

### Penultimate Version

Lisbeth Nielsen & McGregor, S. L. T. (2013). Consumer morality and moral norms: An emergent conceptual framework. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 37(5), 473-480.

#### Abstract

With a focus on consumer morality, this paper first reviewed the literature on moral norms, identifying six approaches: (a) descriptive/injunctive; (b) personal; (c) altruistic; (d) material, formal and synthetic; (e) autonomy, beneficence and justice; and, (f) universal norms. The paper then explored three moral norm-related concepts - what constitutes a moral situation, morally irresponsible behaviour, and morally risky behaviour - with a focus on the insights they can shed on consumer morality, in concert with the notion of moral norms. The discussion then turned to an overview of how these moral norm concepts have been (can be) applied to understand the moral dimension of consumer behaviour. An iterative analysis of this discussion revealed 10 insights that serve as the genesis for an emergent conceptual framework that can scaffold discussions of the role moral norms play in explaining consumer moral behaviour. The paper concluded with a call for a theory on consumer morality and moral norms.

#### Introduction

Certain types of behaviour warrant being understood through a moral lens, including consumer behaviour (Raats, Shepherd & Sparks, 1995). Human beings live in what is now called a consumer society (Goodwin, Ackerman, & Kiron, 1997). The consumer society has witnessed “enormous success, including the exponential expansion of the middle-class and the extension of mass-produced cultural products in global markets” (Goldman, 2005, p.1). Over the last half century, many regions of the world have been transformed into a consumer society, maybe not on the scale witnessed in the Western world but nonetheless it has happened, and continues to happen (Aburawa, 2012).

Most citizens do not engage in consumer decisions with the intent to harm others; however, far too many consumer purchases, no matter how innocent or innocuous they may appear, do cause harm (Hawkins, 1994). People buy coffee, chocolate, running shoes, flowers, diamonds, bottled water, and the list goes on. The harm caused by the production, consumption and disposal of these and other products is well documented (McGregor, 2007; Worldwatch Institute, 2004). “Consumption in economically vigorous regions [of the world] has increased in volume and variety to such degrees that living, thriving, suffering, and dying are more independently connected to the acquiring, owning, and disposing of products than in any other historical era” (Mick, Pettigrew, Pechmann, & Ozanne, 2012, p.3). When harm to other humans occurs, morality comes into play (McGregor, 2010).

Prudent moral judgements require that moral norms (the perceived moral correctness or wrongness of an act) fit the circumstances (Leininger, 2010), with consumption being no exception. This paper focuses on the construct of moral norms and how it can be used to bring another layer of understanding to the morality of consumer behaviour. Moral norms are an inherent part of consumer moral behaviour (Minton & Rose, 1997). They “affect [a range of] behaviours by having a moderating effect on the consistency between intentions and behaviour” (Godin, Conner & Sheeran, 2005, p. 498). As a caveat, this paper does not focus on the intention-behaviour gap, per se; rather, it acknowledges that this gap exists (see Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975;

Vallerand, Deshaies, Cuerrier, Pelletier, & Mongeau, 1992) and focuses instead on the notion of moral norms and how can they help inform our understanding of consumer morality.

As a further caveat, this paper does not engage with the sister literature on ethical or sustainable consumption, focussing instead on the morality of consumption. McEachern and Cheetham (2012) noted that literature about the morality of consumption tends to over focus on ethical forms of consumer choice to the extent that the discipline is “somewhat under-theorized with regard to the moral meanings that shape and are, in turn, shaped by the day-to-day exigencies of contemporary consumption” (p.1). To address this conceptual lapse, after discussing the concept of moral norms, this paper continues by engaging with three moral norm-related concepts - what constitutes a moral situation, morally irresponsible behaviour, and morally risky behaviour? The paper then proceeds with an application of moral norms and these norm-related concepts to understand consumer behaviour, concluding with an emergent conceptual framework for moral norms and consumer morality (see Figure 1).

### Insert Figure 1

#### **Moral Norms**

The word norm is Latin *norma* for practice, rule or standard. A moral norm provides directions for how people should exercise their freedom to act. Moral norms refer to expectations that people will act in certain ways, and these expectations are usually social in origin. And, although moral norms have their origins in social groups, individuals will internalize them, resulting in the norms exercising influence on the person’s thoughts, feelings and behaviours, independent of the originating context. These moral norms specify criteria for moral judgements (e.g., equity, fairness, wisdom). They are a set of instructions and expectations that shape what people *see* and how they act (Leininger, 2010; Manstead, 2000). “Moral norms are an individual’s conviction that acting in a certain way is inherently right or wrong regardless of the personal or social consequences” (Olsen, Sijtsema & Hall, 2010, p. 535). Six different approaches to moral norms are now identified and discussed: descriptive/injunctive; personal; altruistic; material, formal and synthetic; autonomy, beneficence and justice; and, universal.

#### **Descriptive and Injunctive Norms**

Two important conceptual distinctions for social norms inform this discussion. First, Cialdini, Reno and Kallgren (1990) and Caladini, Kallgren and Reno (1991) strongly urged theorists and researchers to “discriminate between the *is* (descriptive) and the *ought* (injunctive) meaning of social norms because each refers to a separate source of human motivation” (Cialdini et al., 1990, p. 1015). The descriptive norm describes people’s perceptions of what is normally done in specific situations and the injunctive norm refers to people’s perceptions of what people think ought to be done. Injunctive norms refer to what is commonly approved or disapproved of within a particular culture; they pertain to what significant others think people should do. Injunctive norms assist people in determining what is acceptable and unacceptable social behavior.

#### **Personal Norms**

Schwartz (1970, 1977) clarified that personal norms are tied to self-concept and are experienced as a feeling of moral obligation (“I feel morally obligated to do”). These personal norms (i.e., standards people have about their own actions) motivate people to act in ways that are consistent with their own values. Compliance with one’s personal norms (i.e., personal value system) creates greater self-esteem while noncompliance results in guilt. Because injunctive

norms refer to “what others think I should do,” these norms tend to motivate behaviour by imposing informal sanctions on a person’s (in)actions.

In particular, Cialdini et al. (1990) posited that although social norms characterize and guide behaviour within a society, they only motivate behaviour “when they are activated (i.e., made salient or otherwise focussed on)” (p. 1015). For this reason, people concerned with norms “must take into account the various conditions that would incline someone to focus attention on or away from a norm” (p.1024). To further clarify their approach to norms, Cialdini et al. noted that “what is normative (i.e., most often done [descriptive] or approved [injunctive] or both) in a society, in a setting, and within a person will, in each case, have a demonstrable impact on action, but that impact will be differential depending on whether the actor is focused on norms of the culture, the situation, or the self” (p. 1025).

That is to say, enduring cultural and social conditions influence people’s normative focus (see also Olsen et al., 2010), as do the context (the situational factors) and personal norms (see Schwartz, 1970, 1977). Vallerand et al. (1992) agreed that each of the social, contextual and personal determinants of moral behaviour have to be taken into consideration in order to make a full account of people’s moral behaviour. Minton and Rose (1997) found this to be the case with pro-social behaviour (i.e., voluntary behaviour intended to benefit others, altruistic behaviour), in their case, when buying environmentally friendly products.

### **Altruistic Moral Norms**

Schwartz’s (1970, 1977) model of the activation of altruistic moral norms predicts that when people deny personal responsibility for the positive or negative outcome of an action with moral overtones, they are less likely to take action to set things right. The conviction that some forms of behaviour are inherently right or wrong is also what is meant by the term moral norm. There are circumstances where, despite having a clear sense that something is morally wrong, people form intentions to act in ways that conflict with the moral norm (noted earlier as morally irresponsible actions, Eshleman, 2009). The individual consequences of acting this way outweigh the disadvantages (personal or social) (see Manstead, 2000).

Follows and Jobber (2005) also discovered that the more people perceive they will have to endure individual consequences if they buy ethical products (e.g., inconvenience, costs), the less likely they are to form intentions to purchase these products (they used cloth versus disposable baby diapers as an example). This focus on ‘me’ and not on ‘others’ is deeply influenced by the consumer society, especially individualism (McGregor, 2010). Each of (a) expecting to get valued consequences and (b) hoping to avoid unwanted consequences plays a role in people’s propensity to engage in moral behaviour (Vallerand et al., 1992).

### **Material, Formal and Synthetic Norms**

Another approach is to conceive of three types of moral norms. Material norms deal with the act, formal norms with the motive, and synthetic norms with the circumstances (Salzman, 2001). Material norms focus on “What should be done?” Formal norms focus on “Who should or shouldn’t I be?” Synthetic norms combine a description of what should be done with a moral evaluation of the action - answering the question “Why should it be done?” (Leininger, 2010). From a consumer decision perspective, morally savvy consumers would approach their purchase decisions asking these three questions: “*Who am I and what should I do in this purchase situation, and why?*” Godin et al. (2005) proposed that people who based their intentions to act on these moral norms (depending upon the answer to these three questions) were more likely to

realize their moral intentions than those who did not.

### **Autonomy, Beneficence and Justice Belief Types**

Beliefs form the basis or foundation of something; that is, they underlie a situation. Any type of “decision making requires that agents have beliefs about what happens given events that are believed or known not to happen” (Di Tillio, Halpern & Samet, 2012, p. 1). Godin et al. (2005) suggested there are three core belief types that underlie moral norms: autonomy, beneficence (and nonmaleficence), and justice of the action. In more detail, “moral norms will be stronger the more the action is thought to reflect individuals’ liberty and uniqueness (autonomy), the more the action promotes the well-being of others and avoids hurt, harm or distress to others (beneficence and nonmaleficence), and the more the action promotes equal and fair distribution of resources (justice)” (Godin et al., 2005, p. 501).

### **Universal Moral Norms**

Krebs and Janicki (2002) identified five universal moral norms that have evolved in all cultures around the world: (a) obedience to authority; (b) reciprocity (resolve conflicts of interest in mutually beneficial ways); (c) care-based and altruistic (care for mates, friends and kin); (d) social responsibility (support the group); and, (e) solidarity and patriotism (supports culture). They further clarified that although these universal norms help people solve universal social problems, their evolution is not universal; instead, these norms evolve differently in different cultures. To understand a culture, one must understand the processes involved in its generation and refinement over time; this tenet holds for understanding a consumer culture (see next section).

### **Three Moral Norm-Related Concepts**

This next section addresses three moral norm-related concepts - what constitutes a moral situation, morally irresponsible behaviour, and morally risky behaviour? The logic is that a moral situation can lead to irresponsible moral behaviour and to morally risky behaviour (individuals and groups), which may or may not be irresponsible. All three concepts have the potential to inform understandings of consumer morality.

#### **What Constitutes a Moral Situation?**

Hart (1961) tendered four cardinal features that collectively serve to distinguish a moral situation from other social situations. The first feature is importance. People must view their choices and consequences as significant, not trivial. The second feature is the “voluntary character of the moral offenses” (Hart, 1961, p. 169). Ethics requires that actions be voluntary. Immoral actions occur when people perceive what they are doing as wrong, and do it anyway (i.e., moral rules are deliberately broken) (see also Eshleman, 2009). As well, if people can establish they acted unintentionally, they are excused from moral responsibility. The third feature is “immunity from deliberate change” (Hart, 1961, p. 171). Moral rules cannot be made up as people go along; they cannot change the moral rules in order to gain immunity from their actions, and exempt themselves from obligation or penalty. The fourth feature is “form of moral pressure” (Hart, 1961, p. 175), meaning the pressure to conform to the moral rule is not derived from a threat of punishment; rather, people conform because they respect moral rules as important in their own right (see also Gorsuch & Ortberg, 1983; Payne, 1976).

Using these four criteria (Hart, 1961), we suggest consumer decisions can constitute a moral situation. To illustrate, purchases can be viewed as trivial when in fact even the most mundane are very significant (McGregor, 2010). Second, people can voluntarily purchase goods

and services knowing harm will result, arguing they did not know (i.e., it was unintentional, so they are absolved). Third, they can make up moral rules and excuses as they go along in order to deal with any guilt and remorse. See McGregor's (2010) discussion of claims and denials people can use to continually, or periodically, rationalize their less than moral and ethical consumption decisions. Manstead (2000) proposed that when people know they are acting against a moral norm, they anticipate feeling negative emotions, such as shame, regret or guilt.

Fourth, consumers may feel no threat of punishment when they consume unethically or immorally because there are no legal sanctions to date for this behaviour in our society. When consuming, people tend not to see moral rules as important in their own right. Indeed, Olsen et al. (2010) defined a *moral attitude situation* as "a situation in which the individual is *aware* that the well-being of others depends on their own action and where they feel responsible for the action and its consequences" (p.535, emphasis added). Most consumers do not see consumption as a moral situation; hence, they are not aware of the risks. What would constitute morally irresponsible and morally risky consumer behaviour?

### **What Constitutes Morally Irresponsible Behaviour?**

Mellema (1997), drawing on May (1992), believed three things have to happen in order for a person's actions to be characterized as *morally irresponsible*. First, someone or something must be harmed. Second, that harm results because of another person's conduct (i.e., there is a causal connection between personal (in)action and the resulting harm). Third, this person's harmful conduct is blameworthy or morally faulty. This latter point means that (a) the person is guilty (deserves to be blamed for the harm) and culpable, (b) the action is censurable, deplorable or reprehensible; or, (c) both. This standard for moral responsibility can be applied to consumer behaviour. If someone buys something that harms nature, other species, those living elsewhere or future generations, then this act of consumption can be blamed for the harm, deemed to be reprehensible, meaning the person can be held morally irresponsible.

Eshleman (2009) added another dimension for how to understand morally responsible behaviour. He explained that "to be morally responsible for something, say an action, is to be worthy of a particular kind of reaction - praise, blame, or something akin to these - for performing it" (p. 1). To regard people as agents worthy of either praise or blame is to ascribe moral responsibility to them for what they have or have not done. More significantly, he clarified that the morality of being responsible stems from whether people *think* it is appropriate to react to someone's (in)actions with feelings of blame or praise. Mellema (1997) agreed, explaining that morally irresponsible conduct is blameworthy (morally faulty) and morally responsible behaviour is praiseworthy (express approval, admiration, respect, gratitude). *Holding* someone morally responsible rests on someone's judgement about another person *being* morally responsible (Eshleman, 2009).

Eshleman (2009) described morally responsible people as those whose status rests on their ability to exercise a special kind of control, called metaphysical control. People can only be morally responsible for their actions if they performed them freely, and where acting freely entailed the ability to have done otherwise at the time of action. Metaphysical control means people choose to act morally when they had a choice to do otherwise at the time of acting. This criterion can also be applied to consumer behaviour. Thøgersen (1999) noted that awareness of the moral ramifications of a consumer choice (i.e., someone or something is harmed) is a precondition for the development of moral norms. With higher awareness comes a deeper sense

of obligation to avoid harm. Based on Eshleman's (2009) understanding of moral responsibility, consumers can only be held morally accountable if they freely choose to act in a way that is praiseworthy. If they acted with full awareness of doing harm, they are blameworthy and can be held accountable.

Along a similar vein, Carrington, Neveille and Whitwell (2010) referred to people's *implementation intention* when they consume. They described this as a mental plan people develop before the actual purchase to outline when, where and how their intentions can be realized as actual behaviour. When people have these mental plans on how to follow through on their moral and ethical purchase intentions, they are more likely to turn their intentions into behaviour. Because most purchasing behaviour is automatic, a plan to implement intentions helps people remain aware of their moral intentions and be in more control of their behaviour.

However, the actualization of these moral plans can be thwarted by the amount of control people have over their behaviour or by how they deal with the situational and contextual events that occur when making the actual purchase (both real time and virtually). Things can happen that prevent people who are trying to purchase from a moral perspective from actually following through. For example, whether or not parents have their children with them or if they encounter a price promotion at the point of sale can have an effect on ethical purchasing behaviour, and some of these effects may be unconscious to the consumer (Carrington et al., 2010). On the other hand, some consumers have learned to be flexible when making consumer choices with moral overtones, especially when dealing with the complex consumer decision environment characteristic of today's marketplace; that is, they exhibit levels of moralizing pursuant to how conscious they are of the impact of their decisions (Szmigin, Carrigan & McEachern, 2009; McEachern & Cheetham, 2012).

In order for *consumer moral reasoning* to prevail, leading to morally responsible consumer decisions, people must pay attention to the moral nuances of the buying situation; that is, any characteristics of purchases that have environmental, human or labour overtones must be made *salient* (Thøgersen, 1999), else people cannot become aware. Without moral awareness, they cannot easily develop moral intentions or engage in moral purchase behaviour. This point is significant because "moral considerations are an important determinant of intentions to act" (Godin et al., 2005, p. 498). Moral norms (the perceived moral correctness or wrongness of an act) mediate the link between intention and behaviour (Godin et al., 2005; Manstead, 2000), deeply affecting voluntary choice and other dimensions of consumer moral situations (see Hart, 1961).

### **What Constitutes Morally Risky Behaviour?**

The previous section discussed morally irresponsible behaviour, mainly for individual consumers. But, it is well known that the behaviour of consumers as a collective is also a pressing issue (McGregor, 2010; Mick et al, 2012). To that end, this section describes the nature of risk taking, especially that of groups, and applies this idea to morally risky *consumer* behaviour.

Mellema (1988) believed his thoughts about morally risky behaviour went "beyond that of [the] morality of business conduct" (p. 593). In that spirit, the authors applied Mellema's conceptualization of the morality of risk taking to consumer decisions. To emulate Mellema, while there is nothing inherently unethical or immoral about consuming, it is nevertheless commonly alleged that individual consumers *take risks* when they consume in such a way as to

constitute moral wrongdoing (e.g., harm other humans, other species and the environment). Furthermore, because the dynamics of consumers *as a collective* are very complex, the moral questions that arise are also complex (Mellema).

Mellema (1988) identified four features of an individual taking a risk, an idea used in this paper to appreciate that *consumers take moral risks* when they consume goods and services. First, people take a risk that something *will* happen, that a state of affairs will arise. Second, they invariably take (or do not take) an action. Third, they must desire that the risk (state of affairs) does not happen. In this case, people presume there are benefits to the act such that they are willing to risk the harmful side effects, fervently hoping the risk does not materialize. “An agent who either desires or is indifferent to its occurrence cannot properly be said to risk it” (p. 594). Fourth, people must deeply believe their (in)actions will make the risked state of affairs more likely to occur (which they hope will not happen). Put simply, when people consume, they take the risk that harm will occur (to others, other species or the planet), all the while not really wanting to cause harm, anticipating the benefits will outweigh the harmful side effects. But, the possibility of harm remains real - the risk is real.

When billions of individuals engage in this morally risky consumer behaviour, group dynamics kicks in. Mellema (1988) offered three aspects of group risk taking, which are used here to better understand global consumption, which is such a pressing, contemporary issue (Mick et al., 2012). First, he tendered the concept of a threshold. “In many cases of group risk taking, there is a threshold beyond which the occurrence of the risked state of affairs is inevitable. When enough [risk actions] are performed ... the threshold is crossed and the occurrence of the risked state of affairs is a foregone conclusion” (p. 594). Second, he recognized the possibility of variable degrees of risk taken by different members of the group; that is, the fact that many people (e.g., billions of consumers) are risking the same state of affairs does not mean they are risking it to the same degree. This dynamic adds to the complexity of the moral dimensions of the risk.

Third, it is possible for an individual to risk a state of affairs without knowing if, who or whether others are doing so. As well, the risk can materialize without people knowing about the circumstances prompting others to engage in the same risky behaviour. Mellema (1988) explained that a person could be well on the way to engaging in an act that will trigger the threshold without knowing this is the case. Worse yet, a person can risk a state of affairs even when the threshold has already been breached by the actions of others. As a powerful illustration of Mellema’s (1988) ideas in action, witness the very threat to our planetary existence due to climate change exacerbated by the unsustainable development and consumption of billions of global citizens, each thinking they are acting in isolation.

The previous text shared insights that can be gained about the morality of consumption by drawing upon three moral norm-related constructs: a moral situation, morally (ir)responsible behaviour, and individual and group moral risk taking. The next section applies this collection of concepts, including moral norms, to gain further insights into the morality of consumer behaviour.

### **Applying Moral Norms and Related Concepts to Consumer Behaviour**

Moral norms, and the three norm-related concepts, will now be applied to gain deeper understandings into the consumer culture/society, and attendant consumer behaviour.

First, in a consumer culture, consumers obey the rules of the market. They live in a

consumer society that is shaped by the market values of scarcity, competition, wealth accumulation and individualism. Second, consumers act solely in their own self interest, and not in the spirit of reciprocity. There is little give and take, tit-for-tat. Each person is out for his or her own interest. Third, in a consumer society, people tend to care for their family by spending money on material possessions more so than focusing on personal relationships. Fourth, people in a consumer society are not inclined to be socially responsible; they tend not to help those of the group who need help nor do they assume roles for which they are best suited, for the good of the group. Instead, consumers focus on their own wants and are distanced from the needs of other citizens in the world. Finally, people living in a consumer society are not predisposed to value solidarity, what with their focus on individualism and the accumulation of material possessions to create their identity. They do not see themselves as part of a larger whole or collective; rather, they live a life of isolation, fear and hopelessness, assuaged with more spending (McGregor, 2010).

Furthermore, in a consumer society, people are taught that their role is to be the best economic agent possible by spending money in the marketplace. Framing a consumer decision from this economic perspective tends to repress the influence that intrinsic motivation (willingly engaging in an act because it brings pleasure) may have on a consumer's decision making process (Thøgersen, 1999). All is not lost, however. Thøgersen (1999) also believed that people's moral reasoning does not automatically stop when they enter the marketplace; some people do let their moral views influence their buying decisions (e.g., boycotts, buycotts, procotts) because they gain pleasure from willingly consuming from a moral orientation. "Over time, a sense of personal moral obligation may develop if people internalize the prevailing societal view of how consumers ought to behave in the marketplace" (Minton & Rose, 1997, p. 45), versus the way they are currently behaving.

It would be strange for the perceived descriptive norm to favour a particular behavior, while the perceived injunctive norm objects to it. But, that is exactly what can happen in a consumer society. To illustrate, although some people may feel uneasy that their consumer decisions harm others or the environment (descriptive norm), the injunctive norms of a consumer society prescribe that people should consume so they can fulfil their key role as economic agent (McGregor, 2010). Correcting injunctive norms (what people *should* do) appears to affect descriptive norms (what is normally done) (Prince & Carey, 2010). This insight implies that the consumer society has to be changed, if people are to consume differently, a daunting feat. Brug, Oenema and Ferreira (2005) agreed. In terms of consumption, this society-wide change could mean making it harder for consumers to purchase goods and services that harm others or the environment and make it easier for them to purchase products that are ethical.

Minton and Rose (1997) examined the link between social norms and their effect on consumers' concerns for the environment. They differentiated between "what others think I should do" (injunctive social norm) and "what I think I should do" (tied to self-esteem, called personal social norm). They concluded that while attitude is a good predictor of intentions, a sense of personal moral obligation is more likely to lead to intentions shaping actual behaviour. Whether or not people follow through on their intentions to act ethically and morally in the marketplace is determined by their sense of moral obligation to others and the environment.

Consumers who make moral decisions a worthy goal to pursue must learn to suppress goal-incongruent habits and thoughts that have the potential to thwart their judgement (see Allan,



2008). Habits are strong predictors of future behaviour (Lane & Potter, 2007). This fact does not bode well for morally sound consumer decisions because many consumer decisions are deeply routine and habitual in nature. Brug et al. (2005) recognized that even a positive intention to act in a certain way is no guarantee for behaviour change related to complex, habitual behaviour (i.e., the habit wins out). But, this is not a totally negative scenario. Consumers are more likely to buy ethically when their *concern* for environmental, human rights or labourer issues has been transformed into a *moral norm*, the perceived moral correctness or wrongness of an act (Godin et al., 2005). Stern, Dietz and Black (1985) agreed that in order for people to be concerned about innocent people or the environment being harmed, “the idea of [the] hazard must enter their awareness and be transformed into attitudes, judgements and actions” (p. 206).

Furthermore, not only must the negative consequences of a buying situation be seen as unfortunate (e.g., environmental damage or infringement on labour and human rights), they must also be seen as *morally intolerable* (Stern et al., 1985). If this moral concern influences even one decision of a person, it is possible that future decisions may be influenced as well (Lane & Potter, 2007). So, if consumers can be convinced to feel morally concerned for a range of habitual purchases, there is a chance they can become morally concerned for a fuller range of consumer purchases.

Carrington et al. (2010), in their discussion of consumer moral decisions, observed that people are more aware of the values of ethical consumption than were past generations, but a change in actual purchasing is still not very apparent. When are altruistic norms activated in a consumer decision? Schwartz (1970, 1977) has shown that awareness of severe or widespread harmful consequences to other people tends to *activate* the feeling that action should be taken to avert or alleviate the harm. When confronted with a moral situation, consumers decide what to do depending upon both (a) their personal attitude toward the behaviour and (b) their perceptions of what important others feel they *should* be doing (Vallerand et al., 1992). As well, people’s trust in their ability to make consumer decisions that mitigate harm affects the extent of their sense of moral obligation, which in turn predicts the morality of their behaviour (Thøgersen, 1999). People will not feel morally obligated to others if they do not think their choices will reduce risk or harm.

Further to the latter point, Raats et al. (1995) demonstrated that a concern for others’ interests influences people’s attitudes and behaviours independently of their own self-interest concerns. Minton and Rose (1997) found that a sense of personal moral obligation is likely to lead to actual behaviour (moral action). Raats et al. determined that perceived moral obligation helps predict behavioral intentions. And, Godin et al. (2005) noted moral norms mediate how consistent people’s intentions are relative to their actual behaviour; that is, did they follow through on their intentions?

### **Emergent Conceptual Framework for Consumer Moral Norms**

Figure 1 shares an overview of ten conceptual insights gleaned from the literature about how moral norms (and attendant norm-related concepts) can enrich our understanding of the moral dimension of consumer behaviour. The ideas in Figure 1, in effect, represent the genesis of an emergent conceptual framework that can be used to scaffold and facilitate discussions of the role moral norms can play in explaining consumer moral behaviour. The development of this framework respects McEachern and Cheetham’s (2012) assertion that the discipline is under-theorized in regards to the moral dimension of consumer decisions, relative to the ethical

and sustainable aspects of contemporary consumption.

In more detail, moral norms (the perceived *moral correctness or wrongness* of an act) are important determinants of intentions to act, even in the marketplace. People must become, and then remain, aware of their moral intentions when consuming, which can involve adhering to their mental plan, their *implementation intention*. Maintaining awareness of moral intentions while making consumer decisions includes exercising a special kind of control (metaphysical), that being to choose to consume morally when one has a choice to do otherwise. To further complicate matters, others must think it is appropriate to react with blame or praise to someone's (in)actions when consuming. Morally irresponsible consumer actions are blameworthy and morally responsible consumer actions are praiseworthy. Actually holding someone morally responsible when consuming rests on one's judgement about whether that person *is* morally responsible.

In a consumer society, despite the reality that harm often occurs, people usually do not view purchase decisions as *moral attitude situations*. Without this moral awareness, it is very challenging for consumers to have intentions to act morally. And, without moral saliency and awareness, others are less likely to judge consumption behaviour as blameworthy or praiseworthy. A further conundrum arises in that while there is nothing inherently unethical or immoral about consuming, the possibility of harm is very real in many consumer decisions. When billions of consumers engage in morally risky consumption behaviour, group dynamics can kick in, leading to tipping points where thresholds are crossed (knowingly or not), leading to more and wider harm.

The authors asserted that purchase decisions constitute a moral situation, per Hart's (1961) four criteria. Accepting this assertion, it became clear that consumers need to view their consumption practices through a moral lens in order to reduce the risk of harm and to mitigate any actual harm. Moral norms (the perceived moral correctness or wrongness of an act) have the potential to mediate the gap between moral purchase intentions and consumer behaviour. People whose intentions are based on moral norms should exhibit an increased effort and persistence to fulfil those intentions (Godin et al., 2005). If consumers perceive their actions as wrong, they may make a different choice; the same holds if they perceive their actions as correct. Moral norms (perceptions of rightness or wrongness) can thus contribute to increased *saliency and continued awareness* of the moral overtones of consumption scenarios, but they can *only* motivate behaviour when they are activated. Without saliency and activation, these norms remain dormant. This activation requires acceptance that consumer decisions *are* moral attitude situations, which warrant a mental plan to implement moral intentions at the point of sale.

This requirement for moral awareness is complicated because enduring cultural and societal conditions also influence people's normative focus (injunctive norms). Unfortunately, consumer societies do not have a moral focus. Consumerism, often "treated as a moral danger" (Glickman, 1999, p. 1), is part of the social economy that is situated within the market. In this context (in a consumer society with market values at its core), consumerism is viewed as productive and necessary rather than as wasteful and immoral (Glickman, 1997). The consumer society and consumerism represent a "materialistic civilization that replaces the idea of the 'citizen' with the 'consumer' [and consequently] cannot concern itself with the long-term viability of life on earth" (Landau, 2002, p.2). Indeed, the "consumer culture operates with a certain logic that... redefines traditional moral and political values [to such an extent that people

are] unwittingly alienated by the moral relativism associated with free-market, consumer capitalism” (Kline, 2007, p.2).

Appreciating that changes to the consumer society will not happen any time soon (due to the power of present day injunctive norms compelling people to consume), aligning people’s moral norms with their consumer moral intentions may be the first step toward more prosocial, morally responsible consumer behaviour. Most especially, the activation of altruistic moral norms has to be fostered (i.e., accept responsibility for outcomes of consumer decisions). As well, people need to become comfortable asking “*Who am I and what should I do in this purchase situation, and why?*”

Posing these questions primes people to eventually develop a personal moral obligation to consume from a moral orientation. Whether or not people formulate and then follow through on their intentions to act morally in the marketplace is determined by their sense of moral obligation to others and the environment, and their trust that they can make a difference. Of paramount importance, people’s awareness of the moral ramifications of a consumer choice (someone or something is harmed) is a precondition for the development of moral norms (perceived moral correctness or wrongness of an act) (Thøgersen, 1999). Moral awareness, leading to moral intentions and moral behaviour, is an imperative, because the risk and harm that result from current consumption practices are very real and globally pervasive (Mick et al., 2012).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, for the first time, this paper presented an emergent conceptual framework for consumer morality and moral norms that can scaffold discussions of the role moral norms can play in explaining consumer behaviour. This 10-dimension framework emerged from iterative readings at the interface of the literature related to consumer morality, moral norms, and norm-related concepts. First of all, others may wish to extend the framework by proposing additional dimensions aside from the 10 tendered in Figure 1. Second, future researchers are encouraged to draw on this conceptual framework, and the supporting literature on moral norms, as they design research focused on consumer morality. Third, valuable insights could be gained from exploring consumer’s thoughts about what constitutes a moral situation, morally irresponsible consumer behaviour, and morally risky behaviour in the marketplace. How useful are these three norm-related concepts in gaining deeper insights into the complexity of consumer decisions with moral overtones? Ultimately, consumer theorists could begin to develop a theory of consumer morality and moral norms, extending this emergent conceptual framework.

### References

- Aburawa, A. (2012, April 24). *The rise (& fall?) of consumer society in the Middle East (interview with Relli Shecter)* [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.greenprophet.com/2012/04/the-rise-fall-of-consumer-society-in-the-middle-east/>
- Allan, J. L. (2008). The intention-behaviour gap: It's all under control (executive control). *The European Health Psychologist*, 10(3), 62-64.
- Brug, J., Oenema, A., & Ferreira, I. (2005). Theory, evidence and intervention mapping to improve behaviour nutrition and physical activity intentions. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 2(2), doi: 10.1186/1479-5868-2-2.
- Carrington, M. J., Neveille, B. A., & Whitwell, G. J. (2010). Why ethical consumers don't walk their talk: Towards a framework for understanding the gap between the ethical purchase intentions and actual buying behavior of ethically minded consumers. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 97(1), 139-158.
- Caruana, R. (2007). A sociological perspective of consumption morality. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 6(5), 287-304.
- Cialdini, R., Kallgren, C., & Reno, R. (1991). A focus theory of normative conduct: A theoretical refinement and reevaluation of the role of norms in human behaviour. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 24, 201-234.
- Cialdini, R., Reno, R., & Kallgren, C. (1990). A focus theory of normative conduct: Recycling the concept of norms to reduce littering in public places. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58(6), 1015-1026.
- Di Tillio, A., Halpern, J., & Samet, D. (2012, January). *Conditional belief types*. Retrieved from Tel Aviv University, The Leon Recanati Graduate School of Business Administration website, <http://www.tau.ac.il/~samet/papers/condbel.pdf>
- Eshleman, A. (2009). Moral responsibility. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University. Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-responsibility/>
- Fishbein, M., & Ajzen, I. (1975). *Belief, attitude, intention and behaviour*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Follows, S., & Jobber, D. (2000). Environmentally responsible purchase behaviour: A test of a consumer model. *European Journal of Marketing*, 34(5), 723-746.
- Glickman, L. B. (1997). *Living wage: American workers and the making of consumer society*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Glickman, L. B. (Ed.). (1999). *Consumer society in American history*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Godin, G., Connor, M., & Sheeran, P. (2005). Bridging the intention-behaviour gap: The role of moral norm. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 44(4), 497-512.
- Goodwin, N. R., Ackerman, F., & Kiron, D. (Eds.). (1997). *The consumer society*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Goldman, P. (2005). Consumer society and its discontents. *Anthropoetics*, 10(2). Retrieved from <http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1002/truman.htm>
- Gorsuch, R., & Ortberg, J. (1983). Moral obligation and attitudes: Their relation to behavioral intentions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 44(5), 1025-1028.

- Hart, H. L. (1961). *The concept of law*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Hawken, P. (1994). *The ecology of commerce*. NY: Harper Business.
- Kline, S. (2007). The morality and politics of consumer religion. *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, 17 (Fall), <http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art17-consumerreligion.html>
- Krebs, S., & Janicki, M. (2002). Biological foundations of moral norms. In M. Schaller and C. Crandall (Eds.), *Psychological foundations of culture* (pp. 125-148). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Lane, B., & Potter, S. (2007). The adoption of cleaner vehicles in the UK: Exploring the consumer attitude-action gap. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 15(11/12), 1085-1092.
- Landau, R. (2002). The Baha'i faith and environment. In P. Timmerman (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Global Environmental Change (Volume 5)*. NY: John Wiley.
- Leininger, T. (2010). *Moral norms* [PowerPoint]. Retrieved from Regis University website, <Http://academic.regis.edu/tleininger/pdfs/Moral%Norms.pdf>
- Manstead, A. (2000). The role of moral norm in the attitude-intention relation. In D. Terry and M. Hogg (Eds.), *Attitudes, behaviour and social context* (pp. 11-30). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- May, L. (1992). *Sharing responsibility*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- McEachern, M. G., & Cheetham, F. (2012). A conception of moral sensitivity and everyday consumption practices. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, doi: 10.1111/ijcs.12005
- McGregor, S. L. T. (2007). Consumerism, the common good and the human condition. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*, 99(3), 15-22.
- McGregor, S. L. T. (2010). *Consumer moral leadership*. The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Mellema, G. (1988). Groups, responsibility, and risk taking in business organizations. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 7(8), 593-603.
- Mellema, G. (1997). *Collective responsibility*. Atlanta, GA: Rodopi Publishing.
- Micheletti, M., & Stolle, D. (2008). Fashioning social justice through political consumerism, capitalism and the internet. *Cultural Studies*, 22(5), 749- 769.
- Mick, D. G., Pettigrew, S., Pechmann, C., & Ozanne, J. (2012). Origins, qualities and envisionments of transformative consumer research. In D. G. Mick, S. Pettigrew, C. Pechmann and J. Ozanne (Eds.), *Transformative consumer research* (pp. 3-24). New York: Routledge.
- Minton, A., & Rose, R. (1997). The effects of environmental concern on environmentally friendly consumer behaviour: An exploratory study. *Journal of Business Research*, 40(1), 37-48.
- Neilson, L., & Paxton, P. (2010). Social capital and political consumerism. *Social Problems*, 57(1), 5-24.
- Olsen, N., Sijtsema, S., & Hall, G. (2010). Predicting consumers' intention to consume ready-to-eat meals: The role of moral attitude. *Appetite*, 55(3), 534-539.
- Payne, M. (1976). Hart's concept of a legal system. *William and Mary Law Review*, 18(2), 287-319.
- Prince, M. A., & Carey, K. B. (2010). The malleability of injunctive norms among college students. *Addictive Behaviors*, 35(11), 940-947.
- Raats, M., Shepherd, R., & Sparks, P. (1995). Including moral dimensions of choice within the structure of the Theory of Planned Behavior. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 25(6),

- 484-494.
- Salzman, T. A. (2001). The basic goods theory and revisionism. *The Heythrop Journal*, 44(4), 434-450.
- Schwartz, S. H. (1970). Moral decision making and behaviour. In J. Macauley and L. Berkovitz (Eds.), *Altruism and helping behaviour* (pp. 127-141). NY: Academic Press.
- Schwartz, S. (1977). Normative influences on altruism. In L. Berkovitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology, Volume 10* (pp. 221-279). London, England: Academic Press.
- Stern, P., Dietz, T., & Black, J. S. (1985). Support for environmental protection: The role of moral norms. *Population and Environment*, 8(3/4), 204-222.
- Szmigin, I., Carrigan, M., & McEachern, M. (2009). The conscious consumer. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 33(2), 224-231.
- Thøgersen, J. (1999). The ethical consumer: Moral norms and packaging choice. *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 22(4), 439-460.
- Vallerand, R., Deshaies, P., Cuerrier, J-P., Pelletier, L., & Mongeau, C. (1992). Ajzen and Fishbein's Theory of Reasoned Action as applied to moral behaviour: A confirmatory analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 62(1), 98-109.
- Worldwatch Institute. (2004). *State of the World 2004: Richer, Fatter, and Not Much Happier—A Special Focus on the Consumer Society*. Washington, DC: Author.

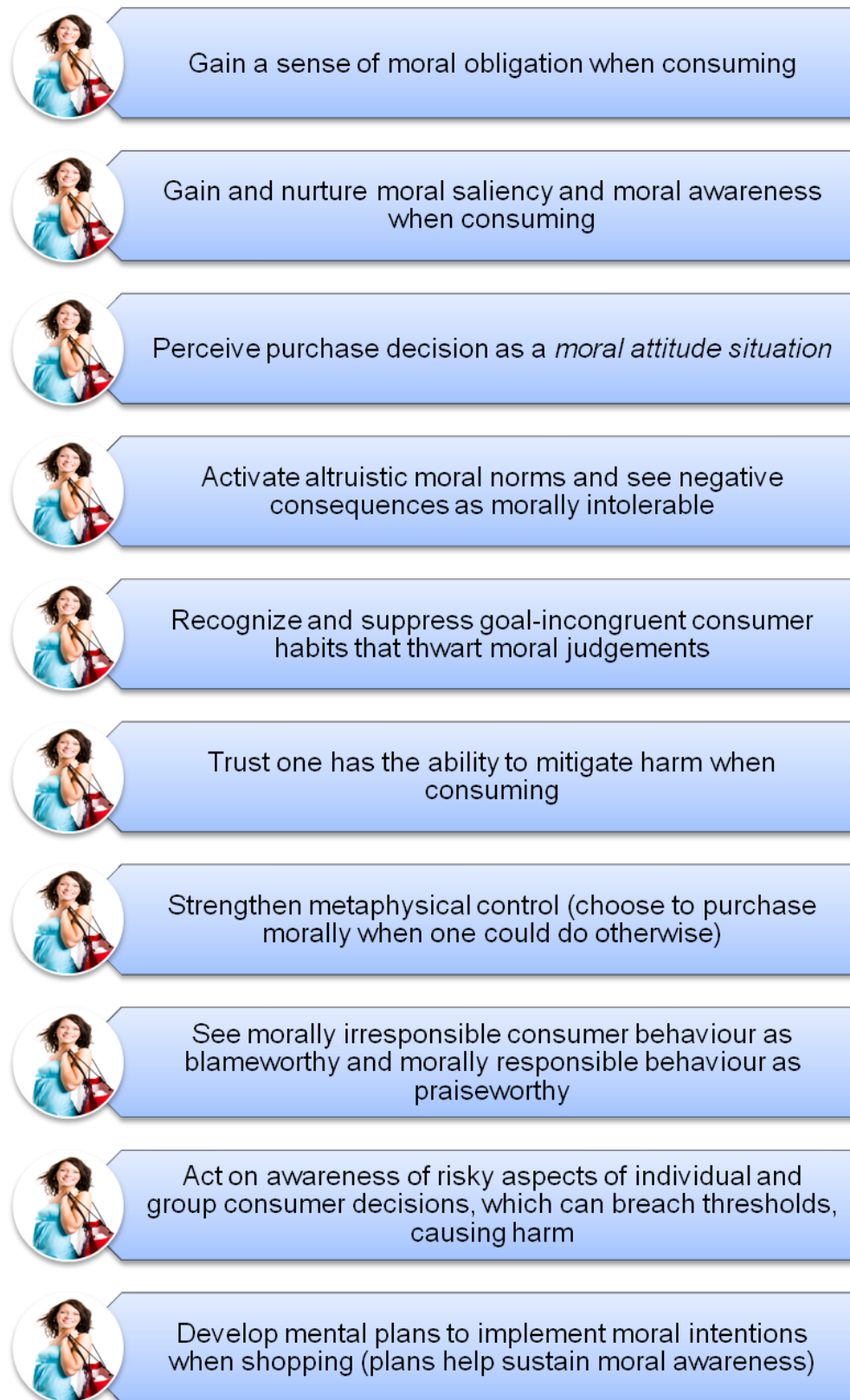


Figure 1 Emergent Conceptual Framework for Consumer Morality and Moral Norms