

Practice

Consumer Power and Implied Responsibility in Influencing the Marketplace

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Premise

This paper shares a professional commentary on the immense scope of consumers' power and attendant influence on and responsibility in the marketplace. It introduces family and consumer scientists (FCS) and home economists to the idea of consumers as moral leaders. Professional "commentaries are short, narrowly focused articles of contemporary interest and [are] more editorial in nature and cover an aspect of an issue that is relevant to the journal's scope" (Biomedical Central [BMC], 2023, para. 2). Berterö (2016) explained that commentaries are considered scholarly contributions by which knowledgeable and experienced scholars advance a field by sharing in depth opinions that stimulate dialogue on a topic.

To launch this professional commentary, I assert that FCS and home economics have historically relied too heavily on the assumption that consumers must be empowered to be ethical and efficient *managers* of their own resources (with the recent imperative of sustainability). I maintain that the profession has not paid enough attention to consumers as *leaders* in the marketplace while in service to others and the Earth – responsibly exercising their power and influence. The profession has historically assumed that consumers serve the economy – their major contribution is to keep it strong, vibrant, and healthy. In actuality, the economy and markets are social institutions that exist to serve people not the other way around (McGregor, 2010, 2020). This commentary begins with facts that establish consumers' power as marketplace agents as reflected in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Consumer Power and Implied Responsibility

The GDP deals with who is spending money in a nation's economy to keep it going – namely consumers, businesses, and governments. Household spending is the amount people spend on goods and services in their consumer role to meet their everyday needs. These expenditures include but are not limited to food, clothing, housing, furnishings and appliances, energy, transportation, communication and en-

tertainment technology, health, and leisure (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2022).

Consumer spending typically accounts for over two-thirds (65%) of the GDP (OECD, 2022). The United States Federal Reserve Bank (2022) put consumer spending at 68% in 2022. Amaedo (2022) put it even higher, at 70%. Businesses spend 18%, and governments spend 17% of the GDP (The Global Economy, 2022) (see [Figure 1](#)). Most people, including myself, are *very* surprised when they first learn these facts. Who *knew* consumers had so much power and potential influence relative to the presumed power of governments and businesses?

In 2020, consumers spent \$64 Trillion dollars worldwide (World Bank, 2020). That's 12 zeros: \$64,000,000,000,000. With this *spending power* comes undeniable *responsibility*, whether desired or not, whether acknowledged or not (McGregor, 2010). Responsibility literally means "response-ability" – the ability to choose your response" (Covey, 1989, p. 71). When acting responsibly, people act independently and make decisions without being told to. Framing responsibility as an active stance (able to choose) instead of a passive stance (respond or react) opens the door for the FCS profession to consider moral consumption in conjunction with ethical consumption.

As a caveat, I am fully aware that FCS and home economists face a major challenge should they presume consumers have collective power that can be harnessed and leveraged. That challenge is the individualistic nature of a consumer society and culture (McGregor, 2010). Individualism is a tenet of the neoliberal ideology currently dominating marketplace discourse. The theory of individualism favours individuals' freedom of action. It "places the value, autonomy and benefit of the individual over that of the group, society, or nation... [It] is the opposite of *collectivism*" (Rohmann, 1999, p. 196).

Social activity is thus presumed to comprise individual acts in a *laissez-faire* economy (minimal government) where individuals' rights are protected and promoted relative to those of the collective. The success of capitalistic, neoliberal economies depends on individualism and followers (Rohmann, 1999). The profession's lingering penchant

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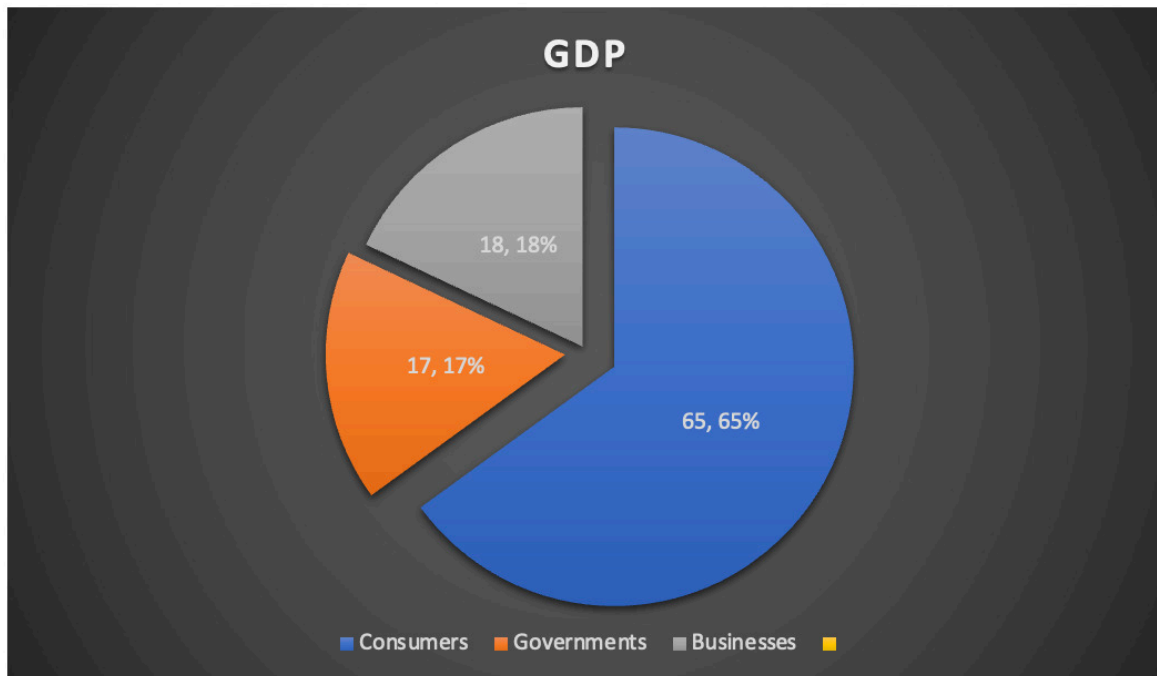


Figure 1. Percentage Expenditure of Gross Domestic Product

to uncritically perpetuate this worldview (see Brown, 1993) underpins this commentary.

Ethical versus Moral Consumption

Any FCS and home economist pondering the notion of consumers' power and attendant responsibilities will benefit from distinguishing between ethics and morals. Ethics refer to the goodness or badness of one's *behaviour*. Morals refer to rightness or wrongness of one's *decisions* (McGregor, 2010). In FCS professional practice, ethics are informed by a professional association's code of conduct or code of ethics, and morals manifest in each FCS practitioner's personal choices (Alexander & Holland, 2020; McGregor, 2022).

Similarly, in the marketplace, a person's consumer-related actions and behaviour are judged to be good or bad relative to an external standard or expectation (i.e., community and societal values). Ethical consumption is thus imposed by and judged from the outside (Weinstein, 2011, 2018). Examples of ethical consumption include buying dolphin-free tuna, foods free of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), sweatshop-free clothing, fair-trade coffee and chocolate, cosmetic products free from animal testing, and conflict-free diamonds.

Moral consumption comes from within a person – morals are the principles that people draw on to guide and judge their decisions (right or wrong). Morality is always concerned with a judgement about harming others with one's decision (Weinstein, 2011, 2018). Examples of morals are honesty, courage, respect, compassion and caring, fairness, no harm, loyalty, empathy, and integrity. People should be able to look at themselves in the mirror after

deciding how and what to consume and feel morally justified in the rightness of their decision (Admin, 2017).

Guideposts and Guidelines

Through the power of a metaphor, I invite FCS and home economists to consider that ethics are *guideposts* established by society or the community for people to follow – like signposts along a road or at an intersection telling people where they will end up if they follow a particular sign – lots of chances to get lost. Morals are *guidelines* set by each person to guide their own decisions – like tying a rope between a house and a barn for use during a blizzard – follow the rope (principles), and you won't make the wrong decision and get lost (Loggins, 2021). In short, ethical consumerism is a type of external consumer activism (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014) – choosing one's behaviour at the guideposts. Moral consumerism is internal and concerns whether one's purchase decisions are principled (Brinkmann, 2004) – following personally set guidelines to avoid decisions that can get one lost or turned around in a moral conundrum.

Followers and Leaders

Within this line of thought, I further suggest that FCS and home economists should view ethical consumers as *followers*. They follow the guideposts – societal dictates of what is good or bad behaviour (as determined by others) for the environment, labourers, human rights, animal rights, women's rights, children's rights, other species, and so on. Followers are important (McGregor, 2010, 2019) because those leading the charge for ethical consumption cannot succeed if others do not *follow their lead* by striving to meet the standards set for consumption that is judged to be *good* for everyone and everything.

Table 1. Three Types of Morality Informing the Rightness of Moral Decisions

Type of Morality	Major Concern and What Constitutes Rightness
<p><i>Deontological</i> – binding duty; the rightness of the act</p> <p><i>What kind of choices ought I make, using what rules?</i></p> <p><u>Axiom</u>: The ends can never justify the means.</p>	<p><i>intentions</i> or motives behind one's actions; people know they have a moral duty to cause no harm and act with that intention; the rightness of a decision is judged by whether the person followed the rules and did their duty (i.e., by what goes in inside their mind)</p>
<p><i>Teleological</i> – end goal/purpose; the rightness of the outcome</p> <p><i>What kind of outcomes ought I seek?</i></p> <p><u>Axiom</u>: The ends justify the means.</p>	<p>the <i>consequences</i> (outcomes) of one's actions; the rightness of a decision is judged by its likely or actual outcome rather than what goes on inside a person's mind; judgement of rightness is problematic when there are multiple possible outcomes; the best way to ensure teleological morality is through a life of virtue and high moral standards (virtue); choices are moral if they bring about a better state of affairs for others</p>
<p><i>Virtue</i> – high moral standards; the rightness of the person</p> <p><i>What kind of person ought I be?</i></p> <p><u>Axiom</u>: What is the good life, and how do I go about living it, so I can experience well-being, happiness and flourish?</p>	<p>consistently act <i>true to character</i> (virtues) across situations while one's character is being tested while minimizing vices; people of strong character will usually make the right decision; they also do not act for the wrong reason; rightness of the action depends on what goes on in a person's mind</p>

The crux of this professional commentary is my assertion that FCS and home economists should also frame consumers as *moral leaders* in the marketplace who adhere to their internal principles of rightness or wrongness – they look to their *moral compass*, which orients them in a direction that minimizes harm (whether physical, psychological, political, ecological, cultural, and so on) (McGregor, 2010, 2020). When depending on their moral compass, consumers would let their principles guide their decisions, so they can retain their consumption integrity. More than ethics and values, their moral compass “turns principles into visible actions, commitments, behavior [and] accountability” (Admin, 2017, para. 6).

I further maintain that leaders shine a light on the future – they have a *vision* of where they think people should go or how things should be done to get there. This is different from a *mission*, which is focused on the here and now (Covey, 1990). So, instead of narrowly focusing on meeting immediate needs and wants through consumption (mission), consumer moral leaders would expand their vision of their reasoning and decision process to include their inner *moral compass*. Framing consumers as moral leaders gives FCS an edge in the ongoing struggle to convince people to steward the Earth and care for themselves and each other when consuming.

For clarification, FCS would appreciate that, when acting from an *unprincipled* stance, (a) consumers would collect facts and information about the attributes of a product or service without understanding how ethics (standards of behaviour) and morals (principles guiding decisions) might come into play. (b) They would engage in routine consumption behaviours instead of self-reflection and self-inquiry about the meaning of consumption (behaviour) and consumerism (ideology). (c) And they would be uncritical of their consumption decisions (i.e., no concern for power differentials and attendant harm) (McGregor, 2022).

Challenges of Morality

While asserting that consumer moral leadership is an imperative, I fully appreciate that morality (i.e., determining what constitutes right or wrong) is demanding, messy, mysterious, and almost always controversial (McGregor, 2010; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2019). FCS and home economists would be more effective in meeting this imperative if they appreciated that people can be concerned with one of three things when judging the morality (rightness or wrongness) of a decision: deontological (binding duty), teleological (consequences), and virtue (character). [Table 1](#) provides a succinct overview of these three approaches with more detail at McGregor (2010, Chapter 1).

It is problematic that none of these three types of morality is foolproof (i.e., things can go wrong when using them), and each has its limitations for judging something as wrong instead of right. Nonetheless, all are viable options for making and judging consumer decisions (Hunt & Vitell, 2006). It is thus important that FCS and home economists can recognize them in use, or they could make erroneous judgements and fallacious counterarguments when engaging with and critiquing consumers' collective moral decisions and ethical behaviour (McGregor, 2010).

As a personal example, as a youngster, I was taught to not harm others with my decisions and subsequent actions: “*You can do anything you want as long as you can live with the consequences.*” When I got older, and learned about the oppressive and exploitive business model of a certain major retail chain, I decided never to shop there. That decision has held for 25 years (virtue morality). In addition to staying true to my character, my other intent is to cause no harm (deontological). That said, I have shopped at stores, which, unbeknownst to me at the time, had similar business models with the unintended consequence of me causing harm to others (teleological). If FCS and home economists

viewed my consumer decisions only through the teleological lens of morality, they would judge my decisions as immoral when my intent was otherwise (i.e., both do my duty, and act true to my character).

Levinas' (1969, 1981) moral philosophy brings a different perspective to this discussion of consumer power and attendant responsibility. He challenged the "system of rationality [sic] justified percepts or norms capable of guiding human action and behaviour" (Benaroyo, 2022, p. 329) (in effect, Table 1). Levinas posited instead that the fundamental ethical and moral layer of the responsible self is one's preconscious experience of responsibility for the other (Benaroyo, 2022). Preconscious means below the level of immediate conscious awareness where unrepressed emotions can be accessed when needed (Peer, 2019). Levinas believed that "we do *not choose* responsibility. [Rather] responsibility arises as if elicited, before we begin to think about it, by the approach of the other person" (Bergo, 2019, Concluding remark section).

In effect, consumers would view themselves as responsible for others before knowing anything about their situation. Benaroyo (2022) described this as a "moral endeavour, based on peace for the other [that is informed by] the infinite demand of the ethical relation" (p. 329). Consumers would thus encounter responsibility when it "is revealed in the other's face. The face of the other reminds us that the ethical meaning of an encounter is not totally contained within the limits of [our] consciousness" (Benaroyo, 2022, p. 330) (see also Wolin, 2022). Through a Levinas' lens, one could argue that consumers experience their moral responsibility to others preconsciously rather than consciously and rationally.

For clarification, the conscious mind (i.e., visible tip of an iceberg) contains thoughts, feelings, and memories that people are aware of in any given moment. The preconscious mind (i.e., part of iceberg just below the surface) contains things that can readily be brought to mind when needed (akin to a "mental waiting room") (Peer, 2019, para. 11). The subconscious (unconscious) mind (i.e., very bottom of the iceberg) is a deep reservoir of thoughts, feelings, and memories outside one's awareness (Peer, 2019). As a caveat, FCS practitioners might want to discredit the preconscious approach to consumer power and responsibility, as we live in a consumer society that *subconsciously* socializes people into consumerism, wherein certain emotions *are* repressed (i.e., not readily accessible), so consumption can be perpetuated.

FCS Practice Recommendation

Those interested in teaching FCS students about the power consumers hold in the marketplace, and attendant responsibilities viewed through ethical and moral frames, must clarify their own positioning about this phenomenon and then commit to learning how to bring philosophy, ethics and morality into their learning environment – how to get students to think about morality and philosophical questions and issues as they pertain to consumer power and responsibility. This would entail inquiry-based learning, a reflective pedagogy, and a constructivist curriculum (i.e.,

students construct their own learning by sharing individual meanings with new learnings and knowledge co-constructed via peer cooperation).

In a time-tested model, Lewis (1932) offered four steps for scaffolding students' attempts to engage with moral and philosophical issues (see Figure 2), which in this case means engage with consumer power and attendant responsibilities through an ethical and moral lens. With the help of FCS educators, students would learn how to challenge the status quo and philosophically and reflectively delve deeply into the tenets of a consumer society and its counterpart – a mindful, morally bound, other-focused consumer culture.

Conclusion

To conclude this commentary, I propose that framing consumers as moral leaders as well as ethical followers paves the way for FCS and home economists to embrace the following premise comprising seven aspects of consumer moral leadership (in bold) (details at McGregor, 2020; quote is from her Figure 1:

Drawing on **moral intelligence**, while exercising **moral self-discipline**, consumers would act from a position of **moral integrity**, with **moral courage**, as they engage with the marketplace. From a position of **moral self-transcendence** (a concern for others), after discerning the **moral intensity** of the consumer purchase situation, consumers would take morally responsible actions anticipating that others will recognize, accept, and be inspired by their **moral authority** and follow their lead.

Consumer moral leadership is a way for FCS and home economists to reframe and rethink how consumers can *responsibly influence* the marketplace – beyond consuming ethically. A moral framing entails a deep appreciation for the collective, inordinate power of consumers relative to businesses and governments. It requires holding clear conceptual distinctions between ethics and morals, and followers and leaders while concurrently acknowledging their interrelatedness. It involves viewing responsibility as the ability to choose a response instead of passively responding. It can also involve preconscious responsibility (i.e., no conscious choice to be responsible). Foremost, it necessitates a keen understanding of the different kinds of morality from which people can judge the rightness or wrongness of consumption-related decisions.

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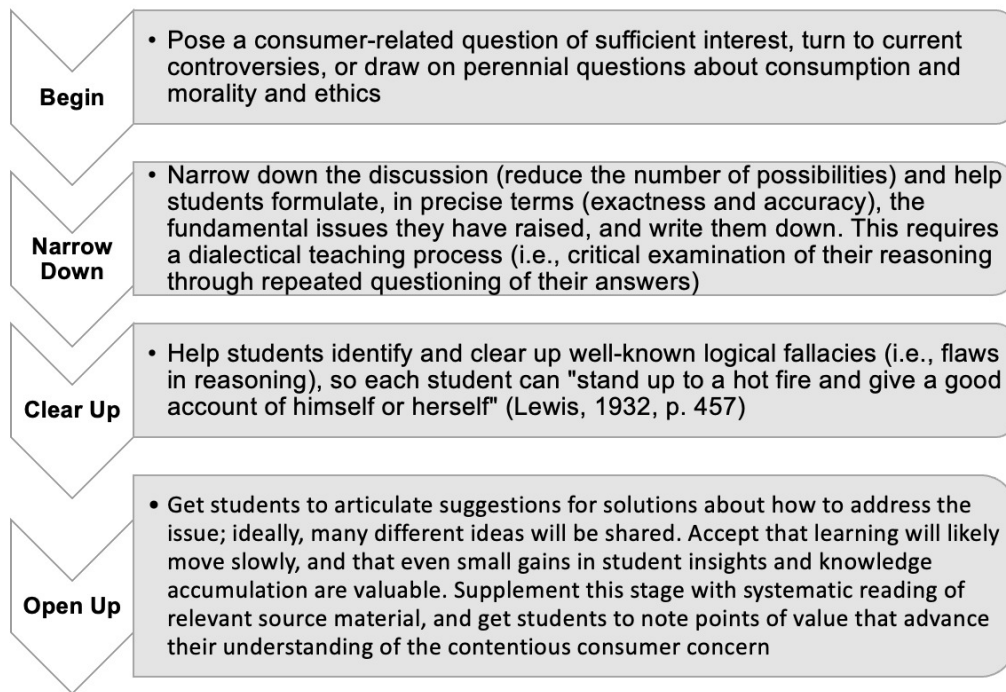


Figure 2. How to Teach Morally Bound Consumer Issues (adapted from Lewis, 1932)



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