marketing context in which Fair Trade products could develop, is now seen as potentially posing a risk of a consumer back-lash due to negative media coverage and changes to the informational environment. Returning to the relationship between the ethics and responsibilities of companies and of consumers, and the relationship between them, Nestlé’s entry into the market also poses interesting questions about the motivations of different types of company involved in Fair Trade. If Nestlé’s involvement is value-led, it poses the question of why and how the company’s values have changed, and how its involvement squares with its continuing dominant role in the mainstream market in which many producers are paid at below

subsistence level. If the involvement is motivated as a reaction to a perceived competitive threat posed by the growth of Fair Trade markets and suppliers, then it may be perceived as cynical in a way that is damaging to both the company and the cause. The hope must be that Nestlé's entry into the market helps to broaden the entire category with its marketing expenditure benefiting the Fair Trade concept as much as the brand itself, and that the brand may act as a bridge for relatively conservative consumers raised on Nescafé to move towards Fair Trade coffees generally.

Interestingly, what the entry of Nestlé into Fair Trade markets seems to have sparked off, is a rediscovery amongst Fair Trade businesses of the importance of marketing based on their ethical credentials to place a fresh emphasis on the moral intensity of the issue. After many years of marketing based on an emphasis of the quality of their coffee first, and their ethical credentials second, Café Direct's 2006 media campaigns returned to an emphasis on their ethical credentials as setting them apart from their more mainstream competitors.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to take a fresh look at our understanding of the ethics and perceived social responsibilities of consumers, and the impact they may have on our understanding of the markets for, and marketing of, ethical products such as Fair Trade products. The current limitations of mainstream discussions about ethics and consumption include:

- + a view of ethical consumption as abnormal and apart from mainstream consumption to create a situation in which businesses who are increasingly viewed as having social responsibilities, serve the needs of consumers who are seen as having none;
- + a tendency to view the ethical dimensions of such products as a mere product augmentation, rather than as intrinsic to the product itself. This has led to attempts to understand ethical consumption behavior simply by extending existing models, such as the Theory of Planned Behavior, rather than trying to develop new approaches;
- + the difficulties of disentangling consumer motives between an ethically driven desire to be responsible, and more selfishly orientated desires to feel and to be perceived by others to be socially responsible, or to feel that one has discharged any

ethical responsibilities that go with one's power as a consumer by making token "good" purchases;

- + an emphasis on identifying, segmenting and understanding "the ethical consumer" or "the Fair Trade consumer" rather than understanding the variations in strength, motivation and focus of the ethical concerns of consumers;
- + a discussion that has polarized the development prospects for Fair Trade marketing between traditional ethically-led strategies and strategies based on an emphasis on technical product quality and greater commercialization (Golding and Peattie, 2005);
- + a research tradition that continues to focus on purchases, and on how and why consumers can be encouraged to make purchases, and that continues to focus on either the consumer's buying motivations or the seller's marketing strategy, without integrating and balancing them.

A proper understanding of Fair Trade marketing will not come from thinking in terms of a simple consumer/marketer divide, but will require an understanding of how the consumer relates to the retailer, the brand manufacturer and the farmers that supply them. It will also require an understanding of how a sense of responsibility can be developed and divided within the market so that there is an integrated and shared sense of social co-responsibility amongst marketers and consumers. Adding an ethical 'box' into conventional models of consumer behavior to create modified versions of concepts like the Theory of Planned Behavior are doomed to provide abstracted and severely limited insights into ethical consumption. Understanding the nature and potential role of consumers in this process, and the nature of ethical dimensions of consumer behavior will require the development of new perspectives, theories, models, categorizations and research streams. This paper has presented a number of different perspectives on ConSR as partially analogous to CSR; as informed by concepts of the citizen-consumer; as insufficiently explained by augmentations to conventional consumer decision making models; as dependent upon the situational context and the information available to consumers; and as potentially dependent on the evolution of a sense of co-responsibility between marketers and consumers. These perspectives highlight the need for a new research emphasis on, and some new research ideas concerning, consumer ethics and ConSR. They will also hopefully contribute to the momentum that is gathering behind this process.

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Endnotes

- 1 A more appropriate name for this “CES”-scale would be consumer dishonesty scale.
- 2 See yet another paper of Vitell, 2001, with some bridge-building between such theoretical and empirical research. For a discussion of the possible narrowness of the Consumer ethics scale (CES) research tradition see Brinkmann and Lentz, 2006.
- 3 The Hunt-Vitell model fits perhaps even better for morally responsible than for dishonest consumer behavior.

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