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### Abstract

Neutralization is a defense mechanism through which people downplay the repercussions of their behaviour. This paper demonstrates the ability of neutralization theory (especially 13 neutralization techniques) to contribute theoretical understandings into how consumers can justify the negative impacts of their purchasing behaviour, how they can continually, or periodically, rationalize their less than moral and ethical consumption decisions. Guided by the intent to galvanize empirical and interpretative consumer scholarship informed by neutralization theory, 13 consumer vignettes were developed to illustrate the powerful insights to be gained from bringing this theoretical perspective to bear on the immorality of consumption.



Socially conscious and socially responsible consumption is a highly complex form of consumer behaviour, intellectually, morally and pragmatically (Moisander, 2007). Indeed, there is a growing body of literature that deals with morality and consumption, with special concern for the most appropriate lens through which to better understand the moral implications associated with consumption practices and processes (Caruana, 2007). This paper suggests that consumer scholars, policy makers and educators need a way to understand the *thought processes* consumers may employ as they attempt to *justify* less than moral and ethical consumption decisions (their intent is to keep on shopping despite the moral injustices they perpetuate).

The ideas in this paper contribute to the literature about the emergence of an ethical consumer concerned with a sense of global citizenship through consumption. These ethical consumers behave in a more reflexive way, show greater self-control, and are aware that their actions can have global repercussions (Goig, 2007). More significantly, research shows that their thought processes, Goig used the term *global cognitive orientation*, influence their purchases. These thought processes inform their *moral agency*, understood to be their capacity for making moral judgements and taking actions that comport with morality. Moral agency concerns itself with social and moral norms in intentional action, distributive and political justice, and moral justification (Centre for the Study of Mind in Nature, 2007).

Using the idea of *moral intelligence* recently tendered by Lennick and Kiel (2005), this

paper posits that morally intelligent consumers would do their best to follow their moral compass, even, especially, when consuming. Moral intelligence is people's mental capacity to determine how universal human principles should be applied to personal actions (as well as personal goals and values). The four main principles are: responsibility, integrity, compassion (how we relate to others) and forgiveness (how we relate to ourselves). Lennick and Kiel suggested that we need the two latter principles for when we make decisions that do not fully respect integrity and responsible actions; this decision arena includes ethical and moral consumption.

In this paper, ethical consumption with moral overtones involves people *explicitly* indicating a commitment and obligation towards distant or absent others as central to how they understand consumption (Barnett, Cloke, Clarke & Malpass, 2004). However, geographical and mental distance from others is a great challenge when consumers are asked to establish trust relationships, gain and apply knowledge of ethical and moral principles when consuming, respect a sense of community and solidarity, and believe that they can have an impact, they can make a difference (Klintmann & Boström, 2006). More pressing is the reality that the human condition is profoundly impacted by consumer behaviour (McGregor, 2007), meaning there is little room left for consumers to continually justify harmful purchase decisions. To develop this idea further, the reality of sweatshop production is presented as a powerful justification for the need to shop with a moral conscience and ethical principles. The paper then addresses the notion of moral intensity in an attempt to discover what might, or might not, motivate consumers to shop ethically with a moral imperative. It culminates in a fruitful discussion of how 13 claims, tendered by neutralization theory, can contribute to understanding the mental strategies and thought processes people could employ to deny any culpability in harming distant and absent others through their shopping behaviour.

### **Sweatshop Imperative**

Shopping is defined as searching for, and sometimes buying, goods and services. Asking people to shop with a moral conscience, for human rights, calls for them to shop in a way that shows they have embedded human rights principles into their decision making process, that they have purposively and strategically modified their existing form of consumer behaviour to serve a new and moral purpose - the human condition of others (McGregor, 2007). When people become concerned with the human rights of others, they will move beyond price and quality and expand their choice criteria (Harrison, Newholm & Shaw, 2004). Until then, price, quality, convenience and brand loyalty are still the most important choice criteria used by consumers when they shop (De Pelsmacker, Driesen & Rayp, 2005).

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights states that people have the rights to justice, dignity, freedom, safety, work and leisure (protection from their government). But, what about protection from the actions of other world citizens? Auger, Devinney and Louviere (2005) found that human rights, child labour, safe working conditions, and good living conditions were rated as the most important social and ethical issues for consumers across six groups of nations (comprising 49 countries). Yet, corporate exploitation of women and children is still too common. Socially irresponsible corporations source their products in sweatshops. The latter include businesses that regularly violate wage agreements, the rights of

women and child laborers, and many health, environment, and safety laws. Sweatshops increase output and profits, not through innovation and higher productivity but by squeezing workers. Managers may refuse to pay overtime, use child laborers, and set piece rates so low that it makes earning a minimum wage impossible. They may provide inadequate ventilation, impose long, unsafe working conditions, or commit such crude abuses as hitting workers, refusing bathroom breaks, fining workers for being absent or firing them for being pregnant. Most sweatshop managers discourage or even forbid unionization (Boje, 2001).

There are hundreds of thousands of sweatshops around the world. Typical sweatshop employees, 90% women, are young and uneducated (between the ages of 16-25). Child labour (aged 9-14) is also a global issue. It is estimated that, of the 2.2 billion children in the world, nearly 250 million children in developing countries work in sweatshops. Almost three-quarters of these children (171 million) work in hazardous situations or conditions. Seventy percent of them work in agriculture (UNICEF, 2005; Woolf, 2001). Women and children make our clothes, footwear, sporting goods, toys, some electronics, even work in call centers... everyday things and services that we take for granted . . . yet, these women and children remain invisible. By some estimates, 83 percent of all clothing purchased in North America is made somewhere else, as are 80 percent of the toys, 90 percent of the sporting goods, and 95 percent of the shoes. Often less than 1 percent of the final cost of a product is paid to the worker, who makes, on average, 15-25 cents US an hour (New Community Project, 2005; McGregor, 2007).

This reality plays out against another reality. In a consumer society, people simply do not like it when they are told that their consumption habits harm those living elsewhere, the next generation, those not yet born, and the environment and other species. They have been socialized to see their role as a good consumer, meaning spending and accumulating material items for the good of the economy, democracy, and society. In a democratic, capitalistic society, materialism is often the way by which people distinguish themselves from others, instead of through their relationships. Although the general public is socialized to uphold ethical values of honesty, responsibility and the like, market values of competition, success and individualism also tempt people to satisfy self-interest to ensure (and definitely demonstrate) wealth and prosperity (Pak & Hui, 2004).

### **Moral Intensity of Consumer Issues**

What motivates people to shop, or not, with a moral conscience? How do they justify continuing the practice? How can some people not even perceive that their purchases have moral overtones? Consumer motivation is defined as things that form the basis for someone's action or decisions in the marketplace (Jackson, 2005; Moisander, 1998). *Social* consumer motivation is what drives people to do things that others think are proper so as to satisfy the other person's opinions, and to gain approval. *Economic* consumer motivation is what drives people to obtain money, things or experience. *Moral* consumer motivation drives what people do to feel proper or right in order to fulfil an obligation or self-determined commitment (Miller, 1999).

Consumers' ethical decisions can have moral motivations, especially when one considers that an ethical issue is present when the actions of a consumer, when freely

performed, affect the welfare of others (Izzo, 1997). The ethical issue gains moral overtones when someone might be *harmed* by the fallout of consumers' decisions (Jones, 1991). But, *regular people* cannot recognize such consumer issues, if they do not see consumption having a moral imperative. Until people incorporate moral ideals (justice, fairness, reciprocity, rights, equity) into their self-identity, they will not be *driven* (motivated) to consume with a moral imperative (Moisander, 1998). This absence means that they will not see themselves as ethically sensitive people able to recognize when an issue demands ethical principles and moral ideals as part of their choice criteria (McShane & Travaglione, 2005).

In order for people to make a moral decision: (a) there must be a norm or behavioural rule that they can use as a compass; (b) they must be aware that their decision will affect others, that there will be consequences; and, (c) they must accept the responsibility for the moral issue (Schwartz, 1977). If these conditions are not met, shopping with a moral conscience is compromised, because the absence of these conditions indicates that consumers are unable to recognize that their consumption decisions have moral overtones. Cowe and Williams (2001) found that only 17% of the consumers they surveyed said they had ever felt guilty about an unethical purchase. Said another way, 83% had never felt guilty when making an unethical purchase. More compelling is the finding that consumers have a distinct lack of understanding of the ethical product features of what they purchase (Auger et al., 2000). Only 10 percent could rate the ethical attributes of their last athletic shoe purchase - describe the living conditions, the working conditions, the wages earned or the use of child labour. These results have deep implications. Research has shown that the moral intensities of an *issue*, linked with the ethical intentions of a *person*, influence the ethical decision making process. Ballantine (2000) cited seven studies conducted in the 1990s that demonstrated this point.

### **The Concept of Moral Intensity**

The concept of *moral intensity* sheds more light on this argument. It is prudent to explain this concept in more detail before moving onto the next section that will apply neutralization theory to conceptualize consumption scenarios with moral overtones. Izzo (1997) discussed moral intensity and consumer decision making. He clarified that moral intensity refers to the degree to which a consumer *perceives* that a purchase demands the application of ethical principles. The perceived moral intensity of an issue affects a person's evaluation of the ethical content of a purchase situation. Jones (1991) and Collins (1989) provided valuable contributions to the concept of moral intensity. In brief, they proposed that a consumer issue will be perceived as morally intense:

- the shorter the length of time between consuming and the manifestation of any consequences of this act,
  - the more the consumer expects that the impact will be negative,
  - the more the consumer believes that these consequences will actually take place,
  - the closer the consumer feels to those who will be affected,
  - the more the consumer believes that a large number of people are going to be harmed, and
  - the higher the level of agreement in society that consuming this way is unacceptable.
- Izzo (1997) noted that, although some consumers are supersensitive to purchase

decisions that take on moral implications, others must 'see the blood flowing' before they react, or even perceive their shopping through a moral lens, if ever. This lack of sensitivity is even more likely to emerge if society does not have a high level of agreement that ethical shopping is acceptable, even *expected*, behaviour. The next section of the paper describes and applies neutralization theory to identify some claims that consumers might resort to when allaying any guilt and remorse they feel once they find out that their purchase decisions fall short of an ethical or moral imperative. Or, when they feel no guilt at all and are surprised when someone expects them to display this emotion.

### **Sykes and Matza's (1957) Neutralization Theory Applied to Consumption**

Neutralization is a technique that allows an individual to rationalize or justify an immoral or illegal act (Sykes & Matza, 1957). This theory is most often used to understand juvenile and adult deviant behaviours and delinquency, defined as a failure or neglect to consider what *ought* to be done. The theory holds that most offenders are not involved in offenses all of the time. They drift back and forth between acceptable and offensive, or delinquent, behaviour. Because most people are not immune to guilt and remorse, they need excuses for those times when they do drift into offensive and harmful actions. They need some mechanism to allow them to deal with the guilt. The agent for rationalization is neutralization.

Neutralization is a defense mechanism through which people downplay the repercussions of their behaviour. It is temporary release from society's moral bond with society (Matza, 1964). Social norms can be violated by using the techniques of neutralization. By appealing to one or more of the 13 forms of denial noted below, people can justify their actions and turn off their internal social control button. Denying their culpability helps them deflect the disapproval they will experience from defying societal norms and societal expectations of what is acceptable behaviour. It is also important to note that people who employ neutralization techniques are not a subculture within society. They are regular people who need some way to allay the guilt and blame they feel for harming another human being, despite their intent (Daigle, 2005). Equally important is the distinction that they will only resort to neutralization techniques if their behaviour has been called into question by them or others (Hamlin, 1988).

Recently, scholars have begun to apply neutralization theory to understand the morality of the behaviour resulting in fraudulent claims of insurance customers (Brinkmann, 2005), shoplifters (Cromwell & Thurman, 2003) and employee theft (Peeler, 2002). Following this new line of thinking, this paper develops a case for the ability of this theory to help the consumer field conceptualize how people can dismiss or downplay the negative impacts of their shopping and purchasing behaviour. The final section sets out a description of the growing collection of neutralization techniques, 13 to date (see Table 1), with examples of what each technique or claim might look like from a consumer perspective.

Table 1: 13 neutralization techniques (claims, denials, justifications), with representative lay statements

Type of Claim	Lay statement representative of claim
<input type="checkbox"/> Denial of responsibility	- <i>It is not my fault.</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> Denial of injury	- <i>No one got hurt.</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> Denial of a victim	- <i>They deserve what they get.</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> Condemn the condemner	- <i>Everyone else, including you, is doing it.</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> Appeal to higher loyalty	- <i>I did it to protect or take care of someone.</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> Defense of necessity	- <i>When times are better, I will change my behaviour. Right now, it is necessary.</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> Metaphor of the ledger	- <i>My lack of consuming judgement is more than made up for by rightness in other parts of my life.</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> Deny necessity of a law	- <i>We don't need laws for this behaviour.</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> Claim of entitlement	- <i>I know my rights. I work hard and deserve things.</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> Claim of relative acceptability	- <i>How I act is nothing compared to others.</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> Claim of individuality	- <i>I don't care what others think. Everyone for themself.</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> Justification by comparison	- <i>It could be more serious. This is nothing compared to 'stealing.'</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> Justification by postponement	- <i>I will act now, and deal with my feelings later.</i>

As a caveat, these consumption scenarios have not been informed by empirical research, although the scholars noted above did provide evidence that the theory explains deviant behaviour for fraudulent insurance claims, when consumers shoplift, and when employees steal.<sup>1</sup> The scenarios set out in this paper were developed by the author to illustrate how consumers might downplay the repercussions of their shopping behaviour. The intent of this intellectual initiative is to further the field's thinking about how to conceptualize this aspect of consumer behaviour; in effect, to offer another intellectual lens leading to future rigorous empirical and interpretative consumer scholarship that explains immoral and unethical consumption.

### Denial of Responsibility

In the instance of denial of responsibility, people doing the harm feel helpless in a particular situation. They believe that their life circumstances predisposed them to engage in

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<sup>1</sup> Muncy and Vitell (1992) and Vitell, Lumpkin and Rawwas (1991) developed an empirically validated *consumer ethics scale*, gauging consumers' inclination to resist moral temptations. Their scale lists 19 more or less ethically questionable consumer activities, organized into four categories: (a) actively benefitting from illegal activity, (b) passively benefitting at the expense of others, (c) actively benefitting from questionable behaviour, (d) and no harm/no foul. This scale deals with consumer *dishonesty*, a different dimension of consumption than moral intensity or moral perfidy (breach of common trust) (Brinkmann, 2004).

immoral acts. A common statement is, *I could not help it. It was not my fault.*" This stance enables them to contend that their acts were caused by forces beyond their control. *"I did not have a choice,"* reflects the belief that their acts were not one of personal choice nor were they done intentionally. Instead, it was an accident of circumstances. People will lament, *"I did not mean to do it. I had no other options."* They may also claim that, *"It was a mistake or an accident."* Also, people using this form of denial may declare that they were ignorant of the laws, or of any other alternatives. And, they may insist that they were so excited during the incidence that they neglected to be responsible due to distractions. *"I had no intent to do anything illegal. I was just so excited that I forgot to do the moral or legal thing."* An interesting denial occurs when people say they usually do the right thing but, *"This one time, it was an oversight."* Others may claim that the circumstances of the situation were unclear, and that they operated under a set of impressions or assumptions that turned out to be misplaced: *"I thought I was doing the right thing."*

**Consumer Denial of Responsibility** - When faced with the accusation that they have not been moral in their consumer behaviour, these consumers would claim that the very act of living in a consumer society predisposes them to engage in unethical consuming. *"I have no choices in the marketplace. Everything I want to buy is made offshore, using child labour and sweatshop labour or techniques that harm the environment. These things are all beyond my control. Harming others or the environment was never my intention. Besides, sometimes, I get so excited over a good deal that I am distracted from choice criteria other than the great price."* Others may say they usually take a moral stand in the marketplace. But, this ONE time was an oversight. Still others may say they bought something thinking it was free of moral implications, when actually it was not. *"It was not my fault. I am not responsible for the fallout of my consuming choices."*

### **Denial of Injury**

If this particular moral neutralization technique is used, it is because people truly believe that no one was hurt by their actions. They do not deny their actions, just that anyone was harmed because of them. These people might say, *"It's no big deal. They have lots of money."* In this case, it is assumed that the "victim" can absorb the loss or harm inflicted by someone else's act; hence, no harm was done. This form of denial is exacerbated when society also does not look at certain acts as harmful. Or worse, society accepts them as a given part of living in that society. People will be heard to say, *"No one got hurt"* and *"I didn't really hurt anyone."* Another facet of this form of denial is the belief that, *"The actions I take as one person are so small and insignificant that nobody is harmed."*

**Consumer Denial of Injury** - From this perspective, consumers actually believe that no one is harmed by their purchases. They do not deny that they consumed, only that anyone got hurt. It is easy to assume this stance of denial in a consumer society that expects us to shop in order to serve the economy. Society measures consumer confidence, consumer price indices and housing starts to show that consumer spending is "strong." When faced with the fact that their spending is harming others and the environment, consumers fall back

on, *"I am just one person. What harm can I cause?"* This is, again, an easy stance to assume in a consumer society, because people are all seen as separate, not connected to others, and out for their own interest. Although people do not see themselves as part of a larger collective whole, in harsh reality, two-thirds of all the money spent in developed economies is spent by consumers. They do harm, and then wrongly assume that those who are harmed are resilient enough to absorb the fallout and repercussions.

### **Denial of the Victim**

When people employ this neutralization technique to offset the impact of their actions, they, in effect, deny that there even *is* a victim. Instead, they see their actions as punishment or revenge toward someone else who deserves this form of treatment. *"They deserved it,"* are words often uttered in these instances. *"They had it coming"* is also another sentiment reflecting this form of denial. People are able to assume this stance because they see the person who is harmed as an abstract entity, "the other," removed and distant from their realm of concern. This assumption is especially true when the person who is harmed is of another race, culture, religion, group, ethnicity or gender. Denying that there even *is* a victim is a form of dehumanization, an insensitivity to the value of a human life (Larson, 2003; Levy, 2003). People will say, *"I did what I had to do."*

**Consumer Denial of the Victim** - This is one of the most offensive forms of consumer denial because it slips into the realm of prejudice (a judgement) and discrimination (action based on the judgement). When consumers deny that anyone was hurt by their consumption habits, they engage in a cruel form of dehumanization because this denial reflects an insensitivity to the suffering of others. Indeed, the distance between, and invisibility of, the labourers producing products makes it very easy to consider them "the other."

Consumers can feel justified in saying, *"I did what I had to do to meet my interests. If anyone got hurt in the process, they must have deserved it because they did not work hard enough to get out of their impoverished position."* Because it is easy to deny others' existence, consumers can say that there is no victim.

### **Condemnation of the Condemner**

When people condemn their condemner, they paint them in a negative image so it is easier to deny the harm or loss inflicted. For example, if Tom condemns Mark for a particular act, this opens the door for Mark to call Tom a hypocrite, a person who professes beliefs and opinions that they do not live up to themselves. This way, Mark deflects the attention being directed to him back to the person doing the accusing, or the judging. If Mark can convince Tom, or others, that Tom is also guilty of the same behaviour, that lessens the negative impact of Mark's actions. Two common sentiments that are expressed in this case of denial are, *"Everybody else is doing it. Why focus on me,"* and *"You do the same thing, so don't point fingers at me."* Another familiar statement is, *"Everyone is picking on me,"* followed with, *"I bet you have done the same thing, too."* Shifting the blame to someone else protects one from self-blame, and from guilt. It is a method to reduce dissonance (doubt) in the face of an internal moral clash - the disconnect between people's self image of being a good person and the reality of their

harmful actions.

People using this claim are likely to say, based on what someone has done to them in the past, or on how society has ill-treated them, that people should not be surprised when others: (a) rip them off, (b) find fault with them, (c) express disapproval of them or, (d) denounce them as guilty of the same types of actions. Calling into question the legitimacy of the condemners is at the core of this form of denial. From another perspective, when espousing this claim of denial, people assert that the action in question is justifiable because it is a legally acceptable behaviour. They may say, *"I was just taking advantage of what the law permitted, so don't find fault with my actions."* Although the action may have been questionable on moral grounds, it was legal. This mental stance enables people to condemn the one who is judging them.

**Consumer Condemnation of the Condemner** - Consumers embracing this form of denial are deflecting attention away from their consumer behaviour back toward the person who is faulting them for their failure to take into account the labour behind the label, and the impact on the environment and other species. They do not feel it is appropriate to be signaled out because they just assume that everyone else is shopping the same way. Turning the spotlight on them makes them uncomfortable because, in other areas of their life, they see themselves as a good person. Knowing they are harming others, with the simple act of consuming, is disconcerting. Conversely, consumers may know that buying something Made in China may support prison and sweatshop labour, and yet they buy anyway. In these instances, they can reduce the dissonance they feel by claiming that they are not doing anything illegal - society *expects* them to spend money to strengthen the economy, at home and abroad. *"Who are you,"* they pose, *"to judge me when you buy things as well? You are as guilty as I am, so don't call the kettle black."*

### **Appeal to Higher Loyalties**

When people break the law or disregard community expectations in order to meet the needs of their small group, friends or family, they are appealing to higher loyalties. An example would be when a teenager gets into trouble when trying to help or protect a friend or family member, exclaiming that, *"I won't rat on them. I won't be a snitch."* With this form of denial, attachment to a smaller group takes precedence to attachment to the larger society. Any harm is justified if people can show that they are remaining loyal to their subgroup of society. In this case, they are not rejecting societal norms, just placing them second to the needs of their immediate group or friends. These people are often accused of having *misplaced loyalties*.

*"Only a coward backs down"* is another statement reflecting this form of denial. Fear of being seen as a coward, or someone who turns and runs at the first sign of trouble, is a compelling rationalization. It insinuates that people are not noble or moral in their character. This form of denial is ironic. Although society holds that it would be more moral to take a stand, taking that very stand results in someone getting hurt. And, people will exclaim that, *"I didn't do it for myself. I did it to protect someone else."* In this case, broad social goals are sacrificed

for the good of a subgroup within society, or a close friend or family group. Also intriguing is the interpretation of people's actions as the means to get attention and gain acceptance from others (the higher loyalty).

**Consumer Appeal to Higher Loyalties** - Even though all people live in a global community, this form of denial works for those people who live in a consumer society. They can make the case that their spending serves to strengthen the local economy, and that the concerns of the global population have to take the back seat. At the micro level, people who shop to keep up with the Joneses, and get attention from their peers, are putting their own self interest before the needs of other members of larger society, especially those making the goods and services. As well, when transnational corporations (TNCs) source labour overseas, they claim that they are giving North American consumers the best price and a wide range of consumer choice (loyalty to their local contingency). In reducing the local labour force, either here or abroad, they are harming local economies here so they can boost the earnings of their stockholders (even smaller loyalty). Also, even less comfortable is the idea that shopping at retail outlets that source from contentious labour sources (so one buy less expensive products while meeting the needs of one's family, "I did not do it for myself") is a form of putting a higher value on one's family than fellow members of the human family.

#### **Extensions of Sykes and Matza's (1957) Neutralization Theory Applied to Consumption**

Eight additional neutralization techniques have been introduced subsequent to Sykes and Matza's (1957) original theory. Minor (1981) put forth the Defense of Necessity. Klockars (1974) posited the Claim of the Metaphor of the Ledger. Coleman (1994) offered both the Denial of the Necessity of the Law, and the Claim of Entitlement. Henry and Eaton (1994) offered the Claim of Relative Acceptability, and the Claim of Individuality. Most recently, Cromwell and Thurman (2003) tendered two others, the Claim of Postponement, and Justification by Comparison. Each of these will now be discussed, again with consumer interpretations.

#### **Defense of Necessity**

When people use the defense of necessity, they are assuming that, even if something is considered morally wrong, it is okay if it is perceived as necessary. Often, people will claim that because they are poor and cannot afford things, it is acceptable to break the law or engage in delinquent actions. They do not condone other people engaging in this type of behaviour. But, they feel it is all right when times are hard. Their survival, and that of their family, takes precedence over adhering to the law. When times are better, they will revert to being law-abiding or conscientious citizens. Also, using Mark as an example again, Mark may claim that if Tom expects him to act in a certain way, Mark is justified in acting in an immoral way so he can meet Tom's unrealistic expectation (Minor, 1981).

**Consumer Denial of Necessity** This form of denial is common in a consumer society. People will say they have no choice but to shop at a particular retailer (often called into question because the retailer sources where many things are

made using unjust labour) because they are too poor to shop anywhere else. They may say, *"If I could afford it, I would make ethical choices."* More affluent consumers may argue that they cannot invest in ethical companies because these firms do not make as much as other companies and the consumer needs the money for retirement. Delinquent consumer decisions are named thus because consumers did not do what *ought to have been done* (care for others and nature). They argue that they act ethically if their circumstances were different. In the meantime, they feel justified making unethical product decisions because it was necessary to pay less for cheaper goods, given their limited income. They promise themselves, and others, that they will make more conscientious and ethical consumer decisions when their financial times are better.

### **Claim of the Metaphor of the Ledger**

In this instance, people engaging in delinquent behaviour strongly believe that all of their good qualities, to date, make up for this one instance(s) of indiscretion (lack of judgement), or illegal behaviour. In the case of stealing at work, employees might say, *"I keep track of what the company owes me in my head. If I steal, it is only fair compensation for unpaid extra hard work."* In the final analysis, people making this claim feel that they come out on the good side. This justification is based on the idea that conforming to the rules on a regular basis accrues credits (brownie points) that can be "cashed in" later, and used to excuse breaking the rules (Klockars, 1974).

**Consumer Claim of the Metaphor of the Ledger** - Consumers expressing this form of denial may recycle, walk when they can, hang clothes on the line and compost; yet, they drive a Sports Utility Vehicle (an SUV), own a boat, and wear blood diamonds. They feel that they can justify the latter purchases because they have a good track record in other consumer product and service categories. They feel that their lack of judgement in some areas is more than made up for by their success in other areas of their consuming life. This sloppy accounting blinds them to the need to bring a conscience to all of their consuming behaviour. Eventually, more negative entries will be posted in their mental ledger, leading to a deficit of good behaviour, and more and more unjust and unsustainable consumption decisions.

### **Denial of the Necessity of the Law**

When people apply this claim for denial, they assume that the law in question is not fair. They believe that some laws are an infringement on the rights of citizens. Some believe that a law is not necessary for a particular set of behaviours. Others believe that enforcement of the laws is inconsistent and unfair. To be unfair means that someone or something is unjust or not evenhanded. Also, law enforcement officers, or others who are standing in judgement of the action in question, may be accused of showing favoritism and partiality. *"That just doesn't seem fair"* is the sentiment expressed by people trying to assuage their guilt for an immoral or illegal action (Coleman, 1994; Eliason, 2003).

**Consumer Denial of the Necessity of the Law** - *"I have rights as a consumer and it places undue hardship on me if you expect me to see myself as a citizen first, and a*

*consumer second. Using human rights as a club for my unethical consumer behaviour is a misuse of these rights. They were intended to protect citizens from the behaviour of their government, not from the behaviour of other citizens. Besides, I am a consumer, not a citizen, so who are you to stand in judgement of me doing what I am expected to do - to consume? It is just not fair for you to accuse me of engaging in unethical consumer behaviour."* Consumers using this form of denial do not believe that proposed laws, which would regulate their consumption behaviour, are even necessary; hence, any attempt to regulate their consuming behaviour, from an ethical or moral perspective, is seen as not fair and unnecessary. It is infringing on their right to consume.

### **Claim of Entitlement**

In the case of the Claim of Entitlement, people are claiming both that they have a right to engage in the behaviour in question, *and* that they have the right to gain or benefit from any actions they take. When they feel entitled, they feel they have the right to claim something. Entitlement can also be construed to mean empowerment and the authority to act. It can infer the perception that many of the rules in society, or in law, do not apply to them. Indeed, a sense of entitlement is the precursor belief that leads to wrongful acts, ranging from minor to felonious. Also, a sense of entitlement combines with the belief that the degree of current social deterioration permits situational suspension of core values (Coleman, 1994; Gilmartin, 2001).

**Consumer Claim of Entitlement** - Because they live in a consumer society, people feel justified to claim that they have the right to consume. They feel entitled (someone gave them authority) to spend money on what they want because it is a way to build up a pile of material goods and consume services, the expected norm in a consumer society. People are defined by what they own. Relationships are second to material goods. A self-identity is shaped by possession and consumption of particular goods and services. If life gets stressful (social deterioration), people living in a consumer society feel it is all right to spend to fill the emotional and spiritual gaps. In order to meet this need, they assume it is acceptable to ignore the moral imperative if doing so serves their immediate needs of belonging and succeeding. They feel justified in suspending core, universal values to meet consumer society values, and in benefitting from their consumer choices. They feel they are entitled to their success and wealth.

### **Claim of Relative Acceptability and the Claim of Individuality**

Henry and Eaton (1999) offered two additional forms of denial: the Claim of Relative Acceptability ("*There are worse people than me*") and the Claim of Individuality ("*I don't care what anyone else thinks*"). These two claims truly appear to absolve people from any sense of complicity or blame, because these claims close the door to any comparative analysis of the behaviour of others. An "*I don't care*" attitude implies a lack of emotion or feeling about others, reflecting impassiveness, disinterest, and indifference. People's lack of any consideration for the repercussions of their actions contributes to the possibility that they will

not be receptive to a change of heart. This apathy is worsened in the situation where people feel they are less to blame for what they are doing with they believe that others have done worse things. These two claims especially allow people to rationalize their behavior, disallow responsibility for harm, and avoid guilt. These claims also relieve moral constraints so people can continue to justify delinquent acts shaped by not considering what should or ought to happen (Hamlin, 1988). Cromwell and Thurman (2003) clarified that the sentiment "*I don't care*" serves to declare people's independence. But, it also reveals their vulnerability to being sensitive to what others think. Although people are individuals, they are also social beings. They need to feel that they belong; hence, an "*I don't care*" attitude actually may mask a deeper need to belong.

**Consumer Claims of Relative Acceptability and Individuality** - Consumers can hide behind the claim that other consumers are behaving worse than they are. When this happens, they see their own behaviour as acceptable, compared to the behaviour of others. This stance is exacerbated when they compound it with, "*I don't care what anyone else thinks about how I consume.*" Apathy and relativity are powerful allies to consumers who assume these two forms of denial. These traits close the door to any acceptance of the idea that people are all citizens of the same, small world, and that their behaviour is all intertwined and connected. What they do as Northern consumers effects others and can come back to haunt them. One clear example of this is a dependence on fossil fuels (e.g., gas, oil, plastics) to the point that Northern nations are at war with countries who control these disappearing commodities. Their way of life - their *good life* - is now threatened by past consumption behaviors couched in denial, "*I don't care. Others are consuming less responsibly (assuming less responsibility) than I am.*"

### **Justification by Comparison or Postponement**

Cromwell and Thurman (2003) offered two final forms of denial. Justification by Comparison refers to the sentiment that, "*If I was not engaging in this particular offense, I would be doing something more serious, so this behaviour is nothing compared to what it could be.*" Assuming this stance enables people to maintain their sense of self-worth and assuage their feelings of guilt by arguing that, "*I may be bad, but I could be worse.*"

The claim of Justification by Postponement is used when people feel guilty of an offense but elect to suspend or postpone their evaluation of their actions until a later time, hoping that they can deal with their feelings when they are under less stress. "*I just don't think about it when I am doing it. If I do, it seems wrong, so I ignore the feeling, and tell myself I will think about it later. After all, by then, it is already done, and I cannot do anything about it.*"

**Consumer Claims of Justification by Comparison and Postponement** - These two types of denial definitely apply to consuming. "*I may be a 'bad' consumer (buying products that harm the environment, other species and humans). But, I could be doing something far more serious.*" AND, "*I know that I am not consuming with a conscience. But, I just suppress those feelings, buy the stuff anyway, and promise myself that I will deal with my feelings later.*" If that postponement is extended, then the

immoral and irresponsible consumption continues. Compounding this postponement, with the sentiment that they could be doing something far worse than simply consuming a product made under lousy working conditions, creates a powerful tool for denying irresponsible consumer behaviour.

### Summary

This paper suggested that the consumer discipline needs a way to understand people's thought processes vis-a-vis the morality of their consumption decisions, leading to more ethical consumption informed by moral intelligence and enacted through moral agency. The discussion briefly recounted the reality of sweatshop production, thereby justifying a need for shopping with a moral conscience. Then, the idea of moral intensity was explored in an attempt to discover what might, or might not, motivate consumers to shop with a moral imperative. This inquiry preceded the rich discussion of how neutralization theory can help consumer scholars and practitioners understand the mental strategies and thought processes people might employ to deny any culpability in harming distant and absent others through their shopping habits. Thirteen justifications or claims that people can use to explain away the immorality (amorality) of their consumption decisions were profiled, with consumer interpretations (see Table 1 for a summary).

### Amoral or Immoral?

The intent of this paper was to illustrate the potential usefulness of neutralization theory to understand how people can rationalize away the adverse impacts of their consuming lifestyle on distant and absent others. In conclusion, the theory provides some intriguing insights into what might comprise the *thought processes* people can employ to justify consumption behaviour that is judged by others to be unsustainable, unethical, irresponsible, even immoral or amoral. Regarding the latter, the distinction between amoral and immoral is *intention*. Unintentional behavior is done without planning to cause the specific circumstances that actually result from the action. Immoral behaviour is predicated on intentions. Amoral behaviour would involve actions taken without awareness of, concern for, or intention to have, moral consequences (harming someone) (Archie, 2000; Collins, 1989). Perhaps what is really going on is not that consumers are immoral; rather, they are amoral. Instead of having low or corrupt moral standards (not in conformity with the moral code of behavior), they may have no sense of, or sensitivity to, what is right or wrong vis-a-vis shopping with a moral conscience. They may have no moral bearings at all when it comes to shopping: *Shopping is not good. Shopping is not bad. Shopping just is.*

### Conclusion

Whether consumption is immoral or amoral, neutralization theory seems to lend itself very well to offering explanations for why some consumers can continually, or periodically, rationalize their less than moral and ethical consumption decisions. Developing the consumption scenarios to bring a consumer perspective to bear on the 13 claims against deviant behaviour was effortless - no stretch of the imagination was involved. It seemed to be a natural extension of this theory, moving from adult and juvenile deviance to shoplifting, employee theft, fraudulent insurance claims and, now, consumer behaviour.

One pertinent aspect of this theory, especially given the potential for amoral consumer

behaviour, is the thesis that most people are not involved in offenses all of the time. They drift back and forth between acceptable and irresponsible behaviours (Henry & Eaton, 1999). This drift offers *hope* that consumers can be moved to see their relationship with the world in other ways. They can become receptive to the idea that wavering between responsible and irresponsible consumption is the norm. But, the true objective of being a citizen is to strive to make decisions that err on the side of moral and ethical consumption as the dominant way of life. With the aid of critical consumer education (McGregor, 2005; Sandlin, 2004), and more enlightened consumer policy, consumers could truly learn to respect the relationship between consumption and the moral imperative, and be supported in these market decisions.

No one said this will be easy. There will be resistance. Many people will assume a defeatist, resigned attitude, claiming that this work is too hard, not within their purview, or simply inappropriate. Some will say that consumer decisions are too complicated as it is; that asking people to consider the choice criterion of *the morality of the decision* is asking too much of the already beleaguered consumer, policy analyst, and educator. But, just because a thing is hard to do, does not preclude people from trying. The conceptual approach shared in this paper shows that neutralization theory provides very valuable insights into how people might avoid making, or justify continuing to make, consumption decisions with unethical, immoral or amoral overtones. Consumer scholars are invited to continue to explore the merits of this intellectual lens, leading to richer understandings of the nuances of immoral consumption. In a recent award-winning documentary, Eckhardt, Devinney and Belk (2006) posed the question, "*Why don't consumers behave ethically?*" Neutralization theory is another step along our theoretical journey towards answering this question. It offers a powerful lens through which to design and interpret empirical and narrative (interpretative) scholarship about ethical and moral consumption.

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