Many consumers intend to buy and consume products with ethical connotations. Very few of these consumers, however, manage to follow these ethical consumption intentions through to the cash register (Young et al., 2010). The scant insights garnered in the nascent literature exploring this ‘gap’ provide a limited, disconnected, understanding of the consumption contradictions of ethical consumers (Devinney, Eckhardt, and Belk 2005; Szmigin et al. 2009). We draw upon a number of theoretical lenses under the rubric of Couples Theory to: (1) explore ethical consumption from the dyadic perspective of couples; (2) understand ethical consumption contradictions in the context of dynamic, deeply layered and negotiated social lives; and (3) begin to grasp the role of ethical consumption in the ongoing construction of self inside and outside these intimate relationships. The findings from our initial interviews illustrate that relational interactions provide authentic, in-depth psychological explanations for ethical consumption contradictions not previously recognized in the literature.

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Behind Closed Doors: Understanding the Consumption Contradictions of Ethically-Minded Consumers from a Couples Theory Perspective

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Many consumers intend to buy and consume products with ethical connotations. Very few of these consumers, however, manage to place the desired ethically-derived items in their shopping baskets (Young et al., 2010). This intention-behavior ‘gap’ is widely recognized and is an emerging topic of academic study (e.g. Szmigin, Carrigan, and McEachern, 2009; Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2007; Carrington, Neville, and Whitwell, 2010). Yet, the exploratory insights garnered in this nascent literature provide only a partial understanding of the gap (Devinney, Eckhardt, and Belk 2005; Szmigin et al. 2009). In particular, the ethically-minded consumers portrayed in the extant literature remain isolated and disconnected not only from their daily lives and routines (Carrington et al., 2010), but also their relationships with intimate others. To address this oversight, we draw upon a number of theoretical lenses under the rubric of Couples Theory to explore the consumption contradictions of ethically-minded consumers in the broadened context of complex and negotiated social lives.

The study aims to: (1) explore ethical consumption from the dyadic perspective of couples; (2) understand ethical consumption contradictions in the context of dynamic, deeply layered and negotiated social lives; and (3) begin to grasp the role of ethical consumption in the ongoing construction of self inside and outside these intimate relationships. The findings from our initial interviews show that relational interactions provide authentic, broad understanding as well as deeper psychological explanations for ethical consumption contradictions not previously recognized in the literature.

REVIEW

The concepts and theories within the conceptual lens of couple theory explore how the interpersonal exchange between the couple might reflect the internal, intrapsychic material specific to each partner (Clulow, 1985). For example, expressed internal material may take the form of ‘projective identification’, which refers to a defensive, unconscious process where parts of the self that are denied and rejected are split off and ‘projected’ onto another person/partner (Klein, 1946). Similarly, ‘transference’ is said to occur when feelings unconsciously retained from childhood (e.g., toward a parent) are transferred to a new object (e.g., the partner) (Andersen and Berk, 1998; Freud, 1940). Many theories (e.g., attachment, object relations) take the perspective that the way individuals relate to both people and situations is programmed by their experiences (i.e. ‘attachment’) with their parents as infants (Bowlby, 1969; Bretherton and Munholland, 1999, Fairbairn, 1952).

Extant consumer research exploring the couple context has foregone deeper, psychological examinations, such as those analyzing the accuracy of predictions of a partner’s preferences (Davis, Hoch, and Ragsdale, 1986; Lerouge and Warlop, 2006; Scheibehenne, Mata, and Todd, 2011). Some, however, have examined the ‘transference’ of previous experiences of service failures onto other ‘attachment’ styles affect consumer processing (Jeong and Drolet, 2010), gift giving perceptions (Nguyen and Munch, 2011), and satisfaction with marketing relationships (Johnson and Thomson, 2003). In a similar study to this one, Albert and Horowitz (2009) showed that stronger attachment styles are related to greater intention for individuals to consume ethically. Nevertheless, there remains a substantial opportunity to examine ethical consumption, especially its contradictions, from the perspective of the couple context and its interactional dynamics.

METHODOLOGY

In light of the nascent state of the extant literature and our theory development focus (Deshpande 1983; Edmondson and McManus 2007), the study employs a novel qualitative research strategy, complimented with an inductive analytic approach (Corbin and Strauss 2008). The present study represents the initial stage in an extended research agenda. We present one in-depth case study of an intimate couple who identify
strongly with ethical consumption values, espouse ethical consumption desires and display both ethically aligned and contradictory purchasing/consumption behavior. The multi-method qualitative methodology combines long semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and archival data to enable territory acclimatization, core theme development and triangulation (Hammersley and Atkinson 2008). The data was interpretively micro-analyzed in-situ by a consumer researcher and a couple therapist in collaboration to construct emergent concepts and relationships. Follow up interviews with respondents and formal therapy ‘supervision’ with a second, senior couple therapist then explored the emergent themes in detail. We drew upon relevant concepts from the a-priori literature to frame the emergent themes as the study unfolded.

FINDINGS – INITIAL CASE STUDY
Some ethical consumption contradictions may be explained by practical, mundane rationale. For example, Alan (male, 41) was not able to convince his wife, Benita (female, 40), to buy a Toyota Prius – a purchase consistent with Alan’s sustainability values – because she found the internal layout “weird. It felt like it was back to front”. In some instances, however, viewing couple consumption negotiations through the lens of more sophisticated couple theory garners a deeper understanding. For example, Alan finds that he sometimes consumes non-organic, non-free range meat products, contradicting his values and beliefs around these issues, in response to Benita’s ethical admonishment. He explains that this is a response to what he perceives as Benita’s “fundamentalism” about these issues, which is counter to his preference for “flexibility” and “moderation”. In this case, Alan’s ethical consumption contradictions stem from his unconscious behavioral response, overwhelming his personal ethical values and intentions. We can speculate, however, that Alan’s response to Benita may be understood through the interactional dynamic and specifically the lens of transference (Andersen and Berk, 1998; Freud, 1940). Further exploration of his family of origin suggests that Alan is transferring unresolved feelings of restriction and lack of autonomy experienced subjectively from his mother, on to his wife. His desire for autonomy from his mother/wife overwhelms his ethical consumption values.

CONCLUSION & FUTURE RESEARCH
Previous ethical consumption research has not taken into account the negotiation and compromise inherent in the shared consumption decisions of intimate couple relationships. Further, our collaborative, qualitative approach is able to unearth potential psychological drivers that emanate from the family of origin and manifest in the couple dynamic, which then underlie couple consumption negotiations. Our approach provides a unique, deep, and relationally contextual explanation of ethical consumption, including its contradictions.

REFERENCES
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