Research Article

Ethical Biographies: Product Provenance and the Pursuit of Ethical Consumption

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ABSTRACT

Research on ethical consumption suggests consumers are motivated to consume products consistent with their moral identity. We use interpretive methods and identity theory as our lens to explore how consumers evaluate the ethicality of products during the purchase process. Our findings suggest the possibility that when informants shop, they try to determine the ethical biographies of products in order to purchase products that are consistent with their own moral identities. Ethical biographies of products consist of associations about the processes, resources, people, and places involved with a product's provenance. However, our informants report that ethical biographies can create tensions among competing consumer values and identities, thereby necessitating the use of coping strategies and heuristics. This exploratory research contributes to research on ethical consumption by introducing the concept of ethical product biographies, by indicating a possible role of ethical product biographies in consumers' ethical consumption decisions, and by suggesting a partial explanation for the oft-noted "attitude-behavior gap" in ethical consumption. Our findings can help guide future research that seeks to better understand how consumers attempt to make ethical consumption choices, thereby aiding marketers and policy makers interested in promoting ethical consumption.

1. Introduction

"It's just so hard. When you first kind of get into it, you kind of get kind of a niche, maybe like one is organic, and you're really big on no chemicals, so I'm just going to get everything organic. But then you don't realize about the labor laws that are going into it. But then when you do, it gets so complicated… and you're like, "I can't do anything, I'm just going to sit in my hole with my lights off because nothing is socially just or sustainable."

(Kristina, 20s, non-profit administrator)

Kristina wants to consume ethically, but as she describes above, she finds ethical consumption to be complex and rife with conflicts. She first attempts to

learn about the products' provenance: the characteristics of a product's sourcing, making, distribution, and retailing. Then, she attempts to choose products with provenances that are consistent with her values regarding organic food, environmental sustainability, and social justice, but she finds the process so difficult she is tempted to give up. In this research, we set out to explore the process and experience of ethical purchasing, and as Kristina indicates, we find that even ethically-motivated consumers can find it difficult to choose products that are consistent with all their morals and values.

This research is motivated by the growing interest in ethical consumption among consumers and marketers. For example, the Co-operative Bank estimates that "ethical spending" across all categories in the United Kingdom exceeded £141 billion, equating to an average household spend of £1,278 (Co-operative Bank, 2024). A 2023 national survey conducted by Fairtrade America found that 79% of US consumers would be willing to pay higher prices if it means that producers in a product's supply chain are fairly compensated (Fairtrade America, 2023). In addition, research has shown that consumers care about the ethical implications of the products they buy, as indicated by the influence of factors like the social responsibility of the seller (Romani & Grappi, 2014), Fair Trade certification (e.g., Andorfer & Liebe, 2012), environmentally sustainable production processes (Haws et al., 2010; Luchs et al., 2010), and fair treatment of employees and/or animals involved in production (Gupta & Sen, 2013).

In response to this growing consumer interest in ethical consumption, marketers are highlighting the sustainable and ethical aspects of their product's provenance, or entire supply chain. For example, Patagonia has partnered with Fair Trade USA to expand their sourcing from Fair Trade Certified factories, with over 85% of their products now carrying the Fair Trade certification (Melchionne, 2023). In 2023 Apple introduced its first carbon neutral products, part of its plan to make all its products carbon neutral by 2030 (Apple, 2023). These and other marketers are trying to differentiate themselves based on ethical aspects of their supply chains. Nevertheless, it remains true that more consumers report a desire to purchase ethical products than actually do (Bray et al., 2011; Park & Lin, 2020). Thus, we argue that a better understanding of ethical purchase decisions can benefit consumers, researchers, public policy makers, and practitioners alike.

Ethical consumption can be defined as "the conscious and deliberate decision to make certain consumption choices due to personal and moral beliefs" (Crane & Matten, 2004, p. 290). Not surprisingly, ethical consumer motivations and decision-making have been connected to sustainable consumption (Hesse & Rundau, 2023; Tomsa et al., 2021; Watkins & Mather, 2016). Ethical consumption has been the subject of a growing body of academic research and has been connected to moral identity, a concept of self in which moral beliefs and values are central (Yaprak & Prince, 2019), where moral beliefs are defined as beliefs about whether particular actions are moral or immoral (e.g., cheating on a test is wrong) (Goodwin & Darley, 2008).

However, gaps in our understanding of ethical consumption remain, among which is the persistent "attitude-behavior gap" between ethical intentions and actual buying behavior (Caruana et al., 2016). Perhaps this gap is at least partially due to the difficulty even motivated and well-informed consumers experience in attempting to make more ethical purchases. The purpose of this research is to seek a better understanding of the complex process of ethical purchasing: how consumers evaluate the ethicality of the products they buy, and how this evaluation process informs their purchase decisions. Using moral identity theory (Aquino & Reed, 2002) as a theoretical lens, we find that products can be perceived to have complex "ethical biographies," which consist of meanings related to their provenance before they reach the consumer. These biographical meanings often must be ascribed by the consumer, and they are used to evaluate the ethicality of the underlying product. We identify four facets of provenance that are included in a product's ethical biography, and we observe the complexity this multifaceted biography introduces to the process of identifying the most ethical option. We find that ethical biographies do not always simplify

the pursuit of ethical consumption. In fact, we find that more complete biographies can instead create dilemmas and conflicts for consumers as they attempt to make purchases that are consistent with multiple facets of their self-concept, including multiple and competing moral beliefs. In turn, these dilemmas motivate consumers to pursue coping strategies or heuristics to simplify the complex process of ethical consumption.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Ethical Consumption and Moral Identity

In recent years, ethical consumption has received increased attention from both researchers and consumers (Caruana et al., 2016; Hesse & Rundau, 2023; Yaprak & Prince, 2019). Importantly, research has indicated that consumer ethics extends beyond avoiding unethical behavior, such as improper product returns, to prosocial behaviors, such as recycling (e.g., Weaver et al., 2015) or purposefully choosing products that are ethically sourced (e.g., McEachern, 2014). Many contend that there are ethical dimensions to all consumption decisions (Carrigan et al., 2017; Hiller & Woodall, 2019); however prior research has disproportionately focused on singular aspects of products (i.e., organically produced, socially just, and/or environmentally sustainable) rather than the holistic ethicality of a product's multifaceted background (Bray et al., 2011). Research has also moved from descriptive attempts to identify ethical consumers to more theoretical attempts to understand ethical decision-making (Carrington et al., 2015; Caruana, 2007; Yaprak & Prince, 2019). Importantly, research has demonstrated that the concept of ethical consumption is itself complex and contested (Caruana, 2007; Grauel, 2016; Szmigin et al., 2009), and prior theorizations of ethical consumption have struggled to explain an apparent "attitude-behavior gap" between moral beliefs and consumer behavior (Caruana et al., 2016; Hesse & Rundau, 2023).

Ethical consumption has been shown to be the source of powerful experiences (Carrington et al., 2015; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007) and emotions (Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013; Xie et al., 2015) for consumers. While ethical consumption decisions are often posited to begin with strongly-held beliefs and norms (e.g. Collins et al., 2007; Nelson, 2004; Osterhus, 1997; Schwartz, 1977) other studies have indicated that moral beliefs themselves can be constituted and formed by ethical practices (Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007). Thus, ethical consumption can be seen as a learning process that is dynamic in nature (Bray et al., 2011; Carrington et al., 2015).

Moral identity theory accounts for this dynamic nature and thus serves as a useful theoretical lens for this study. Moral identity is one of a person's multiple identities or roles and is conceptualized as a schema of traits and behaviors associated with promoting the welfare of others over that of the self (Aquino et al., 2009; Aquino & Reed, 2002; Bergman, 2002; Blasi, 1983, 1993, 2004; Reed & Aquino, 2003). One's identity in this paper is defined as a "category label to which a consumer self-associates that is amenable to a clear picture of what a person in the category looks like, thinks, feels and does" (Reed et al., 2012, p. 312). Thus, for example, a moral identity related to environmental concern might include moral beliefs such as "a good person recycles plastic" and "a good person does not leave their house lights on when they leave." A consumer's moral identity is balanced with other identities or roles (Markus & Kunda, 1986) that may overlap or conflict (Reed et al., 2012). Moral identity has been empirically linked to consumer motivation and behavior, but the relationship is complex and deserves further elucidation (Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007; Shao et al., 2008; Winterich et al., 2009). In particular, moral identity is positively associated with ethical consumer behavior (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014; Vitell et al., 2016).

Moral identity has two aspects: internalization, which is the consumer's learned schema of what constitutes ethical behavior, and symbolization, which is how the moral identity is revealed and communicated to others (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Shao et al., 2008). Both moral identity dimensions have been related to ethical consumer behaviors (Barclay et al., 2014; Vitell et al., 2016). The influence of moral identity on

consumption decisions varies based on its accessibility, which in turn is influenced by its centrality (relative to other identities), though accessibility can be raised and lowered by social and situational influences (Aquino et al., 2009; Leavitt et al., 2016; Reed et al., 2007; Shao et al., 2008). Furthermore, while the salience of moral identity can change the way consumers evaluate ethical decisions (He et al., 2016; Xu & Ma, 2016), it can also make ethical behavior more habitual or automatic (Xu & Ma, 2015).

2.2. Ethical Biographies

As noted earlier, one reason for the gap in understanding ethical consumption could be the lack of attention to the "moral agency" of products themselves (Chatzidakis, 2015). Kopytoff (1986) introduced the idea of a product biography as a way of conceptualizing meanings relating to a product's background, proposing that products, like people, have "life histories" that inform and influence the meanings attached to the objects by consumers. He highlights the controversial nature of product biographies, suggesting that there can be tensions among the meanings assigned to a particular biography by an individual, a group, and a larger culture. Kopytoff (1986) also notes that biographical meanings can have important ethical implications. Although he and other researchers (e.g., Curasi et al., 2004; Price et al., 2000) have explained decommodification and singularization of possessions after they are initially acquired by a consumer, his concept is broad enough to include a wide range of culturally-constituted and objective meanings, including those associated with the provenance of products.

In this research, we use the concept of a biography to describe a product's provenance. While Kopytoff (1986) primarily had in mind a "life story" of a commodity after its production, we apply this metaphor to a product's production and distribution in order to explore the process by which consumers identify some products as "more ethical" and others as "less ethical" or "unethical." Moral identity theory suggests the consumer will seek to consume products that are consistent with their moral identity, and it is plausible that ethical biographies might be used by consumers

to assess the match between their moral identity and a product's ethicality. In adopting this more holistic view of a consumer's assessment of a product's ethicality, we move away from conceptualizing ethical consumption in terms of single indicators, such as Fair Trade certification (e.g. Nicholls & Lee, 2006), organic agriculture (Cairns et al., 2013), or environmental impact (e.g., Lingnau et al., 2019). In doing so, we attempt to gain a better understanding of ethical consumption decisions and to help explain the "ethical purchase gap" (Nicholls & Lee, 2006) or "attitude-behavior gap" (Caruana et al., 2016) in ethical consumption.

3. Method

Our goal in this research is to use the theoretical frame of moral identity and the concept of a product's ethical biography to explore and conceptualize the complex process by which consumers evaluate the ethicality of the products they consume. In order to do so, we adopted interpretive methods and purposive sampling, similar to other recent studies of ethical consumer behavior (Hiller & Woodall, 2019). Therefore, we chose to focus on consumers who have made lifestyle commitments to ethical decision making by choosing to live in a "new consumption community" (Ozcaglar-Toulouse et al., 2006; Shaw & Shiu, 2002). Rather than starting with presumed pro-social and pro-environmental features, we focus on how consumers perceive the holistic ethicality of products and note how these perceptions relate to their own moral identity and resulting purchase decisions.

We selected the pseudonymous Springs Landing as the site for our research, a neighborhood within a major metropolitan area in the southeastern U.S., where residents agree to live by certain community values, such as "Diversity" and "Sustainability." Before purchasing a home in Springs Landing, prospective residents are given a community manual that describes the community's core values and explains neighborhood rules and guidelines that support these community values, such as a prohibition on invasive plant species and the tradition of giving away or recycling unwanted belongings rather than throwing them away. Therefore, these informants are likely to

be highly motivated to consume ethically, similar to the Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability (LOHAS) segment of consumers (Choi & Feinberg, 2021). Since our goal in this study was to explore the complexity of ethical consumption decisions and observe the multiple facets of the moral identity involved, these informants were purposefully chosen, even if they are not necessarily representative of a general population.

With that said, to an outside observer the residents of Springs Landing would fit into most middle-class neighborhoods in the area. The neighborhood is located in one of the ten most populous U.S. metropolitan areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), and home values range from $280,000 to $440,000 based on public records of recent sales (Zillow, 2022). Likewise, our informants were typically employed in or retired from professional occupations. In terms of consumption choices, our informants face typical constraints and pressures as other consumers: limited time, limited money, competing interests and goals, and influence from family members, work groups, and friends. So, while Springs Landing's residents are likely to be more sensitive to the ethical aspects of consumption, they are also likely to be more similar to "conscious consumers" (Szmigin et al., 2009), who demonstrate flexibility and pragmatism in their pursuit of ethical consumption.

3.1. Sample

Initial contact was made with the resident responsible for answering external inquiries, who invited the first author to a community meal to discuss the research and gain neighborhood approval. The study was presented to informants as an investigation of sustainable consumption practices in general. Initial informants were recruited from these early contacts, who subsequently recommended other informants following their interviews (i.e., snowballing). The objective in this sequential selection process was to seek variety in terms of informant backgrounds and consumption practices. Twenty five residents were interviewed (see Table 1), and follow-up interviews were conducted with ten informants as our investigation matured and additional questions arose. The sample was predominantly female (68%), which is representative of the adult population of the neighborhood (64% female). As indicated in the table below, the sample also includes diverse age groups, household types, and professions.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Our data collection and analysis were broadly patterned after the existential-phenomenological approach (Thompson et al., 1989). Semi-structured (i.e., open-ended and non-directive) interviews were used to allow flexibility to explore novel or unexpected themes and to allow the informants to describe their consumption experiences without the imposition of etic theories or frameworks. Informants were not prompted to discuss specific products or product categories, but probes were often employed when informants brought up specific products or product categories (see Appendix A).

Most interviews were conducted in informants' homes. Discussion was guided by the interviewer to focus on consumption choices before and after moving to the neighborhood. Specific responses were probed to determine informants' thought processes, perceptions, and experiences. In addition to interviews, other data included field notes for all interviews; field notes from participating in and observing seven neighborhood events; photographs of residents and neighborhood events and practices; and neighborhood publications. Although the analysis centered on interview data, these additional data sources provided researchers with a deeper understanding of the motives and thought processes of informants as well as additional data points with which to test our interpretations and develop a conceptual framework.

Individual interviews were coded using NVivo in order to illuminate themes within each transcript. The research team coded individual transcripts using descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2015), to identify general themes within each transcript, such as motivations for ethical consumption, types of product meanings, and purchase decisions. Initially, our focus was on coding and drawing themes from individual sources in isolation using a hermeneutical approach (Thompson, 1997) of iterating between examining of specific parts the data and continuing to a more holistic study of the entire data set. In this way, a thorough analysis of

Table 1. Informants

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Profession	Family Status	Time in Neighborhood
Adam	30s	M	Stay-at-home parent (attorney)	Married w/ children	1 year
Anna	70s	F	Retired government administrator	Divorced	10 years
Bill	70s	M	Retired college professor	Divorced	10 years
Connie	50s	F	Government administrator	Divorced	8 years
David	40s	M	Entrepreneur	Married w/ children	3 years
Dorothy*	20s	F	College professor	Single	2 years
Gloria*	20s	F	Tutor and Dance instructor	Single	1 year
Isaiah	40s	M	Physicist (currently unemployed)	Divorced	1 year
Julia*	30s	F	Landscape architect	Married w/ children	5 years
Kristina*	20s	F	Non-profit administrator	Married	2 years
Kristy*	30s	F	Minister	Married w/ children	5 years
Kira	40s	F	Teacher	Married w/ children	10 years
Lori*	50s	F	Nurse practitioner	Cohabitating	4 years
Lily	50s	F	Government administrator	Married	9 years
Lacey*	30s	F	Health professional	Married w/ children	2 years
Mabel	50s	F	Government administrator	Widowed	9 years
Madelyn	30s	F	Journalist	Married	5 years
Myra	50s	F	Non-profit administrator	Married	5 years
Neil*	20s	M	IT Professional	Cohabitating	1 year
Polly	60s	F	Retired scientist	Divorced	6 years
Paul*	50s	M	IT Professional	Cohabitating	10 years
Patrick	40s	M	Business consultant	Married w/ children	10 years
Shelly*	50s	F	Retired therapist	Single	8 years
Samantha	20s	F	Non-profit administrator	Cohabitating	1 year
Winifred	30s	F	Stay-at-home parent (teacher)	Married w/ children	9 years

Notes: *Informant participated in follow-up interviews; F = Female; M = Male.

the data set as a whole was conducted using pattern coding and thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2015) to identify a thematic structure that grew to include categories such as "biography meanings" and "dilemmas and tradeoffs" (see Appendix B). In this stage, numerous data displays were generated, including graphical displays of the coding of individual sources as well as matrix displays summarizing the coding of the entire data set. These data displays were used to compare the prevalence of certain themes in individual interviews, the pattern of individual themes across the data set, and the intersection of themes in the data set.

The emerging themes were compared with alter-native explanations or interpretations among the research team, and they were triangulated with the field notes generated over the course of the data collection. For example, one alternative explanation of the themes emerging in the data was that what the research team was observing was a collection of "single issue" consumers, each one focused on a particular aspect of product provenance rather than a wholistic consideration of different aspects of provenance. However, when the team looked at the distribution of themes across informants, we found that every informant mentioned each of the categories of provenance at least once in their account. Furthermore, field notes of observations of the informants in their homes and of community events provided

support for interpreting the pattern of responses as reflective of wholistic concerns about product provenance. This process of triangulation continued until the final thematic structure of the findings was agreed upon via interpretive convergence (Saldaña, 2015). Finally, each member of the research team read through the un-coded transcripts and re-considered the thematic structure in an effort to confirm consensus and address alternative explanations, thereby helping to address face validity concerns.

4. Findings

Our analysis revealed a number of consistent themes that illustrate the scope and importance of ethical biographies to our participants. Although we believe these themes represent distinct facets of ethical consumption decisions, it is important to acknowledge that the boundaries between them are not always clear, and there is the potential for overlap. We find that when making ethical decisions, our informants evaluated the ethical biographies of products to determine the consistency of those product perceptions with their moral identity. These ethical biographies consisted of four types of provenance meanings: processes, resources, people, and places (see Figure 1). Every informant mentioned provenance meanings of all four types, indicating that these types of ethical biographies were not specifically oriented toward any one particular aspect of a product's provenance. What was most interesting, though, is that these ethical biographies did not always simplify ethical consumption for our informants. Instead, our informants recounted the multiple conflicts and dilemmas they experienced while shopping, which often necessitated coping mechanisms or decision rules to resolve the conflicts they felt.

4.1. Processes

Informants repeatedly referred to various processes involved in product provenance in accounts of their ethical consumption decisions. Process meanings relate to the technological processes involved in the provenance of the product, from the extraction of raw materials to the retailing of finished goods. Respondents frequently used these meanings to distinguish the ethicality of one product from another. For example, the

PlayStation video game system brought to mind extraction meanings for Neil:

Interviewer: …what bothers you about the electronics?

Neil: Well, from what I understand and from what I've read, certain precious metals that they've used to make them, particularly like some PlayStation stuff…come from these areas in Africa where people are killed for these metals [or] enslaved … to mine for these things. (Neil, 20s, IT professional)

While not an avid "gamer," Neil does own a video game system, and, as a young male working in the IT industry, he is a likely target customer for such systems. Because electronics manufacturing involves globalized manufacturing and sourcing systems, which can make it difficult for consumers to find out about the provenance of the goods they consume (Burroughs, 2013; Guardian, 2021), it would not be surprising if Neil were a willing and uncritical consumer of game systems. Instead, Neil attached negative meanings to the materials he thinks are necessary for their construction, creating a type of "origin story" in the product's ethical biography. Although it did not prevent him from buying a game system, he clearly feels guilt for consuming something whose supply chain might involve human suffering, even though he is not confident in this knowledge. Likewise, manufacturing processes are a source of meaning for David, an energetic serial entrepreneur:

…like, look at the buttons on your shirt and just – you know all that goes into just making that button, right? I mean, we're talking massive factories with huge coal-fired power plants and offices and trucks all over the world that are coordinating to produce that button, right? (David, 40s, entrepreneur)

For David, even the most mundane of items – a button on a shirt – involves a vast system of provenance.

Later stages in the supply chain also generated provenance meanings. Kira, a married working mother, described why she dislikes consuming fruit in the winter:

And all that produce flying in from Chile …. I'm not doing that anymore.… Seems like a ridiculous waste of
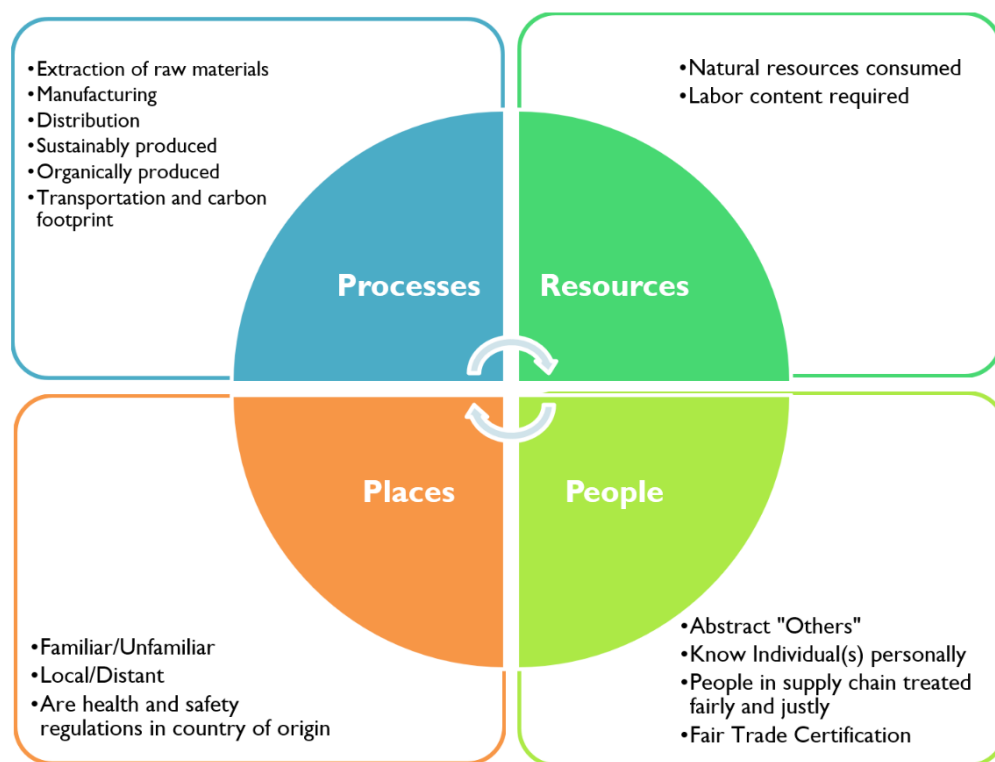
Figure 1. Ethical Biography

fossil fuels. It seems like a ridiculous waste, and certainly the price does not include what it's really costing [in environmental damage]. (Kira, 40s, teacher)

Instead of seeing the year-round availability of fresh produce as an advantage, Kira includes transportation and the consumption of fossil fuels in the product's biography and makes a judgement that it is immoral.

4.2. Resources

Informants also considered the resources invested in making and marketing products when creating ethical biographies. These resource meanings include those related to natural resources, particularly the natural resources contained in products or those used or affected by the supply chain of products, but they could also relate to other scarce resources involved in the provision of products, like human labor or skill. For example, Polly, a single retiree and one of the first homeowners in the neighborhood, makes food choices based in part on the natural resources involved in the product's ethical biography. Among

other things, she states that she prefers grass-fed bison, stating that she "never buys beef." When asked to explain why, she elaborated:

…there's a lot of reasons for buffalo. Cattle have a type of hoof that destroys the range. You have to keep moving them around, otherwise you get severe erosion because their hooves break up the sod. Buffalo don't do that. Buffalo, for a million years, lived on the plains and survived on the plains and the native grasses. They are a part of the cycle that is very self-sustaining. (Polly, 60s, retired scientist)

Polly's biography for meat reflects that she cares deeply about the difference between cows and buffalo in terms of their effect on natural resources. Although a retired scientist, Polly had no apparent first-hand knowledge of ranching or farming, so here and in other parts of her account she demonstrates that she has committed a good deal of time and effort to try to evaluate the ethical biographies for the products she purchases. Her perception of the resources invested

in and impacted by meat production forms part of the ethical biography she considers when grocery shopping for meat.

Other informants thought about the labor content invested in products when making ethical consumption decisions, related to resources. The labor content facet of resources of the ethical biography is distinct from social connections to specific people involved in the product's making, which are described in the next section. Labor content does not connote a connection or association to a particular person or a group of people, nor is it an evaluation of social justice, but rather reflects an appreciation for the effort or labor costs invested in a product by unknown others. In some cases, this aspect of the ethical biography involved an abstract sense of the effort of multiple people across the entire supply chain. Mabel, for example, thinks all the human time and effort invested in marketing different brands and varieties of pasta and sauce is an ethical issue:

…like I'm standing in front of the dry pasta or the spaghetti sauce; that is mind boggling. Why, I just look at it and I think so much energy goes into designing these products to marketing them and human energy and real energy, to transporting them. Then throwing them away when they're outdated, advertising them and so I just think it's kind of sad. (Mabel, 50s, government administrator)

Here again we see Mabel's concern about retailing practices, but now her focus is not on the persuasive intent or ethicality of these practices but on resources she cares about, such as electricity and human labor. Furthermore, the thought of wasting these resources creates an emotional reaction ("I just think it's kind of sad").

4.3. People
The third aspect of an ethical biography, people meanings, are meanings related to the people involved in the supply chain, whether they are specific individuals known to the consumer or abstract people assumed to be involved in the making and distribution of a product. People meanings are distinct from labor content (i.e. resource) meanings in ethical biographies because

people meanings stem from a concern for or connection to the people involved in the supply chain, and is often a matter of social justice, rather than being an of appreciation of the labor investment in the product. For example, informants frequently included abstract perceptions of the workers involved in the production of consumer goods in constructing an ethical biography:

[Fair Trade certification] kind of just makes me feel like I'm supporting a cause, that is, a company that cares about that cause. That means that the people who are producing the product over in whichever country that might be, are, hopefully… not being exploited… that they're able to do work that they are also able to support themselves on and hopefully… not being overworked…. (Dorothy, 20s, college professor)

Dorothy is uncertain about who specifically benefits from Fair Trade certification and how exactly they might benefit, but because she has a moral concern for the treatment of workers, she still seeks products that have an ethical biography that includes Fair Trade certification. In doing so, she feels that she is helping some anonymous workers in another part of the world, thereby illustrating an aspect of her own moral identity by assisting some workers in that supply chain in terms of work conditions and pay.

In other cases, people meanings in a product's ethical biography flowed from specific, familiar people. For example, several informants mentioned buying eggs from a neighbor on a nearby farm:

… sometimes I buy Farmer Fred's organic eggs that are very expensive. Sometimes I buy the cage free eggs at the grocery store, but sometimes I'll buy from him. It's mostly just to support him. I don't think the eggs taste any different, really. (Connie, 50s, government administrator)

First, Connie indicates that process meanings ("cage free") are important in the product's ethical biography, but people meanings are an additional consideration. Connie expressly states that she did not buy the eggs because of any perceived superiority of the eggs themselves; instead, her moral concern for the well-being of her neighbor motivates her to use more of her

limited budget to buy eggs that are otherwise indistinguishable from the cage-free ones at the grocery store. Here again, we see how informants attempted to match facets of their own moral identity with the ethical biography of the products they purchased.

4.4. Places
Place meanings associated with the geographical places involved in the production and distribution of a product constituted a fourth aspect of ethical biographies mentioned by our informants. In some instances, informants discussed far away or unfamiliar places they had never visited:

> … if you go to [U.S. grocery store chain] Publix and you buy their organic apple juice which probably comes from a pretty good place, it's made in the USA. I don't know exactly where in the USA, but it's like $6.50 for, I don't know, it's like half a gallon. … But at Walmart for like $1.50 you can get a gallon and a half of apple juice, like, made in [far away country]. And I don't know even know how they do that [for that price]. (Lacey, 30s, health professional)

In this excerpt, Lacey exhibits a moral concern for taking care of her family by attempting to select "the right" apple juice. She is uncertain exactly where the apple juice comes from, but that does not prevent her from including a place-related meaning in the product's ethical biography. She assumes the United States is "a pretty good place" for making apple juice, while in her perception, many faraway or unfamiliar places are less desirable. The source of this moral judgment is unclear, but what is clear is that she feels a moral pull to purchase apple juice with an ethical biography that includes a US origin.

Other place meanings were derived from places familiar to the informant, particularly, a nearby farm:

> Yeah, [locally grown food] has pleasant associations. Because [the farm] makes it more concrete; the idea of locally grown sounds nice, but that direct connection to your food… somehow feels more connected when I can look out my door and see food being grown right there. (Gloria, 20s, tutor and dance instructor)

Consuming food from a local farm was frequently mentioned as more ethical than consuming food from the supermarket. In some cases, this judgment was connected to process or people meanings, but there was also a sense in which "buying local" was a moral value independent of other considerations. It is apparent that informants were very sensitive to places where products were produced, and these place meanings influenced their purchase decisions and consumption experiences.

In summary, informants in this study sought to learn about the ethical biography of the products they consumed. They demonstrated awareness of and attention to ethical biographies stemming from the processes, resources, people, and places involved in making and distributing products they consumed. Ethical biographies related to all stages of the marketing process, from natural resource extraction to the place of purchase, were used to determine whether specific products were consistent with their moral identity. However, as we will explore in the following section, this evaluation process was complex and rife with conflict.

4.5. Identity Conflict Created by Product Biographies
Although our informants sought out ethical biographies in the pursuit of ethical consumption, they also noted that product biographies could pose challenges to consumption decision making in three ways. First, there was sometimes a consumer identity conflict between two or more of their moral identities. Second, there were identity conflicts between a consumer's moral identity and another aspect of that consumer's identity. And, last, there were sometimes conflicts between two different competing ethical aspects of a product's biography. As noted earlier, the self-concept is multifaceted and comprises multiple identities or roles (Markus & Kunda, 1986; Reed et al., 2012), and, as noted by Reed et al., (2012 , p. 318), "Consumption can often lead to identity conflict, or provide ways to resolve it." Our informants often struggled as they attempted to balance complex and conflicting identities and values when making consumption decisions (c.f. Carrington et al., 2015). Furthermore, it was often difficult for informants to find product biographies that fully matched their own moral identity. Frequently it was difficult to find enough information to even construct complete

ethical biographies of specific products.

Conflict between moral identities. First, informants frequently encountered a conflict between their competing moral identities, such as the moral identity of "world citizen" and the moral identity of "parent." Our informants exhibited overlapping but unique identities that were other-focused rather than self-interested. In contrast with a simplistic view that consumption decisions are either ethical or not, informants felt tension among multiple moral beliefs. For example, Kristy is a working mother who cares deeply about protecting the environment, but she also loves her children and feels a moral responsibility for their welfare. She describes the tension between these moral identities of "environmentalist" and "mother:"

I guess what I wonder right now is will [my newborn son] ever have anything new, and will it ever bother him? The way we are operating now, there's no need for him to have anything brand new, and that's okay. And yet, our culture says, "New is best." …so there's been no resolution of that conflict in my life…. It is hard to stop purchasing, particularly when you have children…. (Kristy, 30s, Minister)

Later Kristy describes the complexity of deciding how to provide diapers for her baby. In a nod to her "environmentalist" identity, she primarily uses cloth diapers, but when she needs to use disposable diapers, she agonizes over the purchase decision:

We use cloth, but when we need to use disposable, my conflict right now is I buy green diapers online, and they are shipped to me from Amazon… taking into account the carbon footprint that that entails. But it is more sustainable for me in other terms, in that I don't have to drive in the car to buy things, the way they package them in bulk, and I get them and have them for a longer period – I'm having to buy them less often. (Kristy, 30s, Minister)

In Kristy's account, we see the conflict between competing moral identities as she seeks to symbolize her different moral identities with her consumption decisions regarding her children. This conflict is not between self-centered identities and a single moral identity, as might be the case if she deliberated between spending money on toys for her children versus spending money on a trip to Europe to enact her (hypothetical) "world traveler" identity. Instead, she feels conflict between different schemas of how she feels "environmentalists" and "mothers" should think and act.

Conflict between moral vs. other identities. A second type of conflict occurred when informants felt tension between a moral identity and another identity in their consumption decisions. A consumer's moral identity is only one among several identities taken up by consumers in their various roles, and this identity can be more or less accessible in different situations (Aquino et al., 2009). Our informants indicated that they often experienced tension between choosing products with biographies that were consistent with their moral identity and choosing products with biographies that were more desirable for their other identities, such as "employee." For example, Samantha, a Peace Corps veteran currently working for a non-profit service organization, reports a conflict between her desire to protect people and the environment and her desire to stay within her limited budget, itself an outcome of her altruistic decision to work for a series of non-profit organizations:

Like I heard that Macs are a little bit more Earth-friendly because they're not slave children that are putting together your computer kind of thing, but it's like I can't drop almost $3,000 for a laptop; I'll go for the cheap one. (Samantha, 20s, non-profit administrator)

Samantha's need for a computer was related to her identity as a non-profit administrator, and she desired certain performance criteria to be successful in that identity. However, she also needed to balance her "environmentalist," "social justice advocate," and "money manager" identities simultaneously, making her buying decision that much more complex. She attempted to find a computer with a matching ethical biography, even if some aspects of the biography were based on subjective or specious information ("I heard…"). Ultimately, though, her budget constraint limited her to the "cheap" options with less desirable ethical biographies. Other informants even indicated a simultaneous overlap among some identities and

conflict with others. For example, Lacey discusses the tension she experiences in shopping for her family:

Our location makes it hard because there is a Walmart superstore right around the corner. And with a child, sometimes it's just easier to go to the Walmart superstore. And that place is just full of evilness. I mean, I used to at least not be aware it was full of evilness… but now I'm at least looking for the one organic item that they hide in the back. (Lacey, 30s, healthcare professional)

Lacey finds it "easier" to go shopping at the nearby Walmart, and saving time and energy is likely beneficial to her own welfare and thus allows her to enact one or more non-moral identities. On the other hand, however, her time and energy are important family resources that can also be devoted to caring for her children as part of her "mother" moral identity. In either case, her beliefs about the ethical biographies of the products available at Walmart make her feel guilty about shopping there because she feels she is not being true to her other moral identities of "environmentalist" and "social justice advocate." Nevertheless, she attempts to reduce her guilt by purchasing the products with ethical biographies that she believes are the most consistent with her values, among the choices available at Walmart.

Conflict between aspects of an ethical biography . A third type of conflict our informants experienced in attempting to make ethical purchases occurred when different aspects of a product's ethical biography conflicted or were consistent with conflicting identities. For example, Kristina notes how an organic peach from Oregon (thousands of miles from where Kristina lives) has an ethical biography that includes a positive process meaning, organic, that is in keeping with her values, but it also has a negative place meaning that is less desirable, because it is shipped from a distant location.

… it doesn't make sense to buy a peach [in the state of] Georgia that was flown in from [the state of] Oregon. It just doesn't make sense, just because it has organic wrapped around it. … it might be better for you technically, because you might have less chemicals

or this or that, but you've put way more chemicals into the environment to get that peach here. (Kristina, 20s, non-profit administrator)

Kristina does not describe a taste preference, but instead notes that where her peaches were grown - Georgia or Oregon - has different ethical implications in terms of transportation. This account also illustrates a conflict between process and place meanings: should she buy organic from a faraway place or non-organic from a nearby place? One she perceives to fit her moral concern for the environment, while the other she perceives to fit her moral concern for her health.

Kristina highlights how difficult it can be to find products with ethical biographies that symbolize multiple moral identities. Her and others' accounts in our study revealed how becoming more ethical as a consumer in an abstract sense means increasing the number of moral identities consumers must balance and the ethical biography meanings they have to consider, thereby increasing the complexity and tension of decision making. Another example is provided by Adam, a stay-at-home parent who has a graduate degree in environmental science. His environmental and health concerns motivate his choice of groceries for his family, but he finds different aspects of product biographies to be in tension:

"I'll buy organic when I can but price is not so much important when it comes to food, I think, because you're putting it into yourself. So it's more important to buy good quality. … So as unrefined or close to the original source as possible. …Not the source, in terms of distance traveled…. for instance, me driving down to Whole Foods. That would be like twice the environmental footprint even if I bought organic then going over to Publix and buying conventional food because I can walk to Publix." (Adam, 30s, stay at home parent)

Adam wants to do what is best for his family and for the environment. Ideally he would buy food that is unprocessed, organic, and environmentally friendly, but there is not a clear choice. Is organic food better for the environment if he has to drive farther to buy it, or would conventional food be better if he can walk to the store? How should the health benefits of organic

food be weighted in that comparison? There is not a straightforward answer to these questions, even to a motivated, well-informed consumer like Alex.

Buying decisions become even more complex when self-interested identities must be balanced. For example, Mabel struggles to find the right product even for something as mundane as laundry detergent:

So when I make a decision to buy one type of ECOS laundry detergent versus soap nuts versus buying Arm & Hammer at the grocery store, you know, I try and understand. What are soap nuts? How do they work? And they sort of work, but it doesn't really get all the dirt out of everything, but it could work okay. Or versus ECOS–are the claims made by ECOS laundry detergent really real or is it just the kind of advertising, like Johnson & Johnson, you know? Or the Clorox line of green products or–I try and find out: is that real? (Mabel, 50s, government administrator)

Mabel's concern about the environmental impact of laundry detergent reduces her consideration set but also introduces a concern over product efficacy, a concern commonly reported about environmentally-friendly products (Luchs et al., 2010; Olson, 2013). She even worries whether she can trust the available indicators of sustainability, or whether it is just "advertising."

Thus, our informants reported that ethical biographies, while helpful to them in achieving ethical consumption, at times created personal dilemmas and identity conflicts. Our informants struggled to balance competing moral and non-moral identities as they attempted to achieve consistency with those identities in their purchase decisions. Achieving this consistency was made even more complex by the fact that ethical biographies were themselves complex and could embody competing moral values. It is little wonder, then, that many of our informants expressed frustration and even a sense of hopelessness, as indicated by Kristina's quote at the very beginning of this article.

4.6. Coping Strategies and Decision Rules

Another indication that ethical consumption is difficult for consumers is the coping strategies and decision rules that informants developed in response to the

perceived conflicts and dilemmas. These coping strategies included abstaining from consumption of a particular type of product, abdicating responsibility for buying decisions, allowing one meaning or consumption goal to trump others, or avoiding the formation of negative product meanings in the first place.

Abstaining from consumption. Madelyn, a married freelance journalist who chooses to repair worn or broken products instead of replacing them, illustrates the first strategy, abstaining from the consumption of a particular type of product:

Yeah, I know I can get a pair of shoes cheaper than getting my pair of shoes repaired, but I get my shoes repaired, and it's not about the money. It's something about staying out of the cycle. Just – I don't want to create more demand for more crap from China. Might as well just fix what I have. (Madelyn, 30s, journalist)

Here again, budget is a concern for Madelyn, but so is what she perceives as a "cycle" of wasteful consumption and disposal as well as the negative place meanings related to China. Although affordable replacements are available, those replacements bring to mind thoughts of adding to the demand for shoddily-made and perhaps unsustainably-produced products that she feels are uncritically purchased by other consumers.

Abdicating responsibility. Another coping strategy referenced by informants is to abdicate responsibility for the decision, as illustrated by Julia:

Interviewer: I was just wondering how knowing more about how the food is actually produced has influenced how you look at food now and how you shop for food.

Jane: Well basically, I've turned over shopping for food to my husband.

Interviewer: Because it was too hard?

Jane: It's just a hard thing for me, I mean, I don't know. Also, there's the whole choice thing. There are so many choices. (Julia, 30s, landscape architect)

Like Mabel's deliberation over laundry detergent, a trip to the grocery store is more of an ordeal for Julia than a routine errand. Because the decisions are so

complicated for her, she would rather her husband do the shopping so that she would not have to expend the cognitive resources such trips would require and perhaps experience guilt or tension over having to make compromises. A different type of abdication is illustrated by Samantha, who earlier discussed her budget constraints when buying a laptop:

Like that website, "Better World Shopper".... It makes it kind of easy because if you're going to buy coffee, baby diapers, ice cream, things like that, they just rank [them]. Every product is different, even if it comes from the same company. And I don't even know what they look into, but it gives me some guidelines. (Samantha, 20s, non-profit administrator)

Even though she expresses uncertainty about the criteria used, Samantha prefers to defer to a perceived expert for recommendations on what to buy rather than expend the effort of determining products' ethical biography and attempting to find a match with her moral identity.

Prioritizing one goal over others. A third coping strategy is to let one goal or identity take precedence, and to rationalize away the negative implications for the other goals. For example, Neil rationalizes his purchases of new electronics:

You know, I guess I feel like it's one of those give and takes, and it's like, "Well, okay. I'm going to hold on to the machine really long. I'm going to do my best to recycle the things that I don't use.... (Neil, 20s, IT Professional)

As seen earlier, Neil expressed ethical concerns about the manufacture of game systems and computers, but here he describes a competing desire to have the latest technology. To resolve this tension, Neil gives in to his desire for new technology, but he bargains with his own conscience, promising himself to extend the lifecycle of the electronics he purchases and to recycle the materials used in them. Likewise, Dorothy feels that she must buy clothes for work that may not meet her ideals of social responsibility:

... if I was a farmer, sure, I'd buy all my clothes at the thrift store. But for teaching purposes I feel like I have to look kind of professional. So I always feel that

tension, that's probably the area of my consumption where I feel the most tension ... because you see the "made in Vietnam" and you feel guilty - like, [it was made] by small children. (Dorothy, 20s, college professor)

Here, Dorothy faces a conflict between clothes consistent with her values (thrift store clothing) and the clothing she feels is expected of her as a college professor. She resolves this tension by buying the clothing consistent with her professional role, but she assuages her guilt by telling herself that her clothes are forced on her by the demands of her job.

Prioritizing one aspect of an ethical biography. Some informants tried to balance their competing interests by prioritizing some desirable product meanings over others. Layla comes to the conclusion that she cannot meet all of her competing priorities when shopping for food:

And I'm still working on pulling all that together and what's the best, like should I buy organic strawberries versus conventionally grown strawberries? I mean do I want to spend my money that way? I'm older, does it really matter? ... So there's always this kind of decision making thing going on in my head and I guess a couple of years ago I came to the conclusion I was going to spend my money on the meats. You know, I was going to make sure that whatever meat we ate was raised and processed in such a way that it ... wasn't in unhealthy living conditions and the animal was slaughtered in a proper fashion. (Lily, 50s, government administrator)

Lily, like other informants, faces constraints on her time and money. In addition, she has concern for the environment, for her own health, and for the wellbeing of the animals that are being raised for food. Instead of investing in a cognitively-taxing decision process for each item, she decides to prioritize health, environmental, and animal rights concerns when she shops for meat but let pragmatic concerns dominate for other foods.

Avoiding biographical information. Finally, some informants report intentionally avoiding the formation of product meanings so as to avoid conflict altogether:

Go yes, for sure, there are times when somebody will put on a documentary and I'll be like, "I can't – I don't [want to watch]." . . . Because it's more work. Because–well, taking in the information is a certain amount of work, energy, attention, but once you know things, you have to act on them; your conscience won't let you [ignore them]. (Gloria, 20s, tutor and dance instructor)

Gloria and her roommates are concerned about the environment and social issues, and as a result, they frequently watch documentaries such as Food, Inc. and Tapped. However, Gloria dislikes the obligation that learning this information places on her, specifically, the obligation to expend more effort to find products that are not harmful to the environment or to animals and people. Thus, rather than increasing the "work" involved in shopping for mundane products, Gloria seeks to avoid learning about the ways in which products might not be consistent with her values and consumption goals. Instead of rationalizing her behavior or abdicating responsibility for her choices, she seeks to stay intentionally and blissfully unaware of the conflicts posed by mundane products choices.

In summary, the observation that our informants developed these coping strategies or decision rules illustrates that the process of matching one's moral identity to a product's ethical biography is not easy or straightforward for consumers. These strategies also could directly contribute to the attitude-behavior gap, as all could result in purchases of products that are less ethical on one or more dimensions.

5. Discussion

Our results suggest that our informants pursue ethical consumption in part by trying to construct ethical biographies for products that correspond to the processes, resources, people, and places involved in a product's creation, production, transportation, and marketing. Although past consumer research has explored specific provenance meanings, such as place or country of origin (Brijs et al., 2011; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007) or organic certification (e.g., Pino et al., 2012), our research takes a more holistic approach and explores how con-

sumers integrate these meanings into multi-faceted ethical biographies that often contain both positive and negative meanings. These meanings can create conflict and dilemmas among consumers' competing objectives. The desire among our informants to create ethical biographies reflects a growing awareness of the importance of a product's provenance, adding additional layers of meanings to consumers' understanding and interpretation of the products they consider purchasing.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that ethical biographies influence consumer's decision processes and assist consumers in their pursuit of ethical consumption. A key principle of moral identity theory (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Bergman, 2002) is that a consumer's moral identity motivates them to purchase products that are consistent with this moral identity, which can result in ethical consumption decisions. However, prior research has not fully explored the way in which consumers go about evaluating this fit and has called for research to help us better understand the influence of moral identity on consumer preferences and choice (e.g., Vitell et al., 2009). Our research addresses this gap and extends moral identity theory by proposing that consumers evaluate a product's ethical biography in order to make identity-consistent, ethical consumption decisions. In contrast with prior conceptualizations of moral identity as abstract and monolithic, we demonstrate the complex and multifaceted nature of moral identity by showing that consumers can hold multiple identities oriented toward the welfare of others, such as "environmentalist" and "human rights advocate." Future research is needed to better understand the symbolic role of ethical biographies, as consumers may seek to communicate their moral identity to others by consuming products with certain ethical biographies. Future research is also needed to explore whether this symbolic behavior itself serves to shape internal aspects of moral identity (Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Shao et al., 2008), thereby demonstrating the influence and "moral agency" (Chatzidakis, 2015) of products via their ethical biography.

In keeping with earlier empirical work pointing to

the complexity of moral identity and its influence on ethical consumption (Carrington et al., 2015; Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007; Winterich et al., 2009), our research demonstrates the difficulty consumers have in finding consistency between the multifaceted constructs of moral identity and ethical product biographies. Our informants frequently deliberated over perceived conflicts among their own identities, and between their identities and a product's ethical biography. This finding is consistent with a growing body of research that explores the complexity of the very concept of morality and ethical consumption (Caruana, 2007; Grauel, 2016; Hiller & Woodall, 2019; Lovett et al., 2010). For example, many of our informants seemed to demonstrate an "ethics of care" (Heath et al., 2016), imbuing pragmatic decisions that benefited their family members with moral value. Like the "conscious consumers" studied by Szmigin et al. (2009), they exhibited a degree of ethical flexibility that might previously have been considered inconsistent. However, the concept of ethical biography helps explain their behavior; as biographies become more complete, our informants discovered that they were not uniformly "ethical" or "unethical." Instead, ethical biographies were complex and contested, with some aspects that coincided with a particular moral identity but with others that conflicted. However, the ethical biographies helped our informants make decisions that were "more ethical" (Hiller & Woodall, 2019) and thus pragmatic, if not perfect.

Our informants frequently deliberated over perceived conflicts between and among a product's ethical biography and their own moral or other identities, and this felt conflict was significant enough to spur the development of coping strategies to lessen or avoid the dilemmas generated by provenance meanings, even in the consumption of mundane products like groceries. In identifying consumer coping strategies and heuristics in this context, we contribute to research on consumer decision-making (Hoyer, 1984; Kivetz & Simonson, 2000; Thøgersen et al., 2012). In keeping with the constructive model of consumer decision making (Bettman et al., 1998), our informants seemed to use these coping mechanisms to avoid negative emotions and/or to make their decision easier

to justify to themselves or others. Future research could investigate the relative prevalence of the coping strategies identified in this research and attempt to identify patterns between the strategy used, the focal product, and the particular consumption goals in conflict.

Taken together, our findings could partially explain the "attitude-behavior" gap observed in ethical consumption (Nicholls & Lee, 2006; Park & Lin, 2020). This gap might not be due to social desirability bias in surveys of intentions (Bray et al., 2011)) or due to consumer hypocrisy (Gillani et al., 2021), but it also might naturally arise from the difficulty consumers have in identifying alternatives that are ethical on multiple dimensions. Indeed, our purposive sample indicates that even highly motivated ethical consumers struggle to purchase sustainable items and at times resort to heuristics and coping mechanisms to deal with this conflict. Thus, our study adds to the research on explaining and reducing the attitude behavior gap, but future research is needed to confirm our model and test its generalizability.

6. Limitations, Implications, and Future Directions

It is important to not generalize widely from our relatively small and purposive sample. Future research is needed to verify this exploratory model, and it remains to be seen to what extent our findings will apply to mainstream consumers. However, there is evidence of a growing consumer awareness of and concern for complete provenance information. Our informants were purposefully chosen, but they represent growing segments of consumers who share similar values. For example, brand consultancy BBMG estimates that Aspirational consumers, who enjoy shopping but want products with biographies that are socially and environmentally sustainable, comprise 38% of consumers worldwide (Elks, 2014).

Increasingly, companies are finding their business fortunes and brand identities impacted by "societal constituents" – consumers who demand that companies adhere to moral standards in their marketing and supply chains (Handelman, 2006). Furthermore, Grauel

(2016) finds that mainstream consumers think ethically and in terms of biographies when purchasing food: "…'good' food was understood to be of known origin, homemade or without excess processing, while 'bad' food was conceived to be of anonymous origin, mass produced and highly processed" (p. 859). Here we see that even "ordinary consumers" attempt to ascertain the places and processes in a product's ethical biography, and they also express concern for "distant others, animals or the environment" (Grauel, 2016, p. 859). However, future research is needed explore boundary conditions on the creation of ethical biographies and to identify differences across product types (e.g. luxuries vs. necessities; Davies et al., 2012) and levels of moralization or moral salience (Mceachern & Cheetham, 2013; Szmigin et al., 2009).

Our findings potentially contain both an opportunity and a threat for marketers and policy makers. On the one hand, there is an opportunity to help consumers make more informed, sustainable, and identity-consistent choices by providing more transparency regarding a product's provenance, as discussed previously. However, our findings indicate that providing partial or conflicting information could frustrate consumers and complicate their pursuit of ethical consumption. Therefore, companies might pursue and promote a multifaceted ethicality for their supply chain rather than more narrow certificates and credentials, like Fair Trade or Rainforest Alliance. This suggestion is consistent with findings from research on corporate social responsibility (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001) and with the emergence of global social responsibility certifications, such as (B Corp, 2023). Prior research has indicated that consumers seek out relationships with companies with identities consistent with their own with respect to social responsibility (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Deng & Xu, 2017), and our research suggests that such consumer-company identification, in the context of ethical consumption, might serve as a heuristic to simplify ethical purchase decisions.

Furthermore, our findings might suggest a market opportunity for marketing intermediaries to provide overall ratings of product ethicality. For example,

websites like Provenance.org and Betterworldshopper.org have been created to increase transparency and to help consumers make ethical consumption decisions, and multiple smartphone apps are available to help consumers examine ethical biographies as they shop (Fuentes & Sörum, 2019). Policymakers could also promote ethical consumption by promoting transparency and simplifying an overall assessment of ethicality. Initiatives like the EU Directive 2014/95/EU, which requires certain European companies to report on sustainability, social responsibility, and diversity practices (Webber et al., 2018), are a step in that direction, but the development of a universal ethical scoring system, combined with labeling requirements, could go very far in simplifying and promoting ethical consumption.

On the other hand, marketers run the risk of being accused of hypocrisy or "greenwashing" if they make ethical claims that are not substantiated. For example, fashion retailers H&M and Everlane have recently come under scrutiny for exaggerating their social responsibility (Himebaugh, 2019). Furthermore, even if consumers say they desire more complete biographical information, more information may not ultimately increase consumer well-being. Our findings suggest that most choices represent tradeoffs between competing values or between pragmatic economic goals and desirable product biographies. In fact, some of our informants appeared to avoid learning about the supply chain of some products in order to reduce effort, avoid guilt (Ehrich & Irwin, 2005; Irwin & Naylor, 2009; Zane et al., 2015), and maintain their autonomy and greater choice variety (Morris & Kirwan, 2010).

Thus, future research is needed to better understand whether people who have a greater awareness of ethical biographies, in general, experience greater (or less) enjoyment of consumption and higher (or lower) levels of subjective well-being. As suggested by research concerning the paradox of choice (Schwartz, 2004), the deleterious effects of greater deliberation (Broniarczyk & Griffin, 2014; Nordgren & Dijksterhuis, 2009), and the stress involved in attempting to consume sustainably (Valor et al., 2018), it is at

least possible that consumer well-being might actually be reduced by greater transparency surrounding ethical biographies, even though society might ultimately benefit if the result was more responsible and sustainable consumption decisions.

7. Conclusion

There is growing interest in ethical consumption among consumers, marketers and researchers, but gaps in our understanding of this phenomenon remain, as evidenced by the perceived "attitude-behavior gap." In this research, we explored the process by which consumers pursue ethical consumption by trying to ascertain the ethicality of products. In addition, we offer a framework of the information our informants were most interested in when trying to consume ethically.

While some previous research on ethical consumption has focused on product meanings, including some types of supply chain meanings, our concept of ethical biography includes a broad range of meanings associated with the processes, resources, people, and places involved in a product's making and distribution. Our informants revealed that their attempts to consume ethically involved identifying and evaluating the ethical biographies of products in order to choose products with ethical biographies consistent with their own moral identity. However, we observed that this process was complex and often created conflicts and dilemmas for consumers as they balanced competing identities and consumption goals. By exploring this under-researched aspect of ethical consumption, this research advances the study of consumer behavior broadly and ethical consumption in particular, and the insights it provides hold the potential for developments in marketing theory and practice that could benefit consumers, marketers, policy makers, and society.

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Appendix A. Interview Guide

This guide serves a framework for conducting interviews. Specific questions will vary, but the topics to be explored are the following:

How informant makes choices about what or whether to consume

- Please tell me about a recent shopping experience. How did you choose among alternatives?
- In general, how do you evaluate products when you are shopping?
- What kinds of information do you look for when deciding which products to buy?
- How do you determine when it is time to replace a durable product, like a piece of clothing?
- Have you always thought about products in this way, or have your shopping habits changed over time? Explain.

Informant's motivation to become a member of the community

- Tell me about your decision to join this community.
- Tell me about the adjustment process involved in moving to this community.

How membership in the community influences informant's consumption choices

- How has membership in this community influenced what you buy or don't buy?
- How does the community influence how you dispose of items you want to discard?
- Can you tell me about a time when you sought help or advice from other community members when shopping for products?
- Are there products that you used to own that you now share with the community?

Appendix B. Coding Structure

Theme	Description	Example
Challenge or effort of considering provision	The perceived difficulty of generating provision meanings for products or taking them into account in consumption behaviors.	I think that's just so hard. When you first kind of get into it you kind of get kind of a niche maybe like issue and you're like maybe like I'm really big on no chemicals so I'm just going to get everything organic but then you don't realize about the labor laws that are going into it. But then when you, I get so complicated when you start getting to all of it and you're like I can't do anything, I'm just going to sit in my hole with my lights off because nothing is socially justice or sustainable. (Kristina)
Consumption behavior: how much to buy	Considering provision meanings in choosing how much of a product to buy or consume.	I'm just as complicit when I shop at Target. I'm just careful about how much I consume. How much I participate in the system. It's harder now than ever before. And just reading–just saying that something's made in the USA doesn't necessarily mean it was done ethically or with fair trade in mind. (Kristy)

Table B.1 continued

Consumption behavior: recycling, disposing, giving away	Considering provision meanings when deciding to recycle, give away, or throw away.	…but when it comes to my day-to-day decisions I decide to say it's more about just so many things are considered disposable and really they're building up somewhere and we're hurting the earth. That's really probably first thing that kind of comes to my head and I try to stop whatever, whether it's you know, compost, recycling, or just helping the kids to figure out just don't throw something away, there may be we can use it some way even if it's to create a new game or something. (Winifred)
Consumption behavior: repair or repurpose	Considering provision meanings when deciding to repair or repurpose a product instead of disposing.	Yeah, I know I can get a pair of shoes cheaper than getting my pair of shoes repaired but I get my shoes repaired and it's not about the money. It's something about staying out of the cycle. Just – I don't want to create more demand for more crap from China. Might as well just fix what I have. And that's true. I get my shoes repaired even thought I could more cheaply buy – actually it's those black shoes right there. I've had those for 15 years and I just keep getting them repaired. I mean they look all right. Sure, so why not. Just repair them instead of buying a new pair. (Mabel)
Consumption behavior: what to buy	Considering provision meanings in deciding which of several products to buy.	I feel like I'm a Georgia winery advocate, like to ask at restaurant, do you have any Georgia wines? Why don't you have Georgia wines? Especially ones that are touting organic and local and then you look at their wine list and it's like Argentina and Italy and that's not local nor is it organic so it doesn't make sense. (Kristina)
Consumption behavior: whether to buy	Considering provision meanings in decisions whether or not to consume a product.	In fact, I got to the point where I was trying to figure out how long I could go without even getting in a car, let along driving my own car. And my husband had the family car that he drove to school every day. And that was great. (Kristy)
Consumption experiences	Enjoyment of products that goes beyond the immediate, instrumental utility of the product.	There's probably more than anything is just that there's huge emotional pay off going every week and just getting it because it's like look at all this great stuff and there are days you come in with this huge basket and it's just beautiful stuff and then – the fact that it's so beautiful is emotionally rewarding. Look at his lettuce. And then of course a lot of the stuff, probably the thing that I had no clue is how good organic fresh tomatoes were. I mean now it's just hard to eat anything that's – I mean I eat it but it's nothing like the tomatoes off our farm. So there's a greater appreciation for a lot of stuff and then there's this huge psychological boost if you will, just having the farm out there…. (Patrick)

Table B.1 continued

Decommodification process	Process by which biographical meanings were created or made salient.	… I went with a trip through school to Oaxaca and we visited some of the flower plants. … I mean flowers don't naturally grow and they have these massive greenhouses that I mean - bad. It was not a good thing for the environment and you go in them and you thought you were probably in Hawaii because they were growing all these tropical plants in Mexico and then shipping them to the United States because that's what everybody wanted. (Kristina)
Motivation: altruism	When consideration of provision is motivated by care for or consideration of people or animals involved in provision.	[Fair Trade certification] means that the um… that the people who make my lifestyle possible, or I feel make my lifestyle possible, are at least being compensated in a way that's livable for them. So, a step up from I assume the wages that a bigger corporation would be paying the growers of…. That there's some regulation over it, someone is saying this is something that will sustain a life and a family, and this is what they should be paid. (Gloria)
Motivation: consumption as political action	When consideration of provision is motivated by a desire to change social institutions or structures.	I usually buy organic beef, and that's for health reasons as well. Although it's partly my personal health reasons and partly to just contribute to that kind of production of meat, to sort of vote for that with my money. That's the way things should be done, I feel. More humane and things like that. (Gloria)
Motivation: environmentalism	When consideration of provision is motivated by care for natural resources or features impacted by provision.	And I never was really big on so much the health aspects of organic but I've been interested in the environmental impacts of organics. The many of the practices, the organic standards put in place, actually are can be better for the soil and for water and the planet. (Lori)
Motivation: experience or well-being	When consideration of provision is motivated by a perception that certain systems of provision provide a better consumption experience.	I don't think it tastes better, it does taste better. I don't – that nutrition stuff, I don't know if it's - some people claim organically this is more nutritious than non-organic. I don't know but I do know that food, fresh right out of the ground is more nutritious than something that's been shipped for two or three days. But yeah, it just tastes better and it seems like the normal thing to do to get food out of your yard. (Mabel)

Table B.1 continued

Motivation: health or safety	When consideration of provision is motivated by a perception that certain systems of provision provide healthier or safer products.	I've got quibbles with the FDA process and what the term organic means and all that stuff, it's not perfect by any means. And yet I know I can trust it enough to have an idea of what it means and know that it's genuinely well followed. When I pick up something that says Mexico or Chile or Peru, I think I have no idea what was put on that. And I don't want to know what was put on it because I'm not eating it. (Kira)
Motivation: pragmatism	When consideration of provision is motivated by practicality, expediency or convenience.	I think with food I might tend to think of it more in terms of where it came from and how it came about and stuff like that. With products, if I can get something handmade or that would be a plus. But the truth is most of the things I get, I get, it's a time constraint. And basically I get what I need when I can get it where I can get it. And I don't – give a lot of thought to each individual purchase.... And there's one on sale at Target so here I go and then oh, shit, there's a – Target just did something. They donated a bunch of money to some right wing candidate in Minnesota so I'm not supposed to shop at Target. So I don't shop at Target for a couple of months and then eventually I'm thinking well, maybe – maybe just this once. (Paul)
Motivation: social connection	When consideration of provision is motivated by a desire to feel a social connection to people involved in the provision of a product.	I think there is something about developing relationships between people that the market economy doesn't seem to care about so much. So if–you know, I would feel better about buying some olive oil from my local olive oil producer. (Isaiah)
Motivation: stewardship	When consideration of provision is motivated by an appreciation or respect for the resources invested in making a product and a desire to use these resources wisely.	We're really – we're acting more as parasites than as stewards. And I'm not religious but I mean one of the things that even in the Christian religion I think that God instructed people to be good stewards of the Earth. But I think that the takeaway for a lot of people was just to go forth and use it. (Paul)

Table B.1 continued

Biography: People	Product meanings stemming from the people involved in the system of provision.	And I also really liked in Malawi like the "closing of the loop" kind of thing, which I learned in permaculture. Because most, like, homes are very open. We don't know where our things come from and we don't know where they go after they finish. But in Malawi, I mean you can pretty much… you know where your greens come from: they come from that guy up there who has a little farm, you know? And he used pesticides, which I wasn't a big fan of, but I still wanted to support him. (Samantha)
Biography: Places	Product meanings stemming from the physical places and spaces involved in the system of provision.	[I] buy a lot of apple juice, [my daughter] loves apple juice. And if you go to Publix and you buy their organic apple juice which probably comes from a pretty good place, it's made in the USA. I don't know exactly where in the USA but it's like $6.50 for I don't know, it's like half a gallon. I'm not sure exactly how much it is. But at Wal-Mart for like $1.50 you can get a gallon and a half of apple juice like made in Indonesia. And I don't know even know how they do that. Like I don't understand. But they've got to be a lot of people that are getting short changed in the process like, I don't know. You can just smell the evilness coming off of – do you know what I mean. (Lacey)
Biography: Processes	Product meanings stemming from the processes involved in the system of provision, such as extraction, manufacturing and transportation.	Yeah, I think for a lot of reasons, CAFOs [Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations] and just the treatment of the animals and the way that there's an industry around…I mean, here in Georgia we produce what, over a billion chickens a year. And those chickens are not happy chickens. I think that's really wrong, from an ethical prospective. I always had that…when I was in college one of the big issues of the day were animal rights and it was going on back then. I think that factory farming is abominable and I wouldn't want to support that system. (Julia)

Table B.1 continued

Biography: Resources	Product meanings stemming from the human or natural resources that are utilized in the system of provision.	I mean, [this community] can't be – and same with [another]– it's not even close to being sustainable, cause it wasn't there before! Where did all that glass come from? Where did all that siding, that prefab, all the carpet – where did all that come from? Not here! And it wasn't woven by little Indians chewing on…. So anyway, the same with [the other]. They're all like hippies; they're super... you know, way more sustainable in the modern lingo than we are. And yet, still - all the… they got all the rubber and, you know? Rubber wasn't grown in Asheville. I mean, all of that stuff that they've got there and that they keep bringing is… it's the same game. So if you want to be sustainable, you'd take a building that was already there, and you go and you'd live without changing it very much. You know? That would be a place to start – how about don't build? (David)