WHY DON’T PEOPLE CONSUME ETHICALLY?
SOCIETAL BARRIERS TO ETHICAL CONSUMPTION

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Why don’t people consume ethically?

• Prothero and McDonagh (2014) posed the question

“We are curious as to how we can begin to understand why we engage in unsustainable behaviours when so many of us realise that these behaviours are not sustainable.

Why, after all these years, is there still such a large sustainability attitude/behaviour gap?”
25 years ago...
Ethical companies then
What do we mean by ethical consumption?

• Purchasing and consumption that takes into consideration societal and animal welfare, environmental concerns, corporate responsibility, development and Fairtrade issues, labour practices, WTO policies and globalisation (Harrison et al., 2005)

✓ Links also to global and systemic risks such as food scares, environmental degradation, questioning consumption and market practices (Barnett et al., 2005)

• Increased evidence of moral and environmental concerns, as well as wider consumption, desires and choices
Ethical consumption and its various manifestations

- Distinction between consumers who choose to shop ethically by refining their consumption choices (e.g. fair trade, free range, organic, low carbon)

- Others choose to restrict their consumption, such as voluntary simplifiers, freegans or downshifters (Zamwel et al., 2014; Shaw & Moraes, 2009; Szmigin & Carrigan, 2006; Bekin et al., 2005; Shaw & Newholm, 2002)

- But all forms of consumption are, at some level, ethical, for often love and care are mediated through commodity consumption (Miller, 1998 in Barnett et al., 2005)
Inherent tensions

• Consumers portrayed as “largely amoral, self-interested, rationally-economically motivated” and only interested in meeting their own needs (Brinkmann & Peattie, 2008)

• Assigned co-responsibility for environmental reform and regulation of own consumption (Connolly & Prothero, 2008)

• Accused of hypocrisy due to inconsistent and conflicting consumption (Higgins & Tadajewski, 2002)

✓ But consuming ethically presents consistency challenges and complex paradoxes (Shaw et al., 2015; Carrington et al., 2014; Boulstridge & Carrigan, 2000)

✓ Inconsistencies can be seen as coherent if we consider ethical consumption as part of overall life projects (Newholm, 2005; Moraes et al., 2012)
Role of marketers

- Choices made are embedded in the “complex social and normative context” of the politics behind products (Brinkmann & Peattie, 2008)
- Corporations benefit from an enormous balance of power compared to individual consumers
- Dominant Social Paradigm (DSP) in which marketing operates means “companies have an almost universal emphasis” on ‘the sale’, with consumption as the underpinning force towards maximizing profits (McDonagh & Prothero, 2014, p. 1198)
- The ideology of marketing, driven by a mantra of ‘more consumption’, is increasingly at odds with sustainability and responsibility (Harper & Peattie, 2011; Prothero et al., 2010)
Ethical consumption is social

• Sociological approaches to ethical consumption are largely concerned with social identity, distinction, identification and norms (Gabriel & Lang, 2006; Jackson, 2005; Rettie et al., 2012)

• Consumption embedded in ‘relationships of obligation’
  ✓ Decisions made as members of households, families, social networks and communities (Clarke et al., 2007; Caru & Cova, 2003; Shaw et al., 2015; Szmigin et al., 2007)

• Consumer inconsistencies are signs of their socially meaningful, but sometimes contradictory, interactions and co-constructions with markets (Penaloza & Venkatesh, 2006)
Ethical consumption as political?

- Consumer choices that seek to address issues of societal and individual concern in relation to consumption have been described as consumer votes (Dickinson & Carsky, 2005; Dickinson & Hollander, 1991; Shaw et al., 2006; Moraes et al., 2011)

  ✓ Ethical consumption can be viewed as political in that it represents an avenue for direct citizen intervention (Micheletti, 2003)

  ✓ It can be seen as individual or collective (Gabriel & Lang, 1995), or as individualised collective action (Micheletti, 2003)

- Many have questioned consumer voting because it seeks to embrace the very market system that is deemed so problematic (Carducci, 2006; Heath & Potter, 2004), but…
Enabling choice, empowering choice…

• Choice is critical to consumer voting, and includes access to information, wealth, and market availability
  ✓ Where these are lacking, consumer uncertainty can arise (Moraes et al., 2011)

• Diverse discourses on consumer choice also illustrate the tensions and complexity in ethical consumption (e.g.)
  ✓ Consumer sovereignty as a market circumstance where individuals have the power to choose which products and services will be produced and consumed (Garman, 1997; Hutt, 1940)
  ✓ Consumer as the liberated bricoleur, for whom choices are cultural resources for self-expression or experimentation (Firat & Dholakia, 2006; Hewer & Brownlie, 2007)
Restricting, overwhelming, complex choice...

- Such discourses legitimise specific industries [and incentive structures] which have come under scrutiny (Schwarzkopf, 2010)
- Consumers are constrained by the choices offered by the market (Lang & Gabriel, 2005)
- Although choice and choosing may be critical to effective voting, too much choice can be detrimental and potentially paralysing (Shankar et al., 2006)

  ✓ The level of information processing required becomes overwhelming (Lennard et al., 2001)

  ✓ Choice overload leads to ‘tyranny of choice’ (Schwartz, 2004; Szmigin & Carrigan, 2004)
Choice complexity and consumer confusion

- Complexity of ethical choices can cause consumer confusion
  - Arises out of (mis)information overload present in the decision-making environment, coupled with consumers’ inability to correctly interpret the many dimensions of products or services (Mitchell et al., 2005; Mitchell & Papavassiliou, 1999; Turnbull et al., 2000; Spiteri-Cornish & Moraes, 2015)

- Three main types of confusion (i.e. brand similarity, information overload, and ambiguous/misleading information)
  - Can lead to consumer-coping strategies, such as abandoning a purchase, clarifying buying goals, or seeking additional information (Mitchell et al., 2005)
Social labels
Social labelling and consumer confusion

- Social labelling exemplifies the complexity and confusion involved in ethical consumer decisions
  - Information asymmetries between social label certifiers/marketers and consumers (Brecard, 2014; Steinhart et al., 2013; DEFRA, 2010)
  - Fragmented and contested social label and certification landscape (Carrigan et al., 2015)
  - Can discredit the market for sustainable products and deter consumption (Annunziata et al., 2011)
  - Offer competing ethical information which is often incomplete, contradictory and confusing
Choice editing and social labelling

• Social labeling is helpful heuristic to reduce ethical search costs (Teisl et al., 2008)

• Ethical signaling power is amplified if labels minimize cognitive requirements for consumers (Parguel et al., 2011)

• **But** consumers also need sufficient ‘ethical literacy’ including
  - Appropriate information
  - The capacity to process that information and trade off complex/conflicting criteria
  - And the opportunity and motivation to practice responsible consumption in their everyday shopping
The issue of access

• Consumers who are more likely to be ‘empowered’ by ethical choice are usually high-income earners (Nelson, 2002)

  ✓ This suggests an element of social exclusivity attached to choice complexity and consumer voting (Williams & Windebank, 2002)

  ✓ Voluntary simplicity and other-oriented green considerations only feasible for a few (Huneke, 2005; Shaw & Moraes, 2009; Bekin et al., 2008)
The issue of access

- Need to make ethical/green options more accessible and affordable (Carrigan & de Pelsmacker, 2009; Shaw et al., 2007; Jackson, 2005)
  - E.g. availability of ethical alternatives in rural shops can be problematic (Shaw & Moraes, 2009)
  - E.g. difficulties in accessing non-sweatshop apparel (Shaw et al., 2007)
  - E.g. Ethical disposal behaviour can reflect social inequalities and difficulties in accessing recycling centres or recycling collection services (Bekin et al., 2007)
Locked in habits and social norms

- Consumers are often ‘locked in’ to inconsistent consumption patterns (Jackson, 2005; Moraes et al., 2012; Carrigan et al., 2010)
  - Influenced by social norms that encourage/reprimand certain behavioural choices
- Habits are triggered by contexts and circumstances
  - Much everyday behaviour uses little intention or cognitive deliberation, so there is a need to unfreeze problematic routines and behaviours (Jackson, 2005)
  - Inconsistency-reduction entails disrupting the environmental factors that prompt habits (Verplanken and Wood, 2006)
Solving societal barriers to ethical consumption
New consumption communities

- NCCs conceptualised as communities that provide alternative forms of thinking and consumption to an increasingly varied range of individuals (Szmigin et al., 2007)
  - Sustained around a sense of community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001)
  - Developed through consumer engagement in boycotts, voicing of concerns and buycotts (Hirshman, 1970; Friedman, 1996)
  - Encompassing; ranging from mainstream Fairtrade Towns through to those highly committed to various interrelated issues
- NCCs represent positive, localised, and context-specific consumer responses to unwanted societal and environmental consequences of consumer culture (Moraes et al., 2012; 2010)
Various types of NCCs

Ithaca
Garstang
Green Tech
Fallowfields
Stone Hall
Woodland
Community Farms
Sunny Valley
Spiritual
New consumption communities
New consumption communities as ethical spaces

• ‘Downstream plus’ combined with upstream disruption and re-creation leads to ‘ethical spaces’
  ✓ Can facilitate choice editing and reduce inconsistency

• Creative, production-engaged practices, discourses and choices ontologically reframe (Gibson-Graham, 2006) and maintain ethical/green consumption
  ✓ Production, consumption and waste become interlinked and intertwined in a web of empowered green and responsible signifiers

✓ This enables participants’ ethical concerns to be imagined, discussed, enacted and practiced
NCCs’ reconnection with production and its symbolic dimensions

(Personal Development)
- Personally Rewarding
- Opportunity for Personal Growth
- (Self-)Awareness
- Humbling
- Meditative
- Aesthetically Pleasing

(Spiritual)
- Love in Action
- Understanding the Process of Living
- Holistic
- Taking Responsibility for What One Consumes
- No Food Mileage
- Less Waste
- Less Packaging

(Sense of Community)
- Opportunity to Socialize
- Opportunity to Connect with Other People
- Responsibility toward Group

(More Control)
- Empowering
- Sense of Capability
- Healthy Can Trust
- Sense of Ownership
- More Quality
- Peace of Mind
- Less Dependency on Supermarkets

(Trade-Offs)
- Time consuming
- Inconvenient
- Laborious information search
- Communal rather than individual choices
- May cause intra-group conflicts
- Not necessarily cheaper

(Moraes et al., 2010)
Modbury – No plastic bags campaign
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• Community change through ‘collective duty of care’ (Carrigan et al., 2010)
• Rebecca Hosking (catalytic individual) filmed ‘Message in Waves’
• Early adopters (e.g. deli, butcher, baker) leveraged peer powers to persuade others
• Downstream interventions
  ✓ Environmental education; ‘tipping point’ created community norm to participate
  ✓ Provided alternatives for each trader; distributed alternative bags to consumers
  ✓ Reduced inconsistency; disrupted environmental factors that led to habitual behaviour
• Upstream interventions reinforced behaviour
No plastic bags campaign results

• In less than one month, 43 traders had agreed to replace plastic bags with green alternatives
• Plymouth and South West Co-operative provided each household with environmentally-friendly bags
• Modbury became the first European plastic bag-free town in April 2007
• A community support network has been established in order to take the campaign to other communities
• Modbury traders have been credited with starting this ‘small green revolution’ in the UK which now includes Wal-Mart Asda, who have invested £3 million to help customers change the habits of a lifetime, and cut the number of single-use bags in their stores by 53%
Summary and implications
What we know

• Consumer responsibility manifests itself flexibly (Szmigin et al., 2009)
  ✓ Demonstrate ethical considerations that are product and situation specific (Carrington et al., 2014; Davies et al., 2012)
  ✓ Subject to attitude-behaviour gaps (Carrington et al., 2014; Chatzidakis et al., 2007; Newholm, 2005; Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000)
  ✓ Impacted by micro, meso, macro and supermacro levels of influence (Caruana and Chatzidakis, 2013)
  ✓ Thinking about practice and ‘ethical performances’ may help (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 1997; Warde, 2014)

• Need to establish what matters to people and appeal to the forms of ethical concerns that are often already embedded in their daily consumption practices (Carrigan et al., 2011; Miller, 2001)
Past practices and policies

- Environmental debate has taken an overly rational view of consumption
  - Neglected the extent to which consumption and sustainability are bound up in, and complicated by, habits as well as emotional, symbolic and social meanings (Peattie & Peattie, 2009; Szmigin et al., 2009; Schor, 1998)

- Need to reframe how the need for information and choice are constituted in a consumer society (Horne, 2009)
  - Avoid dangers of hyper segmentation (Resnik et al., 1979)
  - Find ways to simplify and rationalize ethical cues (e.g. social labels, Modbury)
Exemplar practices and policies

• Can help resolve ethical choices that are contradictory
  ✓ E.g. supporting overseas Fair Trade communities directly conflicts with a desire to reduce food miles (Bray et al., 2011)

• Can help to aggregate rather than segregate these multiple areas of focus

• Inevitably some types of consumption and certain commodities may lend themselves better to ethical marketing initiatives than others
  ✓ E.g. recycled paper versus jewellery versus luxury fashion (Janssen et al., 2014)

• Can help tackle the reasons for rejecting ethical consumption practices (Burke et al., 2014)
Must offer incentives that disrupt

- Diffusion theory (Fell et al., 2009; Carrigan et al., 2010)
  - Perceived potential benefits associated with adoption of new behaviour
  - Ability to try new behaviours
  - Ability to see the benefits of adopting such behaviours
  - Nature of the group
  - New behaviours may evolve
  - Norms, roles and social networks
  - Catalytic individuals
  - How catalytic individuals choose to communicate about the new behaviours
Must offer incentives that disrupt (cont.)

- **Diffusion theory** (cont.)
  - ✓ Ability of a new behaviour to co-exist with existing social patterns and behaviours
  - ✓ Presence of conducive infrastructures
- **Community as locus of change**
  - ✓ Focus on informal structures that tie community organisations together
  - ✓ Networks diffuse new ideas within a social system
  - ✓ Role for pro-environmental mavens as trusted source of information
Connecting production and consumption

• ‘Ethical spaces’ such as NCCs can deliver the necessary links individuals need to the invisible consequences of consumption choices

  ✓ Collective influence can be more powerful than fragmented, individual acts to embed sustainable practice in everyday life

• Waddock (2014) proposes rejecting ‘meme of constant growth’ for new memes that reflect the realities of our resource constraints
Cultural shifts

• Traditional materialism (i.e. a consumer preoccupation that owning things makes life better) remains a barrier to achieving more sustainable production and consumption (Scott et al., 2014)

• Challenge is to shift society towards sustainable modes of production and consumption, while embedded in the DSP and rooted within “largely unquestioned cultural values, symbols, practices and infrastructures, as well as policies and privileged economic positions” (Scott et al., 2014, p. 282)

• Alternative memes for our economic, productive and social systems such as flourishing, wellbeing, plenitude and ‘enough’ advocate fewer resources while still supporting the world’s population (Soper, 2015)
Final thoughts

- Sustainable development itself is a social proposition…
- Consumers’ ethical and non-ethical performances are very much embedded in social processes

✓“Changes in materiality are part of a more general performative integration where objects, feelings, personal experiences, cultural values and activities”, as well as norms, shared knowledge and understanding, and the consumption place “are constantly involved in a process of mutual co-sharing and co-evolution” (Magaudda, 2011, p.31)
Final thoughts (cont.)

• Thogersen and Crompton’s (2009) plea for government and environmental organisations to campaign for more ambitious sustainable agendas may be more effective in tackling behavioural inconsistencies if framed to include community as well as individual consumption practices (Moraes et al., 2012)
Thank you for your attention
Any questions?