

The ideology of the ethical consumption gap

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Abstract

The growth of contemporary capitalism is producing a broad sweep of environmental and social ills, such as environmental degradation, exploitative labor conditions, social and economic inequity, and mental and physical illness. A growing awareness of these significant consequences by an ‘ethical’ consumer segment has catalyzed a field of research dedicated to investigating ethical consumerism. Of particular academic and practitioner focus is the general failure of this ethical consumer segment to ‘walk their talk’ – the ethical consumption attitude-behavior ‘gap’. In this paper, we draw on Althusser (1984) and Žižek (1989, 2008) to critically analyze the ideological functioning of the ethical consumption gap. We argue that this focus inadvertently promotes erroneous notions of consumer sovereignty and responsabilization. We conclude with a call to re-imagine the gap as a construct that paradoxically preserves – rather than undermines – dominant and destructive consumerist capitalism. We redirect research towards the underlying capitalist structures that predicate and benefit from the ‘gap’.

Key words

Ethical consumption, ideology, consumer sovereignty, neoliberalism, attitude-behavior gap

Introduction

The period since the second world war, and in particular since the early 1970s with the neoliberal response to the apparent failure of the Keynesianism model in the US (e.g. Harvey, 2005; D. S. Jones, 2012), has witnessed unprecedented global economic expansion and constantly rising standards of living. This has been accompanied by an equally constant creation of consumer needs that could be satisfied by the market. This economic model of relentless growth in global consumption, however, is running up against the critical thresholds of the complex Earth Systems' capacity to support this total economic exploitation of the environment (UNEP 2012, UNEP 2013) (see also Klein 2014, Latour 2014). Dramatically increasing levels of mental illness among teenagers and young adults, the rise of economic inequality, exploitative and abusive labor conditions in many parts of the world, animal cruelty in industrialized farming, a growing sense of alienation and meaninglessness of work, increasing unhappiness linked to materialism and so on, are also often cited as direct systemic effects of this 'turbo-capitalism' model (Luttwak 1999) and the expanding domains of consumption into daily lives (e.g. Bauman, 2003; Shankar, Whittaker & Fitchett, 2006; Berardi, 2009; Fisher, 2009; Fleming & Jones, 2012).

The role of consumption as the cultural expression of capitalism is somewhat ambiguous in contemporary critiques of capitalism (cf. Fornäs, 2013; Zick Varul, 2013). On the one hand – the hand of classic critical theory – consumption desires represent the false needs the system produces to chain us to endless processes of self-recreation and actualization through consumption. In this line of argument, consumer desire loses sight of its real needs. Consumer desire is productive, but also problematic, precisely because what it demands is always irreducible to need. As Žižek (1993, p. 212) puts it, 'if we subtract need from demand, we get desire.' Thus, from a critical theory perspective, capitalism's destructiveness is sustained by creating an excess of

demand that is never satisfied by the system despite expanding production capacity and efficiencies. On the other hand, consumerism represents – even in its excesses – the potential to feel free, to make autonomous choices, to find a modicum of hedonistic enjoyment in what might be an otherwise empty existence, and perhaps even to further socialist human development (Laermans 1993; Soper et al. 2008; Zick Varul 2013).

What both critiques share, however, is a realization that in the final analysis, capitalist consumer culture must always be excessive. That is to say that capitalism and relentless economic growth depend on the (re)production of consumption levels that always represent less than what consumers demand, and this excessive consumption is problematic to the very capitalist system it is a product of. Consider how excessive consumption has a leading role in bringing us to the brink of ecological catastrophe (see Chomsky, 1999; Klein, 2014; Pearce, 2009). It is with these paradoxical implications in mind that Marcuse stated that the consumer, whose surplus of desire always exceeds the capacity of the system to deliver, might become capitalism's gravedigger (Marcuse 1972).

From this perspective we can see that the relationship between capitalism and consumption is not as straightforward as it appears. As Marcuse's statement suggests, capitalist consumption always contains – even in its most excessive and immanent expression – the potential for its own negation. The suspicion that consumption can be the problem as much as the solution to capitalism's many ills and evils, has been the driving force behind a relatively small but growing segment of consumers who integrate notions of ethics, social justice and environmental sustainability into their consumption practices. This, of course, has brought interest from a group of business scholars interested in the question of ethical consumption (e.g. Devinney et al. 2010; Szmigin et al. 2009; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007). While diverse in focus and approach,

this body of research collectively asks how consumers - or more precisely, how everyday consumption practices - might be enlisted for broader projects of social change (e.g. Harrison et al. 2005; Jones 2012b; Micheletti and McFarland 2011; Stolle and Micheletti 2013), (for a critical perspective see e.g. Chatzidakis et al. 2012; Littler 2008; Sassatelli 2006). The normative premise of this research can be summarized like this: if in an ironic twist conventional expressions of capitalist consumerism (ie. 'non-ethical' consumerism) will bring down capitalism, ethical consumption can save capitalism from itself. Thus, ethical consumption is a reversal that represents a negation of the negation. It turns a pathological object – consumerism – into a new object – ethical consumerism – by maintaining the abstract structure of the original object while annulling its pathology. Put differently, ethical consumption inadvertently works to thwart the destruction of capitalism by reinforcing conventional (capitalist) consumption.

The beauty, and presumably the attraction for firms and their marketers, of such a double negation is that this move allows for a continuation to the sublated object (here capitalism). But this is not a return to the original object but to a new object (here ethical consumerism) that no longer is threatened by the original negation. The negation of the negation thus resolves an antagonistic deadlock not by eradicating the original opposing poles but by *maintaining* them, only now in a different, non-antagonistic form. Put in more concrete terms, ethical consumption promises a solution to a systemic contradiction without challenging the system itself. Thus, ethical consumption not only saves capitalism from itself but also brings about a different kind of capitalism: more just, more sustainable, kinder, and so on. In this fantasy, consumers' everyday ethical consumption practices ensure capitalism's survival rather than digging its grave.

Consideration of the conditions under which ethical consumption is possible has now moved to center stage in academic and policy debates accompanied by the growing realization that

significant environmental and social challenges – such as climate change and worker exploitation – are directly related to human consumption activities (Hargreaves 2011; Swim 2009). This move has illuminated one of the most vexing and perplexing aspects of ethical consumerism: while a significant percentage of consumers state that they *intend* to shop in line with ethical considerations (e.g. looking for labels and certifications such as Fairtrade, FSC- and MSC-certified, B Corp, etc.), following through on these intentions is rare (Auger and Devinney 2007; Belk et al. 2005; Szmigin et al. 2009). For example, a recent analysis of industry research finds that around 30 per cent of UK consumers suggest that they harbor ethical consumption intentions, and yet the UK ethical market is – at best – only 4 per cent of consumer spend in relevant product categories (Davies et al. 2012). In short, consumers are aware of the need to act more ethically in the marketplace and desire to do so, and yet they generally do not act on these desires.

This perplexing discrepancy or *gap* between a person's attitude, intentions, and his or her actual behaviour has prompted efforts of marketing scholars to understand the forces that sustain this gap and to explore options to eradicate it. This work has largely focused on investigating and modelling the choices and practices of individual consumers who transgress their ethical consumption convictions at the cash register (e.g. Auger and Devinney 2007; Carrington, Neville and Whitwell 2014; Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith 2007; Connolly and Prothero 2009). Notwithstanding the important contributions that this body of research makes towards ethical consumption theory, policy and practice, it predominantly ignores the significant structural elements in shaping and constraining consumption choices, such as the role of powerful retailers, producers, and brands, to name but a few. This short fall points to a much larger question, namely, why are we continuing to discuss the persistence of the ethical consumption attitude-behaviour gap in terms of individualized ethical flaws and internal moral shortcomings of consumers when

it is more plausible to consider this gap as the precise expression of the systemic contradictions of contemporary consumer capitalismⁱ? The marketplace constitutes a sphere of instrumental and self-interested decision-making governed by what Habermas (Habermas, 2005[1985], p 153) calls the ‘delinguistified’ rationality of the medium of money that is not committed to norms or values. In this light, we are not surprised to see this gap persisting despite many clever marketing interventions, and we call for the ethical consumption gap to be acknowledged as immanent to the system of capitalist consumerism.

In this paper we argue that the notion of the attitude-behavior gap in ethical consumption serves an important ideological function to help sustain exactly the kind of neoliberal market rationalities that ethical consumerism and its proponents want to alter. In taking this approach, we suggest that the moralization of consumption choices *via* the gap further sustains harmful consumerist capitalism rather than bringing about meaningful social and political change (cf. Bradshaw and Zwick, forthcoming 2015). To make our argument we draw on the classic critiques of ideology of Althusser (1984) and Žižek (Žižek, 1989, 2008). In particular, we engage critically with Althusser’s concept of interpellation and with Žižek’s psychoanalytical notion of ideology to suggest that this preoccupation with the ethical consumption attitude-behaviour gap allows marketers and consumers to hold on to beliefs about capitalism that foreclose a more radical engagement with this destructive social and economic system. Specifically, we suggest that for proponents of ethical consumerism, and responsible business more broadly, the gap serves two ideological functions.

First, the gap as an internalized and individualized condition maintains the belief in the consumer as a sovereign actor with the power – and thus the responsibility – to change the system and the world through moral consumption choices. This discourse of individualization subverts

the realization that destructive, capitalist-driven consumption is immanent to the system (see e.g. Gilbert, 2014). Second, the gap holds out the belief that capitalism has the ability – in principle – to save us all from the environmental, social and economic destruction that capitalism is bringing about in the first place. Put naively, the gap represents the difference between a capitalism that is flawed and destructive, and one that creates a more just, sustainable, and equitable world. The illusion that needs to be maintained is that closing this morality gap would actually make a significant difference to the destructiveness of the current system. Yet, even if the currently low percentage of ethical consumers would double or even triple – an unlikely scenario, to be sure, because there is no theoretical or empirical support for it – the effect would be negligible. This is especially the case when we consider that under current economic conditions even ethical consumerism must be growth-driven consumerism. The task is therefore much bigger than the gap would suggest. For example in the context of the natural environment many observers have argued that in order to halt the ecological catastrophe we need not only responsible consumption but significantly reduced consumption (often referred to as *degrowth*) (Latouche 2009; Schneider et al. 2010).

In the remainder of the paper, we first examine the extant ethical consumption gap research to show how these studies promote, consciously or not, notions of consumer sovereignty, responsabilization, and individualization (see also Binkley 2006; Lazzarato 2009). We then provide a critical analysis of the ideological functioning of the ethical consumption gap that concludes with a call to reject the notion of the gap and its logic of market-embedded morality (Shamir 2008) as a construct that maintains, rather than undermines, neoliberal government of consumption and consumerist capitalism.

The consumer sovereignty myth in ethical consumption gap research

The widespread failure of consumers to put their ethical attitudes and ethical consumption intentions into action is commonly referred to as the *ethical consumption words-deeds, attitude-behaviour* or *intentions-behaviour gap*, and the *ethical consumption paradox* (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Carrington et al. 2014; Chatzidakis et al. 2007). An expanding body of marketing and consumer academic research attempts to understand the factors underpinning this ethical consumption gap. This research broadly takes four approaches to examine the ethical consumption transgressions of individual consumers: (1) studies that attribute the observed ethical consumption gap to the social desirability biases of *individual consumers* who significantly overstate their ethical consumption intentions in research contexts (e.g. Auger & Devinney 2007); (2) studies that assume that stated ethical consumption intentions are genuine and explore how external factors and the cognitive processes internal to the *individual consumer* inhibit the translation of ethical purchase intentions into actual behaviour (e.g. Shaw & Shui 2003, Carrington et al. 2014); (3) studies that explore the inner life worlds of *individual consumers* to show how multiple and competing identities impede on consumers' intentions to consume ethically (e.g. Prothero & Connolley 2009); and (4) studies that reveal the strategies that *individual consumers* use to justify the gap in their behaviour after the fact (e.g. Chatzidakis et al. 2007). We now briefly examine these literature streams and their focus on this individual consumer.

First, studies investigating the impact of social desirability suggest that individuals respond with answers they believe to be socially acceptable in standard consumer research scenarios. As a result, respondents significantly overstate the actual influence of ethical considerations in their buying behaviour (Auger and Devinney 2007; Carrigan and Attalla 2001; De Pelsmacker et al. 2005). These studies are broadly concerned with the limitations of the self-reported survey

methodological approaches commonly employed to assess consumers' ethical purchase intentions. These methods tend to predict subsequent behaviour inaccurately (e.g. Trudel & Cotte, 2009; Auger & Devinney, 2007; Carrigan and Attalla, 2001). For example, Auger and Devinney (2007) found that when forced to reveal their purchase intentions through choice modelling experiments, individual's preferences for specific product attributes generally did not corroborate their stated ethical intentions in basic survey research. Similarly, De Pelsmacker et al. (2005) discovered that despite espousing positive intentions to purchase fair trade coffee, consumer's actual behaviour was tempered by their willingness-to-pay a premium for fair trade.

A somewhat superficial interpretation of these results would imply that many consumers are not as ethically-minded as they would have researchers and marketers believe. An alternative and more critical analysis, however, suggests that individuals might display solid ethical reasoning in the context of social interactions *as long as these interactions are not mediated by the marketplace*. When it comes to decision making within the market domain, ethical and moral values no longer govern how consumers assess right and wrong choices as they are sidelined by the prominent display of the market values of price, quality, convenience, prestige, and so on. The social desirability research agenda promotes notions of the malleability of consumers when placed in different decision making contexts. We argue, however, that this body of work falls short of theorizing the different rationalities operating in the various spheres of life, consequentially espousing the misplaced conclusion that consumers overstate their ethical consumption intentions in the first place.

In a similar vein, the second stream of research rests on the assumption that many consumers do intend to consume more ethically than their shopping baskets would suggest (Belk et al. 2005), but that these ethical intentions are blocked and derailed by a variety of factors

(Carrington et al. 2010). These studies tend to take a modelling approach, identifying influencing factors that directly and indirectly affect the translation of ethical purchase attitudes and intentions into actual behaviour (e.g. Shaw & Shui, 2003; De Pelsmaker & Janssens, 2007; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2008). For example, studies such as Shaw and Shui (2002) and Vermeir and Verbeke (2008) build upon the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen 1985) to suggest that in addition to a positive attitude, factors such as a sense of ethical obligation and self-identity, perceived personal effectiveness and perceived social consequences play an important role in the development of ethical consumption intentions, where intentions are taken as proxy for behaviour. Carrington, Neville, and Whitwell (2014) focus on discrepancies between ethical consumption intentions and actual behaviour, and find that ingrained ‘unethical’ purchasing and consumption habits place consumers in a state of autopilot, are often multilayered, involve complex sequences of behaviour, and are therefore difficult to break.

In addition, Carrington et al. (2010) explore how external factors such as the situational context (Belk 1975) – physical surroundings, social surroundings, temporal perspective, task definition, and antecedent states – impact the cognitive processes that derail and block ethical consumption intentions. Similarly, Bray, Johns, and Kilburn (2011) find that lack of externally derived information impacts upon the individual’s internal decision making and consumption choices – ethical or otherwise. Finally, studies such as Carrington et al. (2014) and Oberseder, Schlegelmitch, and Gruber (2011) point to individual’s predilection to internally prioritise ethical concerns as a key factor in the salience of specific ethical concerns at the cash register. In this scenario of prioritisation, some ethical concerns are deemed more important and are acted upon, while other concerns are not. We suggest that this cognitive modelling research stream tends to artificially isolate the focus of ethical consumption gap to the consumer and his or her consumption

choices. These studies also fail to grapple with the shift from domains external to the market logic when forming consumption desires and intentions, to domains mediated by the market when making consumption choices.

Third, prioritisation is also a theme for interpretive studies that view consumers as socially embedded within transitory and multiple life domains (e.g. Niinimäki 2010). These cultural contexts of daily experience influence the construction of individuals' complex and multiple consumption identities (Cherrier 2007; Carrington, Neville and Canniford 2012). For example, Connolly and Prothero (2009) found that a green consumption identity is only one of many dimensions of the individual's overall sense of self, and that maintaining important social relationships could lead to negotiation, concession and compromise of moral beliefs in consumption choices. While this interpretive turn views ethical identity as being constructed through interactions between the individual and respective socialities (e.g. Cherrier 2007), this thread in the burgeoning body of ethical gap knowledge again casts the individual consumer as the central actor in their consumption choices and practices.

Finally, researchers have indicated that the use of post-rationalization strategies to minimize feelings of remorse when consumption choices contravene ethical consumption intentions may also facilitate the ethical consumption gap. For example, Szmigin, Carrigan and McEachern (2009) found that the gap is facilitated by a lack of cognitive dissonance when there is a significant inconsistency between the individual's moral framework, ethical intentions and their actual consuming behaviour. Rationalization allows the bypassing of feelings of guilt or regret and assists individuals in continuing to purchase products at odds with their ethical concerns. Here again we see that authentic ethical concerns of an individual are replaced in the context of the market by more instrumental and self-interested concerns such as price, convenience and the

desires of others. Similarly, Chatzidakis et al. (2007) draw upon neutralization theory to delineate how an ethically minded individual is able to rationalize non-ethical consumption behaviour, including *denial of responsibility* and *denial of injury*. Both of these techniques are entirely rational dispositions in market domains that in their most basic form separate right from wrong through the medium of money and not some system of morality (see e.g. Simmel, 1978; Zelizer, 1989). Similarly, in their study of consumer ethics and consumption across national cultures, Belk et al. (2005) discovered that the use of justifications to rationalize conscious unethical consumption was common to all of their informants, irrespective of national culture and social status.

Collectively, these studies cannot but find an ethical consumption attitude-behaviour gap because no distinction is made between decision contexts – contexts *external* to the market versus contexts *within* the marketplace that are mediated by the market logic. Put differently, because ethical consumption researchers assume that the same logic of morality and ethics governing an individual's behaviour *outside* the economic system is also operating *inside* the economic system, their research is bound to reveal a discrepancy between intention (outside) and behaviour (inside). As we have discussed above, however, to construct such a homology of ethical standards across various social systems may not be appropriate, especially when one of these systems is the market governed by the amoral logic of money (Habermas, 1984). Furthermore, research on ethical consumption focuses almost exclusively on cognitive processes and on constructs explaining individual behaviour, thus abstracting decision-making behaviour from the social and structural context of consumer choice. Thus, instead of problematizing the validity of notions of choice and morality in capitalist marketplaces, researchers continue to focus on the discrepancy between what consumers would like to do and what they actually end up doing. In addition, much of this body

of research treats the ethical consumption gap as a positive fact to be discovered, described, and subsequently treated rather than the result of the way consumer ethics is theorized.

Above all, and somewhat paradoxically, the idea of the ethical consumption gap, this internal flaw whose causes seem hard to identify and which just does not seem to be susceptible to interventions, keeps the idea of the sovereign consumer intact. Consumer sovereignty is positioned at the heart of marketing theory and practice (Denegri-Knott et al. 2006). Consumer sovereignty is simply defined as ‘the right to choose among a sufficient range of products so that the particular demand specifications of a particular consumer can be reasonably matched’ (Fisk 1967, p 680). Firms are thought to maximise consumer welfare by discovering, producing, and retailing what consumers want (Smith 1987). In this sense, the *consumer is king* as consumer demand directly determines what is produced (Narver and Savitt 1971). Through this lens, the sovereign consumer wields both the power and responsibility of choice (Dixon 1992). The source of consumer power and sovereignty within this paradigm is based on the assumption that ‘aggregate sums of well informed, autonomous consumer agents possess greater power than individual producers’ (Denegri-Knott et al. 2006, p 955).

The consumer sovereignty paradigm, however, has been a prominent feature of critical reflection and commentary within the marketing discipline (Tadajewski 2010). The power and responsibility of consumers to choose rationally has been challenged severely by the experiential research stream (e.g. Arnould & Price, 1993; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Sherry et al., 2001). From a critical theory perspective, the consumer sovereignty paradigm peddled by mainstream marketing fails to acknowledge the power imbalance structuring the relationship between consumers and corporations. As Firat (1996) suggests, an entire supply chain of decisions and choices have occurred before the consumer reaches the store to choose from a pre-determined

range of options that have been procured and controlled by powerful corporate actors. In the midst of this contestation between consumer choice and corporate control, consumers are given the illusion of choice while both the supposed needs and desires underpinning these choices are constructed, and the choice set is strictly controlled, by marketing managers. As Smith (1987, p. 10) puts it rather succinctly, ‘consumers are not really sovereign under capitalism; they only think they are. Marketing fosters this belief.’

As we will discuss below in more detail, one of the ways marketing ideology fosters this belief is through maintaining the myth of the ethical consumption gap. From the perspective of the sovereign consumer, anyone expressing a clear ethical position – such as protecting the environment or preventing child labour – and then failing to enact this ethical conviction through one’s consumption choices must be considered delinquent in his or her practice of consumer power. In the words of Jean-Paul Sartre (1946, p. 37), consumers are ‘condemned to be free’ⁱⁱ: the gap is a constant reminder that the duty to choose (and choose well) cannot be escaped. As Bauman (1988) explains, Sartre did not mean to suggest that consumers are *actually* free. Indeed, the entire body of work of Bauman can be read as one extended analysis of the central predicament of our time: on the one hand we all are heavily constraint in our choices for a great number of reasons but on the other, we nonetheless are required to comport ourselves at all times as if we have free choice (see Bauman, 2000, 2007).

Hackley (2003) and Dixon (1992) claim that the ideology of consumer sovereignty works to cloak and distract from the actions of corporations and their operatives, by shifting responsibility for choice (and consumption outcomes) to individual consumers. Similarly, we suggest that this consumer-focused representation of the ethical consumption gap not only aligns with flawed assumptions of consumer sovereignty, but also works to deflect attention from the role of structural

forces (e.g. financialization and globalization of capitalism, primacy of shareholder value, globally mobile corporations, policy and regulations [or lack thereof], advertising, and so on) in creating the gap. To be sure, we do agree with the core message of the extensive body of research on the ethical consumption attitude-behaviour gap, namely that this gap is indeed *real* – consumers consistently fail to act as ethically and morally as many of them would like to act. We do not see this discrepancy as evidence for consumers' internal ethical shortcomings, however, but as the exact expression of consumerism under turbo-capitalistic consumer culture. In other words, and posited clearly as the moral philosophy of neoclassical economists, the proper ethical subject position in market-based exchange relations is that of self-interest.

As John Maynard Keynes (1927) pointed out almost a century ago in his scathing critique of this moral logic – a critique still valid today – neoclassical economists are able to defend this odd ethical position by simply positing that it is everyone's selfish pursuit of personal advantage that leads to the greatest social good for the greatest number of peopleⁱⁱⁱ. Put differently, the ingenious idea of this capitalist moral philosophy is to allow the public good to rest ('miraculously' as Keynes puts it, not hiding his disdain for this logic) on the natural effort of every individual to better his or her own condition. From this perspective, successful socialization into capitalist reality (Fisher 2009) means that the subject comes to regard social responsibility and self-interest as fundamentally compatible. We should therefore expect behavior that escapes this ethical logic to be the exception, not the norm.

It isn't surprising then, that two decades of tracking ethical consumption behavior has shown that the proportion of consumers making consumption decisions based on ethico-moral considerations has remained very low and not shifted in any significant way. In this light, we contend that a more honest interpretation of consumers acting truly ethically, i.e. to put the plight

and the desires of others before one's own, would acknowledge that within the context of market-embedded morality such behavior represents a critical and almost deviant stance, rather than a compatible one (Shamir 2008). Thus, we question why marketing scholars – in particular those of us interested in questions of consumer ethics – insist on treating a consistent consumer subject as a theoretical contradiction and practical problem? In order to develop some initial answers the next section draws on Althusser's (1984) and Žižek's (1989, 2008) critique of ideology. The purpose of the remainder of the paper is to analyze the ideological function of the ethical consumption gap within contemporary marketing discourse.

The ideology of the gap

Capitalist consumerism is predicated on the reproduction of desire that the system of production can never fully satisfy (de Graaf et al. 2014; Hamilton and Denniss 2005). In addition, in the economic sphere a concern for others is never immanent but transgressive to the system. Thus, under conditions of contemporary capitalism, a gap between one's ethical coordinates and intentions operating in the cultural and social sphere governed by undistorted communication in the idealistic Habermasian sense^{iv} *outside the economic system*, and the contrasting amorality of the marketplace governed by marketing values and messages and monetary exchange *inside the economic system*, should be not only unsurprising but also to be expected. Indeed, as marketers we should approach ethical consumption claims with caution because such a subject position presents an obvious contradiction. Rather than perplexing marketing and consumer researchers, therefore, this gap ought to reassure them that things are just the way they should be. To treat the gap as pathology of sorts requires consumer researchers to posit both a commonality of ethical dispositions across decision making contexts and a capacity of consumers to contain their desire.

Neither of these conditions is inherent to capitalism and likely to materialize (at least not on a mass scale). Thus, the ethical consumption gap is best understood as an artifact of a utopian marketing ideology and without any foundation beyond a positivistic illusion of simple reality.

So what, then, are we to make of the continuous fervor and enthusiasm among marketers for the notion of the ethical consumption gap as a consumer behavior puzzle? The psychological concept of confirmation bias provides theoretical and empirical support for the idea that the marketing ideology would be expected to hold sway here. We draw on Žižek's Lacanian psychoanalytical distinction between the Real and reality to answer this question. Reality cannot exist without fantasy. This position should not be mistaken for postmodern naivety that rejects the possibility of an objective reality altogether. In Lacanian theory 'there is a real' (Žižek 1989) but the subject never approaches things the way they really are in everyday life. In this conception, we always act within the frame of a constituted reality, or put differently, we are always embedded in ideology and what we call reality is best understood as a fantasy that draws upon ideological mediation, prejudice and unconscious desire (see Žižek 1989, p. 48). If we accept this description of reality as a form of fantasy, the question whether the ethical consumption gap is real, or not, is rendered meaningless. In contrast, what matters is how the ideological figure of the gap is invested with the ethical marketer's unconscious desire and how the marketer constructs this figure to resolve a contradiction. The contradiction to be resolved here is that of a capitalism predicated on destructive consumerism that requires (ethical) consumerism to negate its own destructiveness. We can now see why the appropriate response to a marketing scholar endorsing the ethical consumption gap is not 'but such a gap does not exist' (e.g., Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt 2010), because within the symbolic universe of this scholar, and concerned ethical marketers, the gap does exist. Rather, a fitting response to an endorser of the gap is to suggest that notions of the

ethical consumption gap have nothing to do with an ethical gap; the ideological figure of the gap is simply an attempt to stitch up the inconsistencies of the dominant ideological system (cf. Žižek, 1989).

The notion of the ideological figure echoes Jameson's (1981) analysis of the symbolic act that produces a fantasy in which two things that otherwise do not belong together can happily co-exist. In the context of ethical consumerism, the marketer undertakes such a symbolic act with the insistence on the gap. The ethical consumption gap is a device – a marketing fairy tale complete with the promise of a happy ending of a kind, green, and equitable capitalism – which serves to deflect the responsibility for the creation and solving of social and environmental problems from marketers in the turbo-capitalistic system, and onto marketing-constrained consumers. Thus, brought to bear onto a situation for which, in reality, there is no happy ending, the gap functions as if by magic (Fry 2012).

Žižek's Lacanian critique of ideology alerts us to the notion that the fantasy of the romance perspective constitutes *reality*. Put differently, it may be a fantasy but as such it is a reality constituting a cohesive symbolic fabric perceived as real. This reality cannot simply be shattered by pointing to some pre-ideological facts of everyday experience because it is the central role of the symbolic act, as ideological construct, to absorb and annihilate the opposition between everyday experience ('there really is no true gap in behavior; everything is just the way it should be') and so-called reality ('consumers consistently fail to be ethical'). In short, the ideology of the ethical consumption gap succeeds when it presents itself to the marketer as empirical fact.

At this point a key question arises: if the gap represents an ideological figure, a symbolic act, what is its specific purpose in marketing thought, scholarship, and practice? Put more succinctly, what ideological function does the gap serve? Clearly, our discussion implies two such

functions. First, we have seen in our analysis of the various streams of attitude-behavior research that the gap is posited as a phenomenon located in the psycho-cultural life of the consumer. The gap therefore *appears* non-ideological because it does not contain references to larger systemic conditions, apparatuses and structures, which we would more immediately associate with ideology, such as the state, the law, the family, religion, and the school, for example (Althusser, 1984). However, it would be naïve to mistake the absence of a clear and direct ideological interpellation into immediately recognizable political identities (I'm a socialist, social democrat, liberal, communist, etc.) as an indication that interpellation no longer happens. We are still interpellated, but in a much more subtle way. When faced with the question 'what does society demand from me?', we no longer feel the need to answer in grand terms of ideological categories. The interpellative call today is a different one, perhaps best described as a constant and deeply personal injunction to enjoy, be true to yourself, truly express yourself, find yourself, be authentically who you are, etc. (cf. Žižek, 2009). It is a form of constant, but more subtle, ideological interpellation that directly mobilizes the endless process of self-recreation through consumption (Zwick & Cayla (eds.), 2011). Add to this the endless assault from all sides with requests to recycle personal waste, placing bottles and newspapers in the appropriate bins, support companies that reject child labor, switch to green energy providers, invest in ethical investment vehicles, and consume organic, local and fair trade products. 'In this way, guilt and responsibility are personalized – it is not the entire organization of the economy which is to blame, but our subjective attitude which needs to change' (Žižek 2010, p. 22). This ideology of market-embedded morality and the responsible consumer is the most dangerous of all because it is not experienced as ideology.

When reduced to its essence, the vast majority of the body of research in ethical consumerism presents the ethical consumption gap as a personal failure of sorts that can be summarized as: ‘even though you hold strong ethical and moral beliefs in favor of environmental and social justice, when it comes to making purchasing decisions you nonetheless fail to act on your beliefs.’ Thus, by configuring the gap as an internalized and individualized condition, ethical marketing research reproduces the illusion of the consumer as a sovereign actor with the power and responsibility to change the system (and the world!) through ethical consumption choices (e.g. Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Littler, 2009; Micheletti & Follesdal, 2007). Thus, the first ideological function of the gap as individualized condition is to suppress a systemic critique of consumerist capitalism (see e.g. Gilbert, 2014).

The second function we discern from our analysis of the ethical marketing and consumerism banners is that the ideological figure of the gap holds out the belief that capitalism has the ability – in principle – to save us from its own excesses (such as environmental, social and economic degradation, meaningless labor, social and economic injustice, etc.; see also Bradshaw & Zwick forthcoming 2015). Rather than recognizing that the persistence of the gap between ethical consumption attitude and behavior is clear evidence that consumers cannot be counted on to save capitalism from digging its own grave, marketers interpret the gap in the exact opposite way: the gap is evidence for the *possibility* that consumers will make the world a completely just and peaceful place and also stop global warming, with *consumer-led* marketers and firms following this sovereign ethical consumer (Shankar, Whittaker & Fitchett, 2006). As stated before, ideology works when it absorbs the opposition between everyday experience and fantasy. So, how would a marketer excited about the power of ethical marketing and consumption react to the discrepancy between the ideological figure of the consumer gap (hope for a green, just, etc.

capitalism) and the everyday experience of consumer behavior (failing to act ethically, even when trying)? The answer lies in the reversal of what counts as evidence, thus turning the discrepancy itself into an argument *for* the continuous importance of researching the gap: ‘the reason the ethical consumption gap is such an important topic for research is because it is so difficult to close.’ As Žižek (Žižek, 1989, p. 49) puts it, ‘[A]n ideology really succeeds when even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in its favor.’

For this ideological move to work, the illusion that needs to be maintained is that actually closing this ethical gap would make a real difference to the destructiveness of the current system. Yet, 20 years of evidence suggests that there is no reason to expect that consumers will start consuming ethically; and that if they do that the aggregate levels of excessive global consumption and resulting externalities would be affected in any meaningful way.^v So why do we continue to act as if this gap holds the key to changing capitalism into a distribution system of global economic and social justice, a machine against global warming, and the great defender of human rights (cf. Cluley & Dunne, 2012)?

There is an ethical sincerity in the convictions of marketing scholars to entrust ethical consumerism with the enormous task of saving capitalism from its destructive drive. But it is an illusionary stance that relies on an ‘exclusionary gesture of refusing to see’ (Žižek 2008b, p. 52), what in psychoanalysis is referred to as a fetishist disavowal of reality (see Bradshaw & Zwick, forthcoming 2015; Walz, Hingston, & Andéhn, 2014). Žižek suggests that in our allegedly post-ideological era, ideology functions more and more in a fetishistic mode. The fetish allows a subject to displace a fantasy onto an alternative object (in psychoanalysis, this is often a body part such as a foot or a shoe) in order to prevent the full confrontation with the real state of affairs. Freud called this process fetishistic disavowal, where the fetishist is able to believe in his fantasy and at the

very same time to recognize that it is nothing but a fantasy. Freud stressed that recognizing the fantasy as fantasy in no way reduces its power over the individual. Žižek builds on this idea in theorizing the nature of ideology, which follows a similar contradictory logic. He explains how often the victims of trauma (e.g., rape, loss of loved one in a car accident, and so on) do not appear to have grasped the gravity of the new reality as long as he or she can hold on to a fetish (the family dog, a certain piece of music, etc.). The fetish becomes a life preserver, temporary and slippery, but nonetheless indispensable. As Žižek puts it (2007, p. 253): 'I [e.g. the husband, who lost his spouse in an accident] rationally fully accept this death, I am able to talk about her most painful moments in a cold and clear way, because I cling to the fetish, to some feature that embodies for me the disavowal of this death.' In this sense, a fetish can play a very constructive role of allowing us to cope with the harsh reality: fetishists are not dreamers lost in their private worlds, they are thoroughly *realists*, able to accept the way things effectively are - since they have their fetish to which they can cling in order to cancel the full impact of reality. The fetish is the embodiment of the fantasy which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth (Žižek 2009, p. 65). In ethical consumption studies, the gap functions as our fetish; as long as we can hold on to it we do not have to give up the belief in our fantasy.

Again, the fetishistic ethical marketer does not simply repress the real. If he did, all we would have to do is point out to him more clearly the futility of his efforts within the context of the contemporary capitalist system. But this approach to the fetishist is pointless because he transfers a fantasy of the real *as* the real. In the case of destructive capitalism, the fetishist disavows that particular reality by believing in another, thus halting the full impact of the realization that ethical consumption cannot save capitalism from its own excesses. Hence, from the perspective of psychoanalytic theory the ideological function of the gap is best understood as an essential

component of an ethics that legitimizes destructive and unethical capitalism, while offering a futile sense of hope.

Conclusion

Given the hopelessness of enacting real change through the same system that is the cause for ethical transgressions and misery in the first place, is the purest ethical stance not that of a consumer refusing to consume ethically? Is the brutally self-interested and singularly desiring consumer that turns an instrument of oppression and destruction – mass consumption – against itself by demanding ever more and pushing the system to the breaking point (Critchley 2007; Marcuse 1972) not the true resistance fighter against contemporary neoliberal capitalism and all its excesses? This consumer rejects the gap as a source of ongoing guilt (Chatzidakis 2015) and turns it into a concrete articulation of her emancipation from the superego's injunction to do the impossible: to enjoy, provide, realize yourself, be authentic *but also* recycle, protect workers in China, prevent illegal arms trading, end the killing of animals, etc., all in order to save capitalism from digging its own grave.

What makes this reification of the ethical consumption gap so insidious and futile is that the gap works precisely because it can never be bridged. As soon as it is bridged, a new gap has to materialize as it is the excess of consumer desire that is the reason for capitalism to reproduce itself in the first place (Baudrillard 1981; Deleuze and Guattari 1977). The gap reminds the individual of the endless questioning of her intentions and decisions. Is this product truly sustainable? Should I be supporting women workers in Vietnam with my purchases? What if this company is lying about its treatment of animals? Drawing on Lacan, Žižek calls this consumer subject a hysterical subject. The hysterical subject always questions if s/he is doing the right thing;

whether the superego, or the Big Other, is pleased. Burdened with a constant feeling of guilt for not going all the way ethically with his purchases the hysterical consumer internalizes the gap between his desires and his behavior as a personal failing. Thus, we find that the interpellative call of ethical marketing and consumerism produces a subject of ideology that further sustains, rather than negating, the destructive machinery of global capitalism.

We have argued that the idea of the ethical consumption gap and its continuous construction through, and mobilization in, ethical consumerism scholarship functions ideologically in two important ways. First, the notion of the gap reifies the assumption that the responsibility for making ethical choices in the market rests with individual consumers. Positing a commonality of ethics in all spheres of life – domains both outside and inside the market logic – maintains the belief that the consumer is sovereign, and results in the responsabilization of consumers. Blame for capitalism's destructive tendencies is no longer the organization of the economic system but consumers' subjective attitudes and personal deficiencies (see also Firat 1996; Gilbert, 2014; Littler 2009). Second, the individualization of the gap allows for holding on to the belief that the capitalist system does have the ability to better itself, to become something else via the negation of destructive consumption by ethical consumption. The gap becomes a fantasy where the difference between a consumer's attitude and behavior is elevated to represent the difference between a capitalism that is flawed and one that is just, sustainable and equitable. If the fetish is the embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth, as Žižek (2009, p. 65) suggests, the gap functions as our fetish, and as long as we can hold on to it we can hold onto our fantasy rather than confront the blatant irrationalism of global capitalism predicated on excess, exploitation and destruction. In the final analysis, it is this insight – the gap as fetishistic disavowal – that we offer as our contribution to an important emerging conversation about the role

of marketing, marketers, and the capitalist system more generally in perpetuating the destructive machine of neoliberal capitalism (see in particular Bradshaw and Zwick, 2015; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014).

To be sure, the point is not that ethical consumption cannot happen. *Some* ethical consumers do exist, despite the significant sacrifices and barriers in the marketplace. Some consumption acts are ethical, based on ethical and sustainable marketing and production practices. Nonetheless, an important point of ideological critique is that even *if* ethical consumption were to happen in reality, it would not resolve capitalism's underlying contradictions that rest on creating insatiable desire and consumption excess. That is to say, even with some increase in ethical consumption, ethical marketers would not obtain the perfection of the fairytale where in the end everything works out perfectly, where workers at Amazon are always treated with dignity, global warming is reversed, animal cruelty eradicated, and coffee farmers in Guatemala enter the middle class. Indeed, there is something tragic about maintaining the gap as a symbolic act when marketers realize that little would truly be resolved by closing it. We therefore call on marketing researchers to re-focus their investigation from the ethical consumption gap to the marketing construction of the gap and the underlying capitalist structures that predicate and benefit from it.

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ⁱ For a similar point although from a different theoretical perspective see Giesler and Veresiu (2014).

ⁱⁱ Sartre writes: C'est ce que j'exprimerai en disant que l'homme est condamné à être libre. Condamné, parce qu'il ne s'est pas créé lui-même, et par ailleurs cependant libre, parce qu'une fois jeté dans le monde, il est responsable de tout ce qu'il fait.

ⁱⁱⁱ Keynes is clear in his essay "The end of Laissez-faire" that he finds this moral logic utterly problematic. As he writes: "The early nineteenth century performed the miraculous union. It harmonised the conservative

individualism of Locke, Hume, Johnson, and Burke with the socialism and democratic egalitarianism of Rousseau, Paley, Bentham, and Godwin. [...] Nevertheless, that age would have been hard put to it to achieve this harmony of opposites if it had not been for the *economists*, who sprang into prominence just at the right moment. The idea of a divine harmony between private advantage and the public good is already apparent in Paley. But it was the economists who gave the notion a good scientific basis. Suppose that by the working of natural laws individuals pursuing their own interests with enlightenment in condition of freedom always tend to promote the general interest at the same time! Our philosophical difficulties are resolved—at least for the practical man, who can then concentrate his efforts on securing the necessary conditions of freedom. To the philosophical doctrine that the government has no right to interfere, and the divine that it has no need to interfere, there is added a scientific proof that its interference is inexpedient. This is the third current of thought, just discoverable in Adam Smith, who was ready in the main to allow the public good to rest on 'the natural effort of every individual to better his own condition', but not fully and self-consciously developed until the nineteenth century begins. The principle of *laissez-faire* had arrived to harmonise individualism and socialism, and to make at one Hume's egoism with the greatest good of the greatest number. The political philosopher could retire in favour of the business man - for the latter could attain the philosopher's *summum bonum* by just pursuing his own private profit."

- iv Of course, we recognize that Habermas is first and foremost a materialist philosopher. So when we use the term idealistic in relation to his position, it refers exclusively to the notion of undistorted communication, which for Habermas is as crucial for the development of a free and emancipated subject as it is unattained, and perhaps even unattainable (at least under current conditions of moneyed influence, oppression of dissent, etc.). Notwithstanding the potential impossibility of undistorted communication, it is still an ideal worth striving for because without it, we cannot create a just, equitable, and truly emancipatory society. Crucially, undistorted communication requires language (i.e., a linguistic system) that can express the political dimension of moral and ethical positions. In Habermas's philosophical universe, the world is divided up into spheres and the economic sphere is governed by a non-linguistic system (money). Habermas recognizes that only in the most formal sense, money can be considered a language. But since money lacks the ability to express non-economic moral and ethical positions, it is useless as a system of political governance and in fact, as part of the economic sphere must be actively curtailed in its influence on the social and political spheres (see also Chomsky, 1999).
- v As environmentalist Derrik Jensen (2009) put it: "[The movie] *An Inconvenient Truth* helped raise consciousness about global warming. But did you notice that all of the solutions presented had to do with personal consumption — changing light bulbs, inflating tires, driving half as much [...]? Even if every person in the United States did everything the movie suggested, U.S. carbon emissions would fall by only 22 percent. Scientific consensus is that emissions must be reduced by at least 75 percent worldwide."