Becoming Sensitive to Ethical Consumption Behavior: Narratives of Survival in an Uncertain and Unpredictable World

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Becoming Sensitive to Ethical Consumption Behavior: Narratives of Survival in an Uncertain and Unpredictable World

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This paper examines ethical consumption behavior as a subjective and contextual phenomenon. For this study, nine informants who modified their consumption lifestyle and adopted ethical consumption practices were interviewed using existential phenomenology. The hermeneutic analysis of the 458 verbatim-transcribed pages provided insights into the factors influencing the development of alternative lifestyles and the meanings consumers associate to ethical consumption. Ultimately, ethical consumption behavior responds to an individual choice that is contingent upon living in an uncertain and unpredictable world.

INTRODUCTION

Ethical consumption behaviors are “decision making, purchases, or other consumption experiences that are affected by the consumer’s ethical concerns” (Cooper-Martin and Holbrook 1993, p. 113). In an effort to better understand ethical consumption behavior, researchers have taken at least three distinct directions. Those three distinct orientations can be named agentic, structural, and dualistic approaches.

First, some researchers focus on defining ethical consumers’ criteria in terms of demographics, socioeconomics, psychographics, pro-social behaviors, ideologies, or beliefs (Rawwas 2001; Tanner and Kast 2003; Zhongzhi 2001). By labeling the supposed characteristics of ethical consumers, these studies attempt to identify the causes of consuming ethically. For example, some researchers emphasize that cultural personality types (Pitta et al. 1999; Rawwas 2001; Singhapakdi et al. 1999), or collective concerns (Kim and Choi 2004) are important determinants in ethical consumer decision-making. Under this perspective, ethical consumption behavior is believed to reflect rational and intentional individual choices.

While the first stream of research suggests that individuals’ characteristics affect ethical decision-making process, another stream points toward social obligations. By focusing on the underlying “moral principles and standards that guide behavior of individuals or groups as they obtain, use, and dispose goods and services” (Muncy and Vitell 1992, p. 298), this second field considers that individuals consume in order to be part of society. For example, studies by Grove et al. (1989) and Chatzidakis et al. (2004) suggest that consumers try to conform to prescribed normative consumer behavior (Chatzidakis et al. 2004; Grove et al. 1989). Similarly, Van Dam and Apeldoorn (1996) emphasize the influential role of marketing theory in the development of ethical consumption behavior. For them, consumer demand responds closely to structural ideologies (Van Dam and Apeldoorn 1996). Such an argument places the consumer as subservient to normative and prescribed discourses of ethical consumption. This approach suggests that ethical consumption behavior is a phenomenon directed and controlled by the systems and structures of production and competition (Baudrillard 1998; Baudrillard 1978; Baudrillard and Levin 1981).

Finally, researchers have combined both fields suggesting that individual characteristics and social obligations simultaneously affect ethical decision-making. For example, Davies et al. (2002) emphasized that both personal norms and social norms are important determinants in the recycling-decision-making process. Similarly, when Shaw and Shiu (2002) developed a theory of planned behavior in the context of ethical consumption behavior, they considered both self-identity and ethical obligation. Self-identity represents the “pertinent part of an individual self that relates to a particular behavior” and ethical obligation reflects “an individual’s internalized ethical rules” (Shaw and Shiu 2002, p. 287). Both studies concluded that social norms must be internalized in order to impact ethical behavior. When social norms are not internalized but taken as categorical imperatives, individuals develop coping strategies without modifying their behavior (Chatzidakis et al. 2004).

With this approach, ethical consumption behavior is no longer a fixed practice determined by either individual characteristics or by normative obligations, but rather a result of the interplay between individual choice (agency) and societal power (structure). On the one hand, ethical consumption behavior is a rational and voluntary choice that reflects individual characteristics, taste, and preferences. On the other hand, ethical consumption behavior is fabricated and imposed by a complex system of social, cultural, and material (re)production. As such, ethical consumption behavior is a selfless and active practice (Cooper-Martin and Holbrook 1993), yet it is carried out within constraints imposed by material situation (i.e.: global warming, waste, pollution) and structural power. Again, a critical aspect of this approach is that social norms must be internalized before it influences behavior. Arguably, effort is required to understand the process through which individuals internalize social norms and obligations. It is precisely in this area that this research aims to contribute.

This study offers an analysis on the dynamic process of how consumers who believe to consume ethically internalize discourses and practices of ethical consumption behavior. The focus here is not on ethical truth but on the interplay between the individual characteristics (agent) and the structural properties of the social systems (structure). The reflexive modernization thesis offers a useful framework for analyzing the interplay between agency and structure (Giddens 1984).

ORIENTING CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: REFLEXIVE MODERNIZATION

The idea of reflexive modernization is presented based on one of the most prominent radical liberal theorist of today: Anthony Giddens. For the author of Consequence of Modernity (1990), Modernity and Self-identity (1991), The Transformation of Intimacy (1992), and more recently Runaway World (2002), the primary aspects of reflexive modernization rest on a dynamic relationship between a changing environment (the structure) and knowledgeable and capable individuals (the agent). A chronological reading shows Giddens progressively evolving from issues of risks and post-traditional order to concepts of institutional reflexivity and self-reflexive project (Beck et al. 1994; Giddens 1990; Giddens 1991; Giddens 2003; Giddens 2002; Giddens 1998; Giddens and Cassell 1993).

Anthony Giddens developed his notion of reflexive modernization based on our changing environment (Giddens 2002). For him, we are in the process of moving from a traditional world of calculable risks to one out of control, which he calls a “runaway world” (2002). Giddens developed his arguments looking at issues of risks and de-traditionalization. Using the term manufactured risks, Giddens emphasizes that the most threatening risks in society no longer come “from the fixities of tradition or nature” but rather
from “the very impact of our developing knowledge upon the world” (Giddens 2002, p.26). Risks, such as global climate change, increasing social inequalities, or the development of divorce are global, local, and personal threats that arise from our own intervention upon nature. Manufactured risks cannot be predicted, calculated, or controlled, and thus remain largely unknown. There are no institutions prepared for the worst imaginable incidents such as a nuclear power plant explosion. For such incidents, the calculation of hazard is impossible. Consequences and damages of such incidents are beyond human perception; they overlap delimitations in time and space, and concern everyone. Thus, the idea of controllability, certainty, and security collapses. Giddens argues that living in context of unpredictable risks and uncertainty forces us to live in an experiential world, where day-to-day life is a “dangerous adventure” (Beck et al. 1994, p. 59).

In addition to manufactured risks, Giddens comments on the importance of de-traditionalization. Giddens argues that individuals actively revise their narrative of self-identity in response to living in a “post-traditional order.” The term “post-traditional order” or “late modernity” refers to a process of moving from a traditional world in which order came from institutions, normalizing values, and routines; to a runaway world, in which boundaries blur, patterns dissolve, and social customs and established practices no longer offer guidance (Giddens 1991). In this context, Giddens argues that individuals are liberated from the structural power of small communities and traditions. They are divorced from underlying traditional order and enter into the voluntaristic realm of taste, choice and preference. They are free to question their present existence and anticipate future possibilities (Giddens 1991, p. 47). The process of questioning “how shall I live” and the self-monitoring of actions in the context of post-traditional order is part of the reflexive mobilizing of self-identity. It is the freeing of social life from the fixities of customs and traditions in relation to manufactured risks that leads individuals to engage in a reflexivity of modern social life.

The reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character (Giddens 1990, p. 38-39).

With the diffusion of information on ecological uncertainty, social inequalities, and instability of the global order, individuals become aware that traditional institutions such as nation, family, or work have become inadequate to the task they were asked to perform. Responsive of the inadequacy of institutions, individuals become suspicious of arguments mounted by corporate and state institutions with inherent legitimate authorities. This process of questioning institutional power is what Giddens (1990) calls institutional reflexivity. It implies reflection on or knowledge of the problems and limitations of modernity. Essentially, institutional reflexivity is about changes in relationships and roles within traditional structural boundaries that define society. The agent is freed from “the formulaic truth of tradition” (Giddens, 1994, p. 106).

Freed from the social monitoring of their own actions and normative imprisonment, individuals are forced to order and reorient their activities in the light of their new understanding of the world. Individual’s identity is no longer inscribed within tradition, rules, or customs; rather it is an ongoing project of construction, change, and development (Lash 1999). From the idea that identity is no longer given, individuals shift from being passive, non-reflexive marionettes to being active and reflexive agents. The idea of everyday life becomes a site of expression, in which individuals are self-reflexive projects committed to civil and political freedom. It involves engaging in an autonomous monitoring of day-to-day practices. This shift derives from a cognitive awareness of the self and the increasing diversity of lifestyle choices. Giddens’ formulation clearly emanates from Erikson’s conception of identity as a “process located in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his cultural community.” Erikson recognized the essential need for a subjective sense of continuous existence and a coherent memory. This perspective allows for conceptualizations of consumption behavior, in which the knowledgeable agents respond to, critique, and construct social structures in day-to-day choices and practices.

**METHODOLOGY**

A highly effective way of analyzing the dynamic process of how consumers who believe to consume ethically internalize discourses and practices of ethical consumption behavior in context of contemporary societal conditions is through the study of stories. Stories do not represent facts, but experiences in which individuals encode their day-to-day practices with symbolism and meanings (Giddens 1996; McAdams and Ochberg 1988). They constitute, and are constituted, by essential elements of the individual’s sense of self. In particular, Colby’s (2003) work shows the powerful use of life stories as a way of describing the interaction between the self and morality (Colby 2003). McAdams’s work on lives in transition also exemplifies stories as a powerful medium for considering individual’s sense of identity (McAdams 1997). Stories are qualitative lenses through which one can observe, document, feel, and understand human experiences (Fiese et al. 1999). Thus, using ethical consumers’ life stories can provide a valuable window on the way individuals internalize discourses and practices of ethical consumption behavior.

To gather ethical consumer stories, this study follows the methodology of existential phenomenological interviews (Thompson et al. 1989). Respondents who believe to consume ethically were interviewed in the United States during the year 2003. They were recruited by postings at several health stores and newspapers. All participants had internalized meanings of ethical consumption within their language, discourse, and narratives. Yet, as recommended by Thompson (1997), the respondents did not have a theoretical knowledge of the topic being studied. Due to an emphasis on depth of understanding, the respondent pool was small: nine informants. In terms of the Journal of Consumer Research, the recommended number of informants for interpretive research should range between 3 and 20 (Fournier 1998; Murray 2002).

In order to attain the ethical consumer’s first-person description of his/her specific experience, the interview technique required that some trust and pleasant atmosphere existed between the researcher and participants. One practical solution to facilitate trust was to give each informant a pseudonym and assure them of anonymity and confidentiality. Another was to perform the interviews, or rather the conversations, in a comfortable and quiet place in which the informants felt free to describe their ethical consumption experiences in detail.

Since the study draws on the conceptual framework of reflexive modernization, the role of the researcher was to help each informant exhibit a high degree of reflexivity. Toward this aim, the interview began with small talks to help the informant become comfortable with speaking into a recording device. Once the informants expressed openness and will to share their experiences, lengthier and more detailed descriptions were encouraged using questions and probes, as well as thoughts and feelings. The context of the interview gradually helped the respondents to self reflect and
to co-author their stories of ethical consumption behavior. Each interview lasted between one and three hours.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Participants adopted a specific grammar or discourse of ethical consumption through a progression of temporal events. A hermeneutical framework was used to analyze the temporal sequencing of key events and to ascertain the progression of adopting discourses and practices of ethical consumption behavior (Thompson 1997). The iterative analyses of moving back and forth between the data and the conceptual framework of reflexive modernization helped define, sharpen, and differentiate three themes. The three themes were finalized as destabilization, displacement, and discovery.

The theme destabilization has two characteristics: unpredictable and uncontrollable events and ontological insecurity. Informants’ stories of ethical consumption behavior show the importance of triggering events that destabilized their vision of life and existence. The events were either abrupt events that happened at a specific time and space or recurring events. In each case, the events were uncontrollable and unpredictable incidents over which informants had no control. Examples of events from the analysis include rape (Laila), physical injury (Robert), children leaving home (Mary), inheritance (Amelia), watching terrifying pictures of butchered animals (Philippe), or dreaming about the end of natural resources (Alexia). For the informants, these events were life-transforming insights resulting from a profound emotion or affective experience.

No one and nothing, not even the parents, friends, institutions, or governments were able to prevent the events from happening. For example, Laila’s faith in God and her respect for her parent’s norms and values did not protect her from being raped. Similarly, Mary’s life commitment to being the perfect wife and mother did not prevent the children from leaving home. The uncontrollability and unpredictability of the events showed the informants that life can neither be predicted nor controlled. Following the events, informants’ descriptions of people, institutions, society, and the world gave emphasis to a pessimistic outlook on reality. Their stories described a world that mistreats animals, enriches the few and impoverishes the many, destroys individuality and creativity, eliminates local markets and grocery stores, gradually reduces all values to those of a global hamburger/Coca-Cola society, and strongly threatens the ecological environment and the availability of natural resources. Overall, the uncontrollable and unpredictable events changed informants’ view on their life and the world. One of the informants even described the event as an “awakening event” that made her conscious of her life and actions, and the world surrounding her (Laila).

Under the theory of reflexive modernization, Ulrich Beck (1999) speaks about living in a world risk society. For him, the world is facing ecological destruction and technological-industrial dangers, poverty, and weapons of mass-destruction. Similarly, Giddens (1995) describes our contemporary society as a place where nothing can be predicted nor controlled. The uncontrollable and unpredictable event destabilized the idea that governments, institutions, or traditions provide security. The “ontological security” (Giddens 1990; Giddens 1995), or “protective cocoon” (Goffman 1956) disappears. According to Giddens (1991), ontological security is one of the main unconscious human needs. It is a sense of personal safety and absence of threat.

The second theme named displacement marks informants’ detachment from the world and others and the start of existential questioning. Again, an unpredictable and uncontrollable event destabilized informants’ ontological security. As the basic human needs of safety and security were no longer fulfilled, informants came to confront their own responsibility of living. As Sartre would say, informants were “condemned to be free” (Sartre 1966; Sartre 1957). Informants were “thrown” into a world of possibilities, free from social normative constraints. They were then forced to question the nature of their existence and their identity. As Laclau mentioned, “If the world of God can no longer be heard, we can start giving our own voice a new dignity” (Laclau 1990). It involves searching for the meaning of life in the self rather than in God’s words.

The dominant reaction to the collapse of security and the process of existential questioning was for the informants to see themselves as a helpless victim of external circumstances. Informants perceived old realities as an illusion and expressed feelings of emptiness and disorientation. They felt powerless and lonely, expressing severe anxiety and fear.

The concepts of anxiety and fear are important elements of the reflexive modernization thesis. According to Giddens (1991, p. 44-45), anxiety is essentially “an unconsciously organized state of fear” and “rising anxiety tends to threaten awareness of self-identity.” Anxiety attacks the core of the self by distanced the experience of the self from its relation to the world. As the self is distanced from the world and others, it is confronted to the burden of freedom, the necessity to choose an existence.

Discourses and practices of ethical consumption behavior were actualized in informants’ life only if during a phase of discovery. The last theme called discovery implies discovering and recognizing ethical consumption behavior and a new identity through an involvement with others. Others’ life examples opened informants to a new possibility of being and a new way of consuming. Here, anxiety and fear were broken down, legitimization and justifications for a change in consumption lifestyle were found, and a sense of a new identity emerged.

This last theme clearly shows that ethical consumers do not exist outside time and context as if they were singular human beings with immutable and autonomous properties, encapsulated in magical “ethical” islands. On the contrary, informants internalized discourses and practices of ethical consumption behavior through their relations with others and the world. They adopted rhetoric of ethics, or the notion of the common good, in their day-to-day consumption practices as it related to social and political contexts and consequences. Adopting ethical discourses and practices generated a process of value alignment guided by a commitment to the self and to others, a negotiation of subjective expressions, and a procedure of identification. Such processes embraced an ongoing dialectical interplay between the individual’s past, present, and anticipated future and his/her complex social environment. Fundamentally, this theme emphasizes that the process of adopting ethical discourses and practices is historically developed and is the manifestation of social interdependence (Dolan 2002).

The importance of social shaping in the internalization of discourses and practices of consumption lifestyles is prevalent in consumer behavior literature (Schouten 1991; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Studying Harley Davidson Bikers, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) speak about social shaping in term of “commitment-based status hierarchy.” For them, the gradual transformation consumption practices entails a commitment to a subculture.

1Identization is a term employed by Melucci in “The Playing Self” to characterize the procedure, processual, self-reflexive, and constructed manner in which we define ourselves.
CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the how of ethical consumption behavior. It emphasizes the process of internalization of discourses and practices of ethical consumption behavior.

The framing of an ethical consumption behavior starts with the implicit human need for security. After an unpredictable and uncontrollable event, informants felt in the grip of forces over which they had no power. With available cultural discourses and the help of others’ life examples, they realized that the powerlessness they experienced was not a sign of personal failing, but reflected the incapacities of institution to provide security.

With the analysis, it became clear that the internalization of ethical consumption discourses and practices did not solely emerge from a rational reflection or cognition, but rather from a life-transforming event that led informants to (re)assess their environment and (re)shape their lives. Here, ethical consumption behavior is viewed as a dynamic socially constructed concept whereby consumers are mutually constituted by their own agency and by their changing structural environment. Ultimately, ethical consumption behavior represents an individual choice that is contingent upon living in a world risk society (Beck 1999). On those terms, adopting ethical consumption behavior refers to a project of becoming “the kind of person one should aspire to be, the type of life one is encouraged to lead, the practices which are invented to turn into moral beings, into the right sort of person” (Weeks, 1995, p. 56).

The use of the reflexive modernization thesis in this study provides important inferences on consumption practices. Consumption used to be seen as almost exclusively a function of a real subject motivated by needs and confronted by real objects as sources of satisfaction. Such perspective gave ultimate power to a rational, creative, and autonomous consumer, free from structural influences. In clear opposition to this under-determined view of consumer sovereignty were the critical theorists such as Galbraith (1979), Marcuse (1964), or Baudrillard (1998) who noted that consumers, although apparently free, were in fact dominated by processes of massification, domination, and commodification2 structured by The Hidden Persuaders (Packard 1980). Under this second perspective, the consumers are manipulated by an unlimited structural power. While this suggests important oppositional views on consumption, the reflexive modernization thesis provides a useful dialectical view on consumption (Cherrier and Murray 2004; Dolan 2002; Giddens 1998; Murray 2002; Weeks 2000; Weeks 2003).

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Becoming Sensitive to Ethical Consumption Behavior


