

To My Mother and Father

HOW DO CONSUMERS SELF-LICENSE THEMSELVES IN THE CONTEXT OF
ETHICAL CONSUMPTION?:
A QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO MORAL SELF-LICENSING

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I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Science in Marketing.

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ABSTRACT

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Ethical decision making processes of people have been a locus of research across disciplines because morality is considered as an important yet complex tenet of social life. The research to date has aimed at exploring the inconsistency in ethical decision-making processes of individuals to comprehensively apprehend the issue. A research stream on moral self-licensing (ML) effect has revealed that individuals are more likely to follow an amoral behavior if they established moral behaviors earlier. Since the ML phenomenon has been investigated mainly via the experimental approaches, the nature of ML has been almost exclusively explained by a single empirical model, called *moral*

credits model, and therefore, the ML effect has remained rather underexplored. As such, the main objective of this thesis is to explore ML in the context of ethical consumption in which the ethical decision-making processes are at the forefront. With a methodological shift from the dominant research stream on the ML effect, this thesis embraces interpretivist approaches based on consumers lived experiences and accounts about moral dilemmas during the ethical consumption behaviors by interviews and projective methods. The findings of the thesis suggest that there are alternative models of moral self-licensing: reversed moral credentials, moral supplement, moral societal position, and moral systemic position. These findings not only expand the definition of ML but also inform some neglected aspects of the attitude behavior gap in ethical consumption. The findings of the thesis are expected to set a scholarly dialogue to enhance the growth and expansion of ethical markets.

Keywords: Attitude behavior gap, ethical consumption, ethical decision-making, moral credits, moral self-licensing.

ÖZET

ETİK TÜKETİM BAĞLAMINDA TÜKETİCİLER KENDİLERİNİ ETİK OLARAK NASIL RUHSATLAR?: ETİK RUHSATLANDIRMAYA YÖNELİK KALİTATİF BİR YAKLAŞIM

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Etik kavramının toplum hayatının önemli ancak karmaşık bir ilkesi olması nedeniyle, insanların etik karar verme süreçleri disiplinler arası bir araştırma konusu olagelmıştır. Bugüne kadar yapılan araştırmalar, konuyu bütünüyle anlayabilmek adına etik karar verme süreçlerindeki tutarsızlıkları açıklamaya çalışmıştır. Etik ruhsatlandırma etkisi üzerine yapılan çalışmalar, kişilerin etik bir davranışta bulunmasının ardından etik olmayan bir davranış sergilemeye yatkın olduklarını ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bu fenomenin özü bu zamana kadar genellikle deneysel çalışmalarla incelenmiş, sonuç olarak da

sadece *etik kredi modeli* adında tek bir ampirik modelle açıklandığı için etik ruhsatlandırma etkisi bütünüyle keşfedilememiştir. Bu tezin amacı, etik karar verme süreçlerinin ön planda olduğu etik tüketim bağlamında, konuyu tüketici deneyimlerini ön plana alarak irdelemektir. Şimdiye kadar yapılmış çalışmaların çoğunda kullanılan deneysel metodolojiden farklı olarak, bu tezde mülakatlar ve projektif teknikler yoluyla, tüketicilerin tutarsız etik tüketim deneyimlerine ve açıklamalarına yorumcu bir bakış açısıyla yaklaşmıştır. Araştırma sonunda dört alternatif model keşfedilmiştir: Tersine etik anlamlandırma, etik tamamlama, etik sosyal konum ve etik sistemsel konum. Bulgular, etik ruhsatlandırma tanımını geliştirmenin yanı sıra etik tüketimdeki tutum ve davranış uyumsuzluğuna da açıklamalar sunmaktadır. Bu bulguların, etik pazarların gelişmesine yönelik akademik tartışmalara katkı yapacağına inanılmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Etik karar verme, etik kredi, etik ruhsatlandırma, etik tüketim, tutum ve davranış uyumsuzluğu.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As the world faces a variety of environmental, social, and political deteriorations in the last decades such as climate crisis, ecological breakdowns, social inequalities, poverty, political corruption and so on, one way of value, belief, and care reflection toward these wicked issues by individuals is revealed to be through consumption (Gabriel & Lang, 1995). This accumulated and collective moral reflection through consumption has stimulated the emergence of ethical products, ethical markets, and ethically minded consumers as a result. Clothes from recycled plastics or foods from fair trade systems, local farm shops or zero waste markets, and ethically minded consumer groups who are downshiftners, vegans, boycotters can be considered as some examples of the ethical consumption phenomenon.

Several market and consumer reports reveal increasing annual growth and expected growth for ethical markets (Co-op, 2021). Yet, such reports often fail to reflect the true dynamics of ethical markets as these markets are not growing as expected in the marketplace (Carrigan & Attala, 2001). This situation is often explained by an inconsistency of consumer behavior towards ethical markets by ethically minded consumers. The behavioral level empirical explanation for the relatively slow growth of

the ethical markets is shaped around a term called the attitude-behavior gap (Carrigan & Attala, 2001; Eckhardt, Belk & Devinney, 2010; Auger & Devinney, 2007; Carrington, Neville & Whitwell, 2010; Carrington, Zwick & Neville, 2016; Carrington, Chatzidakis, Goworek, & Shaw, 2021). Cowe and Williams (2000) referred to this behavioral inconsistency phenomenon as the 30:3 syndrome, which means that approximately 30% of the consumers states preference for ethical products, but only 3% of them actually purchase such products. Carrigan and Attala (2001) historically and empirically demonstrated evidence of such discrepancy between consumers' attitudes toward supporting an action and behaviors that actually carry out these attitudes in the ethical markets. Authors framed this phenomenon as the attitude behavior gap in ethical consumption. As the pioneers of the research stream on the attitude-behavior gap in ethical consumption context, authors suggested that the development of policy and corporate social responsibility campaigns in the domain of ethical marketing is not a pointless activity, yet the attitude-behavior gap related inconsistency at individual's behavioral level should be approached with scrutiny during such regulative and practical implementations.

Several scholars raised further calls for research to better understand the attitude behavior gap in ethical consumption by exploring diverse narratives in the moral self-construction (Newholm & Shaw, 2007), by exploring the effective strategies of consumers' ethical behavior (Eckhardt, Belk & Devinney, 2010), by recognizing the contextual interactions' role (Papaoikonomou, Ryan & Ginieis, 2011), and by refocusing

to the gap from a viewpoint of underlying capitalist structures (Carrington, Zwick & Neville, 2016).

The research stream in social psychology literature about the moral self-licensing effect has a potential to explain some dynamics of ethical consumption in general and the attitude behavior gap in particular. Moral self-licensing effect, empirically identified by Monin and Miller (2001), occurs “(...) when past moral behavior makes people more likely to do potentially immoral things without worrying about feeling or appearing immoral.” (Merritt, Effron & Monin, 2010). Positioned against the consistent and sequential behavior paradigms (i.e., the foot-in-the-door effect by Freedman and Fraser (1966)), moral self-licensing effect is a likelihood of inconsistent moral behavior in a sequential framework informed by an individual’s earlier moral capital (Mullen & Monin, 2016). This inconsistency related phenomenon in moral domains has also been investigated in ethical consumption contexts (Mazar & Zhong, 2010) but sometimes demonstrated contradicting findings (Urban, Bahník & Kohlova, 2019).

A theoretical explanation for the inconsistencies in moral self-licensing findings was suggested by Merritt et al. (2010) as they revealed that there are actually two models of moral self-licensing: (I) *Morals credits* model which focuses on balancing the moral capital in a calculative manner by the individual and (II) *moral credentials* model which focuses on disambiguating the subsequent morally dubious behavior to depict it as irrelevant and less of a transgression. Authors have pointed out an alternative model of moral self-licensing, the moral credentials model, which cannot be measured by the

dominant methodological choices -experimental- in the moral self-licensing research. Because the licensing effect in the model of moral credentials occurs via *meaning changes* attributed to the licensed prospect behavior, which is immoral or morally ambiguous. Although the moral credentials notion has been a conversation changer to the ML literature conceptually, no empirical evidence has been produced in its favor.

This thesis aims to answer the following question of “How do consumers self-license themselves in the context of ethical consumption?”. As earlier research suggested deeper investigations for “qualitatively different experiences of individuals” (Mullen & Monin, 2016: 367), an interpretivist methodological approach for the thesis has been utilized. Moreover, future research is called for studies that explore “independent pathways to licensing that operate in different situations” (Merritt et al., 2010: 350). The locus of the research is ethically minded consumers’ experiences of inconsistent ethical consumer behaviors. This thesis approaches to consumption as a process instead of an act (Kilbourne, McDonagh & Prothero, 1997) by a retrospective narrative-based manner unlike the earlier research on moral self-licensing which approach to the phenomenon from an experimental approach encapsulating a minor part and time frame of consumption -purchase act-.

The theoretical contributions of this thesis are threefold: (I) Moral self-licensing has different models which are shaped by individuals’ totality of consumption experiences in the ethical consumption context, (II) moral self-licensing is not simply an unconscious cognitive bias, but rather a conscious and deliberate strategy towards the internal and

external stimulus during moral dilemmas, and (III) the attitude-behavior gap in ethical consumption may occur via moral self-licensing experiences of individuals. While ethical consumption is the context in which the moral self-licensing phenomenon is researched here, an expansion of the moral self-licensing research also provides some novel challenges and explanations towards the attitude behavior gap phenomenon of ethical consumption literature. Therefore, the topic and the context of the thesis inform each other in a mutual respect.

The remainder of the thesis will firstly elaborate the theoretical underpinnings of moral self-licensing effect and ethical consumption to clarify the positioning and the relevance of the thesis in chapter one. Methodological choices and rationales will then be discussed in chapter two. In the chapter three, the findings from 17 semi-structured interviews, with six of them inclusive of a projective method of story completion from ethically minded consumers with different ethical consumption behaviors will be demonstrated. Findings will reveal new alternative models of moral self-licensing beside moral credits and moral credentials models. In chapter five, the discussion will demonstrate the theoretical contributions of the thesis to the literatures of moral self-licensing, ethical consumption, and the attitude-behavior gap. Managerial, policy, and societal level implications will also be discussed with an aim of enhancing the sustainable growth of the ethical markets in the discussion chapter. Additionally, future research directions and the limitations of the thesis will be also mentioned in the same chapter. Finally, appendices at the end demonstrate the story templates of the projective method, the interview questions, and typology of ethical consumption behaviors.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Mullen and Monin (2016) position moral self-licensing effect as a counter argument towards behavioral consistency literature in sequential behavior paradigms in the social psychology literature. As moral self-licensing involves behaving *inconsistently* in moral domains (Merritt et al., 2010), it is relevant to discuss the effect's relationship with the attitude behavior gap in ethical consumption (Carrigan & Attala, 2001), which is a dominant research stream in the context of ethical consumption context with a focus on inconsistency. While the ultimate goal of this research is to explore independent pathways to licensing, the findings of this thesis are expected to inform some fundamental aspects of the attitude behavior gap in the context of ethical consumption.

This chapter will start with elaborating moral self-licensing effect's theoretical tenets and examples, and then will continue with elaborating the ethical consumption context and attitude behavior gap phenomenon to provide foundations of the linkage between two theoretically distinct yet experientially resonating phenomena.

2.1. Moral Self-Licensing

In a search for a scientific response to the question of how people react to the moral dilemmas in life, social psychologists have discovered moral self-licensing (ML) effect to be a cognitive influence and bias in such situations. ML refers to a situation when past moral behavior makes individuals more likely to act in potentially immoral ways in a subsequent situation (Merritt et al., 2010; Monin & Miller, 2001). Some empirical research to date showed the effect of this behavioral phenomenon in the contexts of employee recruitment (Monin & Miller, 2001), donation and prosocial behavior (Khan & Dhar, 2006; Sachdeva, Iliev & Medin, 2009), political preference (Effron, Cameron & Monin, 2009), leadership (Lin, Ma & Johnson, 2016), and prosocial and proenvironmental consumer behavior (Mazar & Zhong, 2010; Bauer & Menrad, 2020; Engel & Szech, 2020; Giebelhausen, Lawrence & Chun, 2021).

ML effect stands out as a counterargument to the vast literature of behavioral consistency. The research stream suggesting that individuals have a tendency to behave in consistency includes the foot-in-the-door-effect theory (Freedman & Fraser, 1966) - which suggests if individuals help initially, they are more likely to help further at a later stage-, cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) -which suggests that consistency is a key element of human behavior-, self-perception theory (Bem, 1967) -which highlights that individuals shape their attitudes with reference to their perception of self, modelled by earlier behavior-.

ML is suggested to be proceeding as “When people are under the threat that their next action might be (or appear to be) morally dubious, individuals can derive confidence from their past moral behavior, such that an impeccable track record increases their propensity to engage in otherwise suspect actions.” (Merritt et al., 2010: 344).

Positioning *past moral behavior* to the center, ML effect is suggested to have three core components: (I) *licensed* feeling of freedom to take an action, (II) *moral* tenet often associated with virtue, and (III) the notion of a person permitting to her/his *self* to transgress (Effron & Conway, 2015).

For clarification purposes of this cognitive bias -as referred by the earlier literature- in consumer research, an elaboration of a couple of studies is needed. Mazar and Zhong (2010) researched the ML effect in the context of “green consumption” (Connolly & Prothero, 2008). After confirming that people attach higher moral values to green products than conventional products, the research experimented whether purchasing green products would reduce following altruism. Participants were randomly assigned to make purchases either in a green store – with nine green and three conventional products- or in a conventional store – with nine conventional and three green products-. In the later phase of the study, the participants played a cognitive game on the same screen. Each correct answer of the game would earn the participants some cash. But the participants were supposed to report the number of the correct answers. The research design put participants in a position of moral dilemma in which they have opportunity to lie to increase their earnings. The participants in the green store condition were found to

be more likely to lie to earn more money. The authors concluded that purchasing green products can license self-permission towards subsequent selfish or immoral behaviors.

Similarly, Khan and Dhar's (2006) study follows a similar methodological approach in which they experimented the relationship between earlier altruistic behavior of volunteering in a social cause and subsequent product choice between a utilitarian or hedonic product. The participants were asked to choose being involved in an imaginative scenario of a community service, either teaching children in a homeless shelter or improving environment. After completion of the first task, participants in the experiment group were told to imagine that they are in a mall and there is sale on a vacuum cleaner (utilitarian) and a pair of designer jeans (hedonic) -with the same price-, which they had asked to imagine having a plan of buying both but could afford only one for the moment. Significantly more participants in the experiment group chose the hedonic product over utilitarian product than in the control group. Researchers concluded that prior moral task licensed the later act of a hedonic over utilitarian product choice. These well-known studies are considered as representative examples of the dominant research stream on ML effect with regards to methodology, constructs, and findings.

However, subsequent research demonstrated some contradicting results. With an aim of replicating Mazar and Zhong's (2010) study, Urban et al. (2019) did not find a licensing effect between prior green consumption and subsequent dishonesty. Similarly, Rotella and Barclay (2020) reported no significant licensing effect in the context of earlier prosocial behavior and later donation. Additionally, in two meta-analyses (Blanken, van

de Ven & Zeelenberg, 2015; Simbrunner & Schlegelmilch, 2017) ML effect is demonstrated to have a relatively small-to-medium effect size. Blanken et al. (2015) suggest that such contradicting results may put the robustness of the effect in jeopardy or imply the existence of moderating factors.

Under what conditions individuals act morally consistent or inconsistent, then, have been a core question for the ML research stream in the latter phase. Different moderators of moral consistency vs licensing were suggested such as construal level of initial behavior, progress vs commitment perception of individuals towards initial behavior, moral identification of an individual by their social circle, value reflection by initial behavior, ambiguity of initial and target behavior (Mullen & Monin, 2016), cultural background -regional- (Simbrunner & Schlegelmilch, 2017), and individual differences of attitude (Gholamzadehmir, Sparks & Farsides, 2019).

However, while ML effect has been assumed to be an unconscious cognitive bias, no scholarly attention was given to the experience of ML from the perspectives of individuals' lived experience. Individuals were mostly experimented for what their next choice will be in a sequential moral–morally dubious behavior setting. This is a setting that fulfills the “moral” and “self” tenets of ML, yet “the license” (Effron & Conway, 2015) part of the experiments were heavily focused on the mere presence of an earlier good deed while isolating many other potential influences. Mullen and Monin (2016: 363) criticized the dominant research stream on ML effect in their comprehensive review as follows: “Many studies lacked baseline conditions (“donut” designs), leaving

it ambiguous whether licensing was observed and although many proposed moderators yielded significant interactions, evidence for both significant consistency and balancing simple effects in the same study was nearly coexistent.”. Authors suggest that in the absence of a neutral baseline condition, separate from being good or bad, researchers cannot discern licensing from compensation and vice versa. This thesis was inspired by this critique, and ethical consumption is construed as a process instead of an isolated and bracketed decision-making moment between moral and immoral (Kilbourne et al., 1997).

Such distantness to lived experiences creates a gap in the literature with regards to leaving the academic ground to possible assumptions for ML studies. One similar concern is raised by the authors of the first meta-analysis of ML effect, as they stated (Blanken et al., 2015: 556):

Moral licensing is typically seen in the temporal pattern. (...) All studies on moral licensing that we are aware of investigated the phenomenon in terms of two consecutive behaviors or events, where good behavior ‘A’ leads to less desirable behavior ‘B’. However, there is no reason to assume that the process of moral licensing actually operates in the order of these two consecutive behaviors.

Authors not only question the assumptions and methodologies of earlier studies but also call for a deeper level of analysis of ML as a “justification-based account” and suggest further research on focusing this aspect with a specific interest to the immoral behavior (Blanken et al., 2015: 555).

2.1.1. Moral Credits vs. Moral Credentials Models of Moral Self-Licensing

Mullen and Monin (2016: 367) emphasize that ML can be practiced “via qualitatively different psychological processes”. The tenet of this argument is mainly derived from Merritt et al.’s (2010) notions of “Moral Credits” vs “Moral Credentials” approach.

Merritt et al. (2010) suggest that people derive confidence from their earlier moral behaviors but there are different modes of liberalization toward morally dubious acts. Authors suggest that two different modes come forward: Moral credits model and moral credentials model. The moral credits model is a mode of moral capital balance which individuals, after facing an ethical dilemma, feel licensed towards a morally dubious behavior by a feeling that earlier good deed(s) earned them the right to transgress. In this mode, people are aware what they are about to do is rather immoral, but they focus on the “positive balance in their moral bank account” (Merritt et al., 2010: 349). In the moral credentials model, however, when individuals face with an ethical dilemma and are about to follow a morally dubious behavior, unlike their initial acts, earlier good deeds change the meaning of subsequent behavior. In this model, people’s “past track record” facilitates the disambiguation of the bad behavior. Subsequent behavior’s meaning is changed in the light of this record to become a behavior of less of a transgression.

While most of the studies approach to the ML effect from an experimental perspective and discuss the results from the perspective of moral credits model (the balance in moral bank account), the literature points that qualitatively different approaches may be

possible (Mullen & Monin, 2016) such as the changes in the meaning of subsequent morally dubious behavior via moral credentials model (Merritt et al., 2010). As the research stream of ML is still maturing with regards to effect size, deeper level and critical investigations can be benefited to better understand the phenomenon (Simbrunner & Schlegelmilch, 2017), such as focusing on the justification-based accounts (Blanken et al., 2015). Future research that employs such an approach potentially have the promise of facilitating conditions that cultivates moral behaviors to serve the greater good (Merritt et al., 2010).

This section of the thesis aimed to clarify that while the research on the effect size and the moderators of ML has been maturing, the experiential aspect of the phenomenon on how individuals experience this so-called cognitive bias of moral inconsistency in their daily lives remained unanswered. Revealing the experiential aspect would not only help to eliminate the possible assumptions by the earlier literature but would enhance the initiatives that aim establishing consistent morality towards and by individuals. Therefore, this research aims to focus on suggested qualitatively different experiences from consumers' point of views in the ethical consumption context, in which the morality of decision-making process of individuals comes to the forefront.

Following section will first detail the ethical consumption context by explaining philosophical tenets, ethical consumers, and decision-making approaches. In the final subsection, the attitude behavior gap (Carrigan & Attala, 2001), which is a phenomenon

at the vertex of moral self-licensing and ethical consumption literature, will be elaborated.

2.2. Ethical Consumption

Ethical consumption is defined as “a plethora of consumer concerns and actions that go beyond considerations of product price and quality to include the political, social, and environmental consequences when acquiring, using, or disposing of goods and services.” (Andorfer, 2015: 1). Such concerns and practices may include -but not limited to- boycotts, positive buying -buycotts- (e.g., fair trade), screening and comparisons of ethical ratings, relationship purchasing (e.g., purchasing from local stores), anticonsumerism and sustainable consumerism (Harrison, Newholm & Shaw, 2005).

As ML’s important tenets mentioned earlier include *licensed, moral, self* (Effron & Conway, 2015) elements, ethical consumption context provides a fruitful venue to further investigate this topic. Because consumers -as selves- face with a plethora of choices -which morality is at the forefront- and do not consistently consume in moral manners, which potentially provides a space for the feeling of being licensed, as we shall see later in the subsection of the attitude behavior gap (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001).

Understanding the ethical consumption effectively and in detail is necessary as the nature and fundamental tenets of the ethical consumption are inclusive of different approaches to morality, ethical decision-making processes, and ethically minded

consumers. The remainder of this section is constructed as follows: Firstly, the philosophical frame of the consumption ethics will be elaborated to better understand the substantive domain of ethical consumption. Then, the depiction of ethically minded consumers will be detailed from consumer research and marketing domains. Next, the ethical decision-making literatures from psychology and management will be reviewed to link ethical consumption and moral self-licensing literatures. Finally, a dominant behavioral level inconsistency pattern of ethical consumption, the attitude behavior gap (Carrigan & Attala, 2001), will be explored before the methodology chapter.

2.2.1. Philosophy of Ethical Consumption

Ethical consumption may have political, religious, spiritual, environmental, social, or other motives in their hierarchical preferences with regards to morality towards products/services and such hierarchy of preferences nurtures the disagreements about what is morally right and wrong (Harrison et al., 2005). To understand the roots of such contradictions in the substantive domain of this thesis, an elaboration of morality or ethics is needed. Put plainly, how morality and ethics¹ are assessed by individuals, is the concern of this subsection.

¹ Morality and ethics terms have been used interchangeably throughout the thesis. The fundamental philosophical differences between them are beyond the scope of this thesis.

Two theories are dominantly suggested by the earlier moral philosophy literature: consequentialist theories which privilege the *good* and deontological theories which privilege the *right* in action (Singer, 1997; Rawl, 1972). Ethical consumption discourses are suggested earlier to enclose elements from both approaches (Barnett, Cafaro & Newholm, 2005).

Consequentialist approach champions consequences or outcomes of actions by conceptualizing the right thing to do as maximization of the overall good (Singer, 1997). However, the main criticisms toward this perspective are that it suggests a totalization and centralization of the notion of good; it does not leave room for plurality of views; exploitation of some people, who are not a part of the majority, can be justifiable within this perspective (Rawl, 1972). Deontological approach, on the other hand, highlights the *right* over the good with a duty-based approach. It is about acknowledging and practicing universal norms that prescribes the right thing to do, respecting and protecting over all human dignity by following external enforcement (Van Staveren, 2007). It is therefore dependent on top-down imperatives.

Both models are criticized for suggesting extreme levels of universality and high levels of abstraction while neglecting the complexities and ambivalences of decision making (Barnett et al., 2005). Especially, the regular and daily individual behavior level of ethical decision making is considered as not relatable to these two main approaches (Van Staveren, 2007). As an alternative, a more down to earth approach of virtue ethics is suggested which is acquired from and expressed through relationships, daily

interactions, and trial-and-error processes in consideration of ethical decision making (MacIntyre, 1987). In this model, what ethical is simply what a virtuous person would do. This approach suggests that moral behavior is imperfect through continuous adaptations and changes with an acknowledgement of there is no universal standards, therefore, it is contextual (Van Staveren, 2007). Barnett et al. (2005: 14) suggest that "... an approach that is more sensitive to experiential horizons of ordinary consumers, and in particular to the ways in which certain sorts of ethical conduct are already embedded in everyday consumption practice." is required to understand ethical consumer behavior and ethical consumption. Authors suggest the virtue ethics is more suitable to study these topics. Similarly, as moral dimensions of economic behavior do not occur from straightforward moral rules but arise from a combination of motivation and reason, virtue ethics is offered as an overarching philosophy to study individual ethical behavior in markets (Van Staveren, 2007).

Finally, one other theoretical moral approach suggested to study ethical consumption is the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006). Caring is referred as "... a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair or world so that we can live in it as well as possible." (Held, 2006: 3). Compared to other moral theories, ethics of care is highly relational and dependent on the elements of these relationships and context. Shaw, McMaster, and Newholm (2016) suggest that how and what consumers consume concurrently display caring towards self, family, environment, and community. Papaoikonomou et al. (2011) suggest that in a postmodern view of ethics, consumers vary in what they evaluate to be ethical consumption and their weight of

concern can mitigate and are diverse. Shaw et al. (2016) use the theory of care to better understand the nature of ethical consumption in general and attitude behavior gap in particular. They suggest that ethics of care in ethical consumption is visible in the sense that consumers care for/of/about– which are different in practice- a variety of issues in their interaction with the social world. Such practices are shown to be nuanced in their depth and conceptualizations in different narratives of ethical consumption aligned with the conceptualization of ethics of care. To sum up, while consequentialist and deontological approaches to ethics are universal, virtue and care ethics are relational and contextual. Tough, the care ethics is deeper in relationships and contextualities.

Providing a broad picture of philosophical tenets of the morality in general and ethical consumption in particular, the following subsection will further elaborate the notion of ethically minded consumer to better apprehend the unit of analysis of the thesis.

2.2.2. Ethically Minded Consumers: Who Are They? What They Do?

As questions of what the right or good thing to do and what someone should do or care about provide diverse templates to the approaches to morality, the answers to the question of “What is ethical?” become “far from a homogenous collective” (Carrington et al., 2021: 215). People can derive the logics and belief systems in consumption from different ethical contexts and resources, which are already complex as originated from many different kinds of ethical philosophies (Enderle, 2000). Ethical consumption is criticized for being “... too broad in its definition, too loose in its operationalization, and

too moralistic in its stance to be anything other than a myth.” by Devinney, Auger and Eckhardt (2010: 9).

This broad understanding of ethical consumption was also mirrored in the definition of ethical consumer which brought about a refusal of “ethical consumer” notion as it can only be a “myth” due to several reasons (Carrigan & Attala, 2001; Devinney et al., 2010). The term “ethically minded consumers” is suggested for this consumer segment who demonstrates generally inconsistent and irregular consumer behaviors even though they declare and show concern about others via their consumption practices (Carrigan & Attala, 2001). This thesis will embrace the term of ethically minded consumers to refer to the people who are considerate towards environmental, social, and political outcomes of their consumption behaviors but act inconsistently in the marketplace.

To frame the complex nature of ethical consumption, Carrington et al. (2021) reviewed a plethora of interdisciplinary ethics studies with an aim of bracketing the multiplicity of terminology and meanings. Authors showed that consumer ethics can be *self-oriented* or *other-oriented* and *stable* or *variable*. They can be enacted by *individuals* or *collectivities* who are *internally motivated* or *outcome-focused* and *agentic* or *non-agentic* through diverse modes of *action* or *non-action*. Following part will explore the notion of ethically minded consumer with the authors’ thematization to provide a ground template for further discussions (See Figure 1).

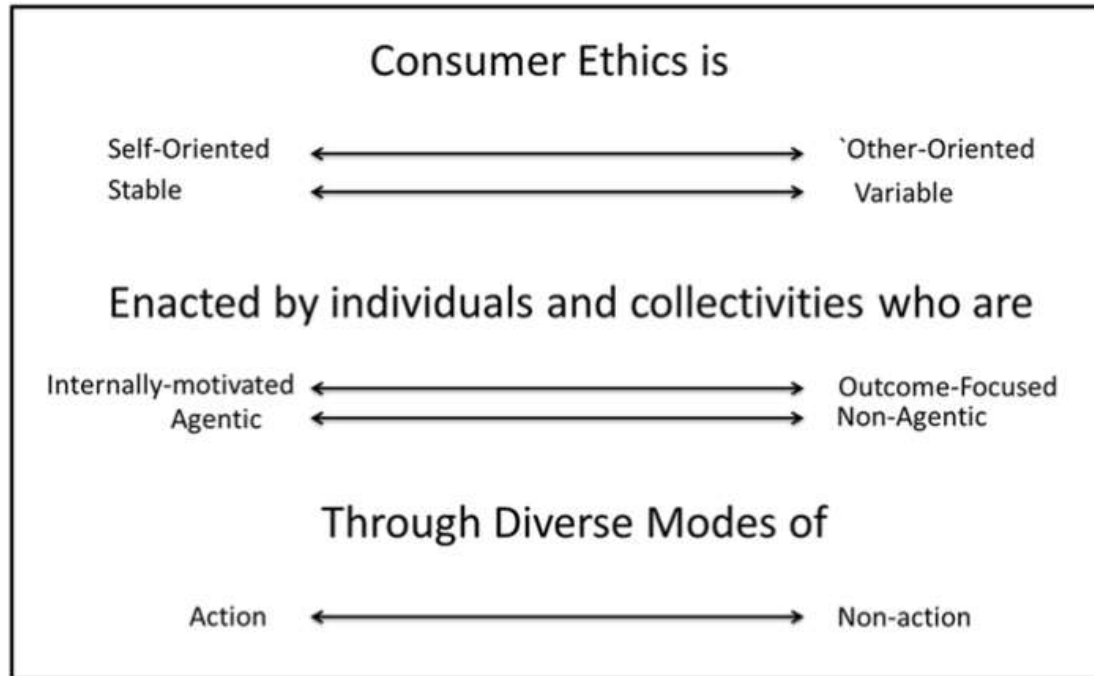


Figure 1: Consumer ethics: Key interdisciplinary themes and assumptions
Adapted from Carrington et al. (2021)

First of all, one aspect of ethical consumption is the target of ethical concerns via consumption. While ethical concerns dominantly observed to be *other-oriented*, where the “trade-off” between ethical action and cost (Olson, 2013) comes to the forefront, *self-orientation* was also seen as a common theme with a reaction towards capitalism’s capacity for social and environmental protection and an urge to sustain the “self”. Other-oriented ethical consumers may concern with animal welfare, social justice, ecological protection through consumption, while self-oriented consumers may concern with sustaining their selves in the capitalistic infrastructure. Secondly, individuals’ ethics in consumption across domains are diverse in the sense that they are either considered as *variable*, meaning evolving and changing, or *stable*, meaning not based on a process but

rather prescribed and followed consistently. Thirdly, although the earlier literature on who ethical consumer is had a focus on profiling and creating typologies, only a few demographic differences have been found (Devinney et al., 2010). Therefore, the responsibility and agency of ethical consumers were shown to set the latest focus in progressing literature. Two orientations around responsibility are revealed in the review which are namely *internally motivated* or *outcome focused* modes of responsibilities. Internally motivated responsibility is based on a reflection of an individual's conscience, while outcome-focused responsibility tends to concern about the consequences of consumers' choice. Furthermore, ethical consumers are often approached as either *agentic* or *non-agentic* by different research streams. The notion of agentic ethical consumers supposes that people can exercise responsibility in marketplace through actions like consumer activism or resistance, and they have the capacity to change parts and parcels of the consumptionscapes. On the other hand, some studies acknowledge that consumer agency is constrained by institutions, social structures, and availability of relevant information. Following this, any type of responsibility and agency can be performed by *individuals* or *collectives*. Finally, ethical consumers are varied by the modes of engagement with the marketplace. They can exercise consumption ethics through "action" or "non-action" (abstention). Examples of action can be recycling or shopping from farmers markets and examples of abstention can be modes of anti-consumption such as voluntary simplicity.

Additional to this frame, the ethics of consumption are also referred as *contextual* in the sense that it is dependent upon the time and place of consumers' experiences, besides

being heterogenous, multiple, fragmented, and subjective (Cherrier, 2005). For example, Belk et al.'s (2005) research on consumer ethics across eight countries revealed that there are significant differences of emic approaches to the consumption and production ethics between affluent and developing countries with regards to moral rationale of justifications. For example, while participants from developing countries can assess counterfeit products as morally acceptable, affluent societies' participants would evaluate such products as an ethical transgression.

As can be seen in this holistic conceptualization of consumer ethics (See Figure 1), the substantive domain of ethical consumption is filled with dualities and poles beside moral dualities of right/wrong, good/bad and so on from a philosophical point of view. Contextualities are also another aspect that is diffused around such dualities. Such context related issues in addition to a duality of moral and immoral provide a fruitful venue to define, situate, unpack, and problematize the concept of ML. Because the earlier literature on ML with certain methodological choices might have potentially moved forward with some basic assumptions related to other dualities in a moral decision-making process besides an assessment of a simple good and bad. Re-rendering potential moral dualities in ethical decision making of ethically minded consumers, it is now required to take a detour through ethical decision-making literature.

2.2.3. Ethical Decision Making of Consumers: When and How They Do It?

Lately depicted as complex in nature, the ethical decision making process of consumers has been another significant locus for both behavioral ethics and consumer researchers. In this subsection, a further elaboration of ethical decision making frames from the behavioral ethics theories will take place before moving on approaches by consumer research.

It is suggested that there is an elaborate avoidance of providing a definition for ethical behavior in the general management domain, yet management is inclusive of decisions that impact others, which positions the domain as a moral activity (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Cowe, 2008). So, the field, inclusive of marketing domain, is still dependent on general ethical decision making (EDM) models, mostly from behavioral ethics literature and heavily from experimental studies (Schwartz, 2016).

Schwartz (2016: 756) points out that the EDM process often depicted as “... a series of temporal and sequential process stages, typically beginning with initial awareness or recognition of an ethical issue leading to a moral judgement, intention to act, and finally to behavior.”. This conceptual stance also resonates with the dominant approach in ML research stream in which a moral dilemma is bracketed with sequential choices between moral and immoral. Some examples of such linear approach, often used in ethical consumption literature, are inclusive of theories of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) and planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) which depict the ethical decision making

process in a fixed sequential manner of relationships between attitudes, norms, intentions, and behavior.

Schwartz (2016) also stresses that even though such models attempt to include individual, organizational, or situational-related variables, EDM has been even considered as a black box with the lack of consistent findings. As the literature offers a vast of explanations to that empirical shortfall, author suggests that “Another possibility may be that EDM is simply too complex neuro-cognitive-affective process involving too many interrelated or undiscoverable variables being processed by our brains preventing any possible generalizable conclusions.” (Schwartz, 2016: 756).

Similar criticisms arise overtly from the ethical consumption literature. With a social action focus of ethical consumption behavior, Devinney et al. (2010: 49) stress that a linear model of social action is “at the heart of the vast majority of theoretical and empirical models of ethical consumption found in the management and business ethics literature.”. As can be seen in Figure 2, links between values, attitudes, intentions, and actions are assessed as fixed and sterile with clear beginnings and endings. Authors refer to this model as “the simplistic” EDM model. They highlight another venue for investigating ethical consumption with a conceptualization of recursive model of EDM (see Figure 3) with an emphasis on no clear-cut direction of causality that is necessarily apparent or logical. Authors also highlights that, with a recursive model approach that lacks exogenous and endogenous influences, empirical characterization is rather difficult to assess via simple surveys due to linkages between components being not clear and

context being a matter of concern. A hermeneutic method of choice is suggested if empirical aim is to reveal an understanding of the nature of ethical consumption as a complementary approach to dominant methodological choices in the domain.

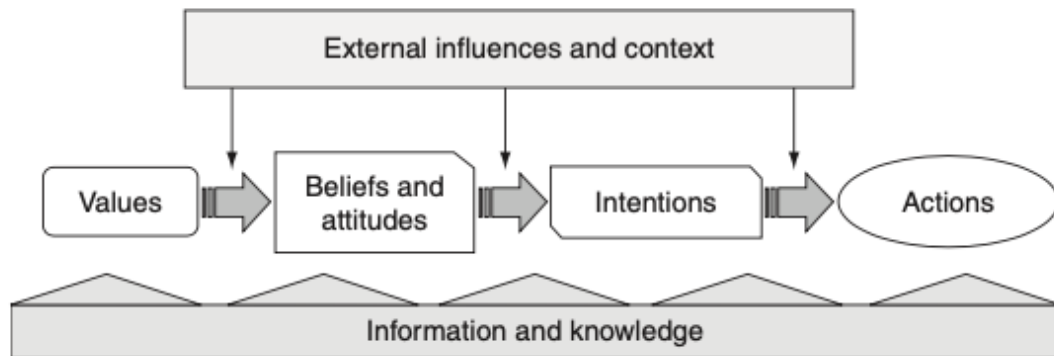


Figure 2: Linear model of ethical decision making
Adapted from Devinney et al. (2010)

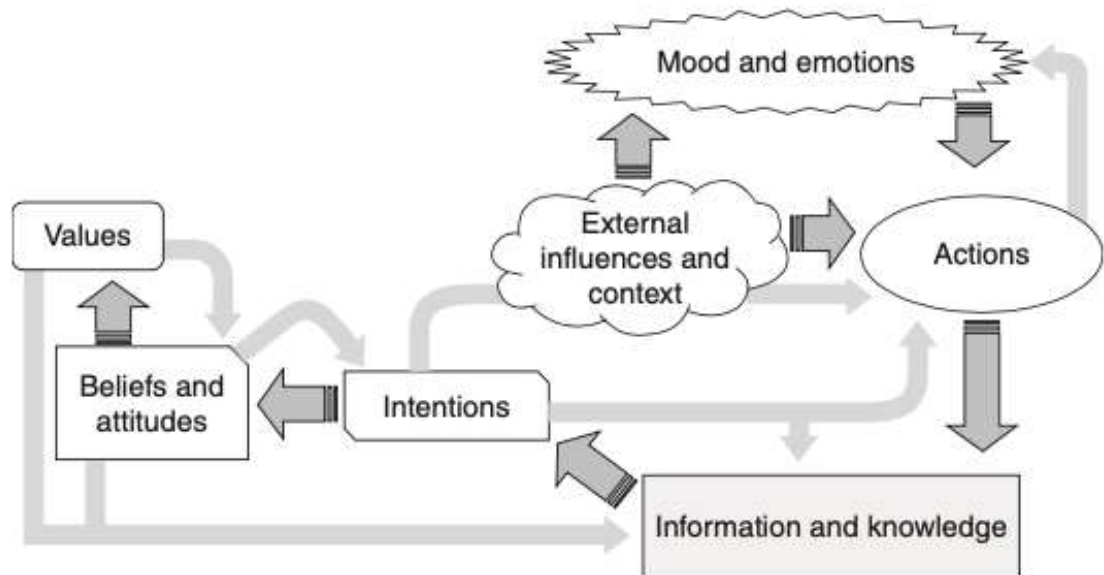


Figure 3: Recursive model of ethical decision making
Adapted from Devinney et al. (2010)

The theoretical conflicts around ethical decision making are not limited to the depiction of the process towards behavior, but inclusive of debates around moral reasoning and moral intuition. In an attempt to synthesize two dominant EDM models, which are namely rationalist based -reason- and non-rationalist based -intuition and emotion-, Schwartz's (2016) integrated EDM model suggests that such dualistic approaches rather function together in ethical decision-making process. The rationalist models have moral reasoning dominating the core of the model to lead to moral judgement (Rest, 1986; Jones, 1991) while non-rationalist models move from an assumption that intuition and emotion² dominate the path to moral judgement and moral reasoning comes secondary, *ex post facto*, as explanatory or justificatory (Haidt, 2001; Sonenshein, 2007). However, accounts in the forms of *ex post facto* justifications and excuses are socially approved manifestations which reflect communal and individual negotiations (Scott & Lyman, 1968). Orbuch (1997) highlights that accounts are nourished by meanings individual attribute with a purpose of sense-making to their experiences and social world around them and they inherit links between individual and society. Therefore, people's accounts count (Orbuch, 1997: 464):

Accounts are packages of attributions (including attributions of causality, responsibility, and blame, and trait ascriptions both to other and to self), tied together by descriptive and emotive material (...). Attributions concentrate more strongly on the cognitive aspects of judgments and responsibility than on the social processing of these statements; accounts emphasize the cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of these explanations.

² Intuition refers to "A cognitive process involving and automatic and reflexive reaction leading to an initial moral judgement." (Schwartz, 2016:772). Emotion refers to "One's feeling state." (Schwartz, 2016:772)

In this thesis, ethical consumption is approached as a substantive domain that is complex and varied in its nature of different moral philosophies, recursive towards and around ethical behavior, and integrated of both reasoning and intuition rather than being assessed as based on a monolithic moral philosophy, linear towards ethical behavior, and either rationalist or non-rationalist. Additionally, accounts by consumer's are approached as valuable sources of information toward the nature of ethical consumption. Justification of embracing these comprehensive approaches is derived from the inconsistency in empirical findings of EDM in general (Schwartz, 2016; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008) and ML in particular (Blanken et al., 2015; Urban et al., 2019; Rotella & Barclay, 2020).

An important inconsistent ethical consumption behavior concept is the attitude behavior gap (Carrigan & Attala, 2001), which has a potential to include ML effect. Next subsection will elaborate this phenomenon, exhaustively researched by consumer research domain.

2.2.4. Inconsistency in Ethical Consumption: The Attitude Behavior Gap

Ethically minded consumers don't walk their talk consistently when it comes to actions and behaviors of ethical consumption (Carrington et al., 2010). For example, while public opinion polls towards renewable energies demonstrate positive attitudes, the diffusion of these novel technologies is relatively slower in consumer markets (Claudy, Peterson & O'Driscoll, 2013). Such discrepancies between attitudes and behaviors in

ethical consumption context are referred as the attitude behavior gap (Carrigan & Attala, 2001; Auger & Devinney, 2007).

The attitude behavior gap has warranted great attention by consumer and market researchers as it has significant academic, managerial, and societal consequences. Carrington et al. (2010) demonstrate that while utilization of attitudes and intentions as proxies of behavior would lead to failure for prediction of ethical consumption behaviors, exploring the gap what consumers intend to do and what they actually do is clearly important because products are generally launched based on “intentions to purchase”. Therefore, ignoring this gap would lead to costly failures. This gap continues to stand as an important managerial problem because an exaggeration of consumers’ apprehension for others’ well-being may lead to a misguided reaction by producers (Devinney et al., 2010). Yet, it should be noted that the gap also yields important societal problems as the context of ethical consumption is fundamentally an egalitarian and environmentalist mode of consumption. Therefore, any misguided or inconsistent efforts by producers or consumers set a failure to the mode’s ultimate aim.

While there is much research that confirm the existence of the attitude behavior gap in ethical consumption, two streams of research stand out with their explanatory purposes. The first one aims to explain *why* there is a discrepancy between what ethically minded consumers say and do. This stream of thought suggests that the attitude behavior gap in the ethical consumption context is due to misrepresentation of scales and the social desirability bias emerging from methodological failures (Carrigan & Attala, 2001; Auger

& Devinney, 2007). Noisy and simple survey questions tend to “overstate intentions to a considerable extent” (Auger & Devinney, 2007: 361). Similarly, simple rating scales’ utilization, such as Likert-type scales, is criticized for misguiding the consumers. Authors also highlight that respondents’ social desirability bias towards researcher may cause an “incentive compatibility issue” which is the extent of survey structure’s allowance for respondents to reveal the truth about their behaviors, attitudes, and preferences. The second stream of research aims to explain *under what conditions* and *when* the attitude-behavior gap will occur with an aim of predicting the behaviors. In this line of thought, many researchers attempt to explain the phenomenon from different behavioral models which are inclusive but not limited to Ajzen’s (1991) theory of planned behavior (Chatzidakis, Hibbert & Smith, 2007), Westaby’s (2005) behavioral reasoning theory (Claudy et al., 2013), and Ajzen and Fishbein’s (1980) theory of reasoned action (Shaw & Shiu, 2003). Testing the models and suggesting different moderators, this research stream aims to predict the behaviors of ethically minded consumers and suggests managerial implications to prevent the attitude-behavior gap.

Although such reasons and models are mentioned to be partly explaining or predicting the attitude behavior gap (Claudy et al., 2013), a few studies to date brought novel perspectives to the domain to explain the phenomenon from a perspective of consumers’ reflections. Shaw et al. (2016) suggest that “caring about” is not always lead to “care-giving”, a concept that is suggested to be aligned with the attitude behavior gap. The authors’ locus of research is ethically minded consumers’ “articulation of their ethical consumption behaviors”. Authors’ approach is distant from the linear model of EDM

and closer to the recursive model (Devinney et al., 2010) mentioned in the preceding subsection as they give attention to the consumers' full-fledged emic level experiences in an interpretivist manner. Shaw et al. (2016) reveal that capacity to care cannot meet caring needs and the attitude-behavior gap can be considered as a "care deficit".

Similarly, Papaoikonomou et al. (2011) were the first authors who approached the topic not from the EDM perspectives and models but through an aim of identifying and understanding the consumer situations of a mismatch between attitudes and behaviors. The authors who study in the context of Spain brought attention to the potential external factors that trigger the attitude behavior gap by stating that the main cause is "...not the lack of real demand for ethical products, but that the ethical market in Spain is still in an early phase of development." (Papaoikonomou et al., 2011: 87). The authors provide a comprehensive and holistic model to the attitude behavior gap literature as can be seen in Figure 4.

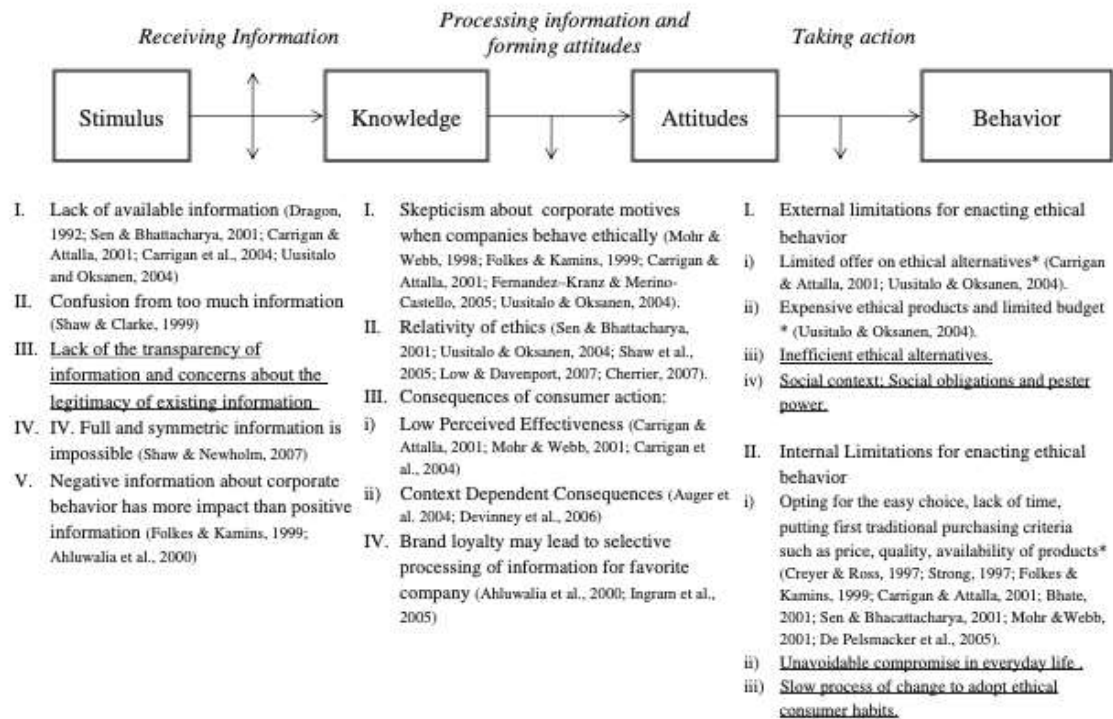


Figure 4: Holistic model of the attitude behavior gap
Adapted from Papaioikonomou et al. (2011)

As emic level experiences of the attitude behavior gap were not exhaustively researched, ML experiences of ethically minded consumers can potentially yield explanatory paths. The attitude behavior gap and moral self-licensing are two separate concepts that are in the similar vein, but not yet connected in theory.

As the aim of this thesis is to explore how ethically minded consumers do moral self-licensing in the context of ethical consumption from the perspective of emic level experiences and justification-based accounts, the proceeding chapter will elaborate the methodological choices and rationales.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The methodological frame of this thesis has its tenets from the neglected theoretical ground of ML. As mentioned earlier Merritt et al.'s (2010) review suggests that ML does not only occur via moral credits model, which the presence and the amount of initial moral deed liberate individual to follow an amoral deed -the balance in the moral bank account metaphor-, but also can occur via a moral credentials model, which the initial moral deed *changes the meaning* of the subsequent amoral deed in a form of “less of a transgression”. In the second model, “... the initial behavior provides a lens through which subsequent behavior is *interpreted* (emphasis added).” (Mullen & Monin, 2016: 367). While both models are suggested as independent pathways to licensing, research to date heavily focused on the moral credits model with an experimental approach but acquired contradicting results (Blanken et al. 2015; Simbrunner & Schlegelmilch, 2017; Urban et al., 2019; Rotella & Barclay, 2020). However, the earlier research suggested that ML can occur via consumer interpretation, which cannot be “measured” (Mullen & Monin, 2016). Unlike the dominant research stream on ML, this thesis aims to empirically shed light on independent pathways to licensing from an interpretive approach as changes in meaning and emic level interpretation are suggested to be a potential mode of ML.

Therefore, this research investigates the inconsistencies by ethically minded consumers in the context of ethical consumption at a level of consumers' lived experiences from an emic perspective of justification-based accounts (Blanken et al., 2015). The interpretive approaches are also considered as more prosperous paths when investigating the ethical consumer behaviors (Cherrier, 2005).

3.1. Data Collection

Semi structured existential-phenomenological interviews were conducted to deeply understand the experiences of ML in the ethical consumption context. The method is suggested as an appropriate tool to investigate ethics of consumption as the domain is revealed to be contextual, subjective, multiple, fragmented, and often paradoxical and this method aims to derive each respondent's subjective meanings of ethical consumption (Cherrier, 2005).

The unit of analysis of this research is individual consumers who are both self and socially identified ethically minded consumers. 17 informants were recruited with a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. The sampling procedure started with a purposive (judgement) sample (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Cherrier, 2005). First, three potential informants were identified and approached through social media platforms. Judgement of this recruitment was based on the individuals' social media posts about ethical consumption. Further informants were recruited through snowball sampling by asking initial informants whether they know any other ethically minded consumers who

would wish to participate to the research. While recruiting the informants, a great attention was given to provide socio-demographic diversity to prevent any bias as can be seen in Table 1 in the Findings chapter. Ten of the participants are female and seven of them are male. The ages of the informants vary between 18-51. The relatively affluent level of the sample -with high education levels- can be considered as a natural reflection of sociodemographic of the ethically minded consumers (Olson, McFerran, Morales & Dahl, 2016). Consent forms are signed by the informants to participate in the research and their anonymity is provided by giving them pseudonyms after the data collection phase of the research.

All informants were interviewed via video conferencing software (Zoom) because most of the data collection phase of the thesis took place during the COVID-19 pandemic between years of 2020 and 2022. This choice was a mutual preference between the researcher and participants in all cases. Online interviewing is suggested to be an effective approach on data collection in the sense that it provides a venue to reach a variety of participants whom otherwise would be hard to reach due to reasons such as location and/or time zone related differences (Gruber, Szmigin, Reppel & Voss, 2008). The interviews were recorded in audio and video with the permission and consent of participants and verbatim transcripts were written. The duration of interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 95 minutes.

First eleven of the interviews started with indirect questions in the form of opinion exploring questions about the ethically minded consumers to prevent potential social

desirability bias of informants (Fisher, 1993). Following questions was directed from a general to specific approach starting from a grand tour of participants' general ethical consumption tendencies, practices, and experiences to the inconsistencies. To facilitate the conversation, five market segments were specifically asked about: Groceries, fashion, technology, services, and disposal of products.

After eleven interviews, a projective method was integrated in the remaining six of the interviews to prevent social desirability bias further and to gather more thick descriptions around meanings of ethical consumption. Projective techniques are successful methodological facilitators if the subject matter and the topic are sensitive and have potential to raise socially desirable yet inaccurate answers (Rook, 2007). As consumers reveal their apprehension of morality through consumption, ethical consumption context is considered as a sensitive topic (Belk et al., 2005). The story completion projective method is suggested to unearth individuals' meaning making (Gravett, 2019). Moreover, compared to other modes of projective techniques such as word association or picture drawing, story based projective methods are suggested to offer deeper level of descriptions by the amount of information they generate (Rook, 2007).

Four different hypothetical stories of inconsistent ethical consumer behavior by ethically minded consumers were verbally presented, one at a time, to the participants at the very beginning of the interview -even before they share any type of personal information or experiences- to elicit the nature of the ethical consumption inconsistencies in a reflected

and desirability-bias-free manner. Brief story stems were based on different inconsistency situations of ethical consumption by a variety of individuals to provide a balance of meaningful content and enough scope to reflect upon (Clarke, Hayfield, Moller & Tischner, 2017). The story stems were inspired by the inconsistency situations in the previous set of interviews and the observations of the researcher. Each of the four stories included fictional characters and a moral dilemma which includes established good deeds and an inconsistent bad deed. Manipulations of the stories included the type of the ethical consumption, the gender of the fictional character in the scenario, and the depth of details for the earlier good deed. These manipulations were important to prevent context specific and gender bias (Gravett, 2019) and to critically approach to the earlier good deed and its extent, aligned with the aim of the thesis. Participants were informed that there is no right or wrong answer to complete the story and will be expected to reflect their thoughts upon the fictional character's moral dilemma and his/her thoughts during this inconsistency (Gravett, 2019). Stories were peer checked before presenting to check their relativity to the subject matter of the research.

In addition to those, as a supplement method of data collection, consumer journal method was utilized to overcome memory related deficits and to provide data triangulation. After a set of interviews, it was observed that consumers were having troubles about their near past inconsistent ethical consumption behaviors. All participants were asked for their willingness to involve in a digital voice record based journal keeping through a popular instant messaging app (WhatsApp). They were asked to send instant voice messages when they face an ethical dilemma in their ethical

consumption patterns and act inconsistently. This method can be considered as a merge of two methods: diary research (Patterson, 2005) and giving natives recorders (Sunderland & Denny, 2002) which are used in consumer research for naturalistic inquiry. While nine of the informants agreed to attend, only three of them sent voice messages about their inconsistent ethical consumption experiences. Even though the data gathered from this method was not rich, it was a sufficient complementary supplement.

All in all, 420 pages of verbatim transcripts from 19 hour and 13 minutes of recording were gathered. Additionally, five minutes and 26 seconds of data from the voice journals with two pages of transcripts were established as supplementary data.

3.2. Data Analysis

As mentioned earlier, some research in ML research stream suggested that individuals can change the meaning of subsequent behavior in their moral preferences to liberate their transgression via different qualitative experiences (Merritt et al., 2010; Mullen & Monin, 2016). The potential of changes in the meaning and presence of individual level interpretations in ML provided the tenets for a methodological choice of hermeneutic analysis.

Hermeneutic analysis is employed to assess “the meanings that consumers ascribe to their consumer experience.” (Thompson, 1997: 438). The prime locus of the approach, therefore, is the consumption experiences as narratives. A hermeneutic approach is suitable for complexities in the market as it does not focus on monolithic patterns in the

social world but on personalized cultural frames of references (Thompson, 1997). The aim of such analysis is not to reach “fact like statements” or “causal explanations” but to reach reflective insights about collective community (Arnold & Fischer, 1994).

To reveal how consumers license themselves in the ethical consumption context with an aim of exploring alternative pathways of ML, two stages of hermeneutic analysis were conducted iteratively: (I) intratext cycle, to gain a sense of the whole by studying every case separately, and (II) intertextual cycle, to gain a sense of part-to-the-whole by looking across cases together. This multiple reading of texts is suggested for a holistic understanding that is shaped over time (Thompson, 1997; Arnold & Fischer, 1994).

Five key aspects of consumer narratives were coded throughout the transcripts: (I) plot lines, (II) symbolic parallels, (III) intertextual relationships, (IV) existential themes, and (V) cultural codes (Thompson, 1997). Plot lines consisted of consistent and inconsistent ethical consumer behaviors of the participants. All ethical consumer behaviors were initially coded via typology of ethical consumption by Harrison et al. (2005) (see Appendix 2) as the typology is an overarching and comprehensive model of ethical consumption behaviors. Symbolic parallels were coded as things, meanings, practices of inconsistent ethical consumption behaviors with an important question at the core: Are they assessed as moral (good), immoral (bad), or morally ambiguated? During intertextual relationship and existential theme coding, personal history narratives and self-identity conceptions were highlighted. Finally, cultural codes were depicted upon shared socio-historic meanings in the form of metaphors and common viewpoints.

Trustworthiness of the analysis was provided by peer checking in the forms of triangulation across researchers and debriefings by peers on several occasions and steps of research (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). Additionally, a reflexive journal was kept by the researcher throughout the research with an aim of clarifying the situatedness of the researcher (i.e., “researcher as an instrument” notion by Arnold and Fischer (1994)) in the light of Gould’s (2007) suggested metacognitive poststructuralist exercises on introspection.

After an iterative and exhaustive intratext and intertextual analysis, in the third step of hermeneutic analysis, (III) contextualization of the conceptual framework, the moral meanings raised during inconsistencies lead to conceptualization of different ML models beside the moral credits and moral credentials model. The following chapter will depict on these findings in the form of alternative models of moral self-licensing.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The findings of this thesis extend the theory of moral self-licensing (Monin & Miller, 2001; Merritt et al. 2010; Mullen & Monin, 2016) by demonstrating alternative models of ML beside heavily studied moral credits model and theoretically suggested but not empirically revealed moral credentials model.

First of all, while most of the empirical studies on ML effect have been studied upon encapsulated comparisons of a good (moral) and a bad (immoral) choice – which raised criticisms earlier (Mullen & Monin, 2016)-, this research studies wholesome consumption experiences of ethically minded consumers from their narratives and accounts to reveal broader links beyond the good and the bad. This approach still kept the ML's tenets of *moral*, *self*, and *licensed* (Effron & Conway, 2015) during data analysis. The findings reveal that when approached from a broader lens of the totality of ethical consumption experiences, consumers do moral self-licensing in different ways. Most importantly, the amount and mere presence of the past good deeds or the past track record to shed light on prospect meaning are shown to be overemphasized tenets of ML, embraced by earlier empirical studies. Consumers can derive liberation during a state of a decision-making between a moral and morally ambiguous option from the meaning of

the good deed, practice of the bad deed, perceived social position, and perceived impact in the broader systems.

The alternative models of ML can also provide an empirical lens to better understand the dynamics behind the ethical consumption (Harrison et al., 2005; Belk et al., 2005; Newholm & Shaw, 2007; Devinney et al., 2010; Papaoikonomou & Alarcon, 2017; Carrington et al., 2021) in general and the attitude behavior gap in ethical consumption (Carrigan & Attala, 2001; Auger & Devinney, 2007; Carrington et al., 2010; Papaoikonomou et al., 2011, Claudy et al., 2013; Shaw et al., 2016) in particular as the models lay out the specific, underexplored yet common moments of “reasons against” ethical consumption by ethically minded consumers (Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013).

While the informants of the research were all ethically minded consumers, their considerations varied in contexts (See Table 1). Their ethical consumption behaviors were coded throughout the verbatim transcripts in the light of Harrison et al.’s (2005) typology as it is one of the most comprehensive yet parsimonious typology of ethical consumption practices.

Table 1: Profile of consumers

Pseudonym	Age/Sex	Profession	Education	Duration	Ethical Consumption Practices
Zoe	31/F	Midwife/Nurse	Bachelor	1 h 12 min	Relationship Purchasing, Anticonsumption/Sustainable consumption, Label screening
İsma	29/F	Engineer	Masters	1 h 20 min	Relationship Purchasing, Anticonsumption/Sustainable consumption, Boycotting
Terry	26/M	Data Analyst	Bachelor	1 h 30 min	Label screening, Boycotting/Buycotting
Aisha	32/F	Engineer	Masters	1 h 04 min	Relationship Purchasing, Anticonsumption/Sustainable consumption, Boycotting/Buycotting
Kara	30/F	Accountant	Bachelor	1 h 33 min	Anticonsumption/Sustainable consumption
Elliot	34/M	Engineer	Bachelor	45 min	Relationship purchasing, Anticonsumption/Sustainable consumption
Salih	40/M	Teacher	Bachelor	40 min	Anticonsumption/Sustainable consumption
Nadia	51/F	Retired	Bachelor	1 h 20 min	Relationship purchasing, Boycotting
Biyu	18/F	Student	High School	1 h 15 min	Relationship purchasing, Anticonsumption/Sustainable consumption
Nina	31/F	Editor and Influencer	Masters	1 h 10 min	Anticonsumption/Sustainable consumption, Boycotting/Buycotting, Label Screening
Ozan	48/M	Journalist	Bachelor	1 h 07 min	Relationship Purchasing, Anticonsumption/Sustainable consumption, Boycotting/Buycotting
Nour	18/F	Student	High School	52 min	Anticonsumption/Sustainable consumption
Marry	34/F	Cosmetic producer	Bachelor	1 h 03 min	Relationship Purchasing, Anticonsumption/Sustainable consumption
Barack	33/M	Farmer	Bachelor	1 h 18 min	Relationship Purchasing, Anticonsumption/Sustainable consumption
Steph	30/M	Engineer	Bachelor	1 h 14 min	Relationship Purchasing, Anticonsumption/Sustainable consumption, Boycotting
Mona	31/F	Sales Manager	Bachelor	1 h	Anticonsumption/Sustainable Consumption
John	32/M	Engineer	Bachelor	50 min	Anticonsumption/Sustainable Consumption, Boycotting

After a thorough and iterative hermeneutic analysis of verbatim transcriptions of the interviews, projective story completions, and supplementary voice journals on ethical consumption experiences, with a main locus of analysis on the accounts on inconsistencies, four alternative models of moral self-licensing to credits and credentials models emerged which occur via (1) reversed moral credentials -by changing the meaning of the former good deed-, (2) moral supplement -by re-practicing the bad deed-, (3) moral societal position -by repositioning the self or the other-, and (4) moral systemic position -by temporarily surrendering to the system-.

This research explores the alternative models of ML from a qualitative approach that cover the totality of consumption experiences instead of focusing on a capsulated consecutive moment of a moral inconsistency. By doing so, the alternative models of ML are revealed to be embedded in consumers' wholistic and lifelong consumption experiences. While this approach might seem similar to moral credentials model's "past track record" focus emphasizing for a meaning change, the locus of these models is more wholistically interpreted, including interpretations about practice, societal position, and systemic position.

These alternative models distinguish from both credits and credentials models of ML to a variety of extents. By definition, these alternative models involve a comparison and relevance of *moral* and less-moral actions, a *self* from the informant's own actions and narratives, and forms of *licensing* by liberation to follow the less-moral path (Effron & Conway, 2015), which are not by moral credit balancing of consecutive behaviors or by

changing the meaning of the bad deed. The liberation of self to a less moral consumption practices – the term “bad deed” will be utilized from here on for less moral and morally dubious behaviors- are derived from the self-interpretations of the totality of consumption experiences, observation of the consumer society, and observation of the systems.

As the analysis set a critical lens to the overemphasizing of past good deeds or changed meanings of the bad deeds as sources for licensing, the exclusion criteria for the analysis needs to be elaborated to clarify the tenets of the alternative models.

Firstly, moral credits model of balancing, the moral bank account or moral capital, were observed in several parts throughout the transcripts. An example of ML by moral credits model can be Zoe’s, 31, example. Zoe is a midwife with relationship purchasing, anticonsumption and sustainable consumption behaviors such as not consuming cosmetics and detergents with inorganic chemicals to protect the fresh water sources. Even though it is very unlikely of her moral consumption attitudes and behaviors, she highlights that she plans on buying a car soon:

I have been sensitive about the environment since I was a child. But thinking about using mass transportation under these conditions (refers to Covid 19 pandemic) ... Yes, I don’t have a car right now since I am still paying for the house credit. But if I could afford, honestly speaking, I will buy a car. I will cause environmental harm, too. So, this is a confession. (...) I did not do anything for myself until now, which is related to my psychological stuff. Always self-sacrificing by caring about my mother, this, and that... Now, I am thinking I shall do something for myself.

Zoe is very well aware of her moral inconsistency by being a part of the individual transportation and the environmental harm caused by this behavior. Yet, she reminds herself how she has been a caring person for all her life which she defines as “self-sacrifice”. She credits herself for being a self-sacrificing child and being good so far. A moral credits model of ML is defined as “(...) individuals accumulate credits in a metaphorical moral bank account and later use them to buy out of positive behavior or offset negative behavior, retaining an overall positive balance on their moral ledger despite clear withdrawals” (Mullen & Monin, 2016). Zoe’s account showcases a perceived clear withdrawal and a motivation to balance moral behaviors. The subsequent bad deed still means bad. But Zoe believes she deserved it by the right of her earlier good deeds. The alternative models in this research differ from the moral credits model with its amount balancing in the moral bank metaphor. In the alternative models, consumers do not utilize the amount or mere presence of established good deeds directly while licensing themselves towards a bad behavior.

Secondly, the model of moral credentials was also captured in many parts of the thick descriptions of consumers’ accounts. The model of moral credentials suggests that individuals change the meaning of the bad deed and decontextualize it to feel less guilt (Merritt et al., 2010; Mullen & Monin, 2016). In this model, bad deed is perceived as not a transgression at all as it is disambiguated. As an example, Terry, 29, cares about animals and uses cosmetics that are not tested on animals. He is even considerate when disposing his razorblades, so he is covering them with other materials to prevent cats

nearby trash to reach and cut their mouth. When asked about his motivations of such ethical consumption behaviors, he answers:

Terry: I would do something to someone if I allow them to do the same thing on me. I would not do something to someone if I don't allow them to do the same thing on me. So, I am an animal and I have no difference from them (referring to animals). Just because my frontal lobe is more developed... I mean, those animals... Why wouldn't people test it on me and test on them (referring to animals)? (He gets tense.) Since I cannot find an answer to that question, I see animals and myself in the same category. Plus, I can imagine the conditions of such testing procedures. This is my main motivation (referring to product choices): Animal abuse in consumption. I mean, as I said, I wouldn't want a cat facing an action which I would not want it to be executed on me. Now, you will probably ask about meat consumption, right?

Interviewer: Yes, that will be my next question and I would like to listen to your answer. (Both laugh)

Terry: I rationalize it. Because there is food chain. I rationalize it and think 'Hmm, there is a food chain. If I were not to be a homo sapiens and was a lion or dog, I would probably be eating mice. I think, this is different.'

When he is asked about how this way of thinking functions in his thoughts:

Yes, it comforts me. It comforts me by this causality and my mind says: 'Terry if you were to be in nature, you would hold this animal between your teeth and tear it apart to eat. Now at least you are eating it properly, in a cool way.'

Terry decontextualizes eating meat from animal cruelty in consumption. Although he is consistent about associating himself as an animal in the cases of using cosmetics tested on animals and actually consuming them, he comforts himself as he decontextualizes eating meat as humane and "in a cool way" by forks and knives and on the table. As he considers eating meat is "different" than using animal tested cosmetics, this account of Terry provides an example for moral credentials model of ML.

As the moral credits and moral credentials models of ML are clarified through examples, the alternative models can be better conceptualized. The inclusion criteria for alternative models were mainly based on moral relevancy and comparability derived from one's totality of consumption experience including purchasing, using, disposing, observing systems and so on. The moral, self, and licensing elements of the phenomenon (Efron & Conway, 2015) were tracked within accounts to operationalize the concepts. Table 2 depicts the differences of the existing and alternative ML models for orienting readers towards the findings. In the following sections, alternative models of ML will be elaborated.

Table 2: Models of Moral self-Licensing

Models of Moral self-licensing	Definition	How?	Linguistic	Focus of individual	Good Deed Meaning	Source of Liberation	Bad Deed Meaning
Moral Credits	"Individuals accumulate credits in a metaphorical moral bank account and later use them to buy out of positive behavior or offset negative behavior, retaining an overall positive balance on their moral ledger despite clear withdrawals." (Mullen and Monin, 2016)	By balancing between good and bad deeds Calculative, Equilibrium Seeking	I deserved it. I have already done moral XYZ.	Good deed's presence and amount	Good	The presence of the good deed	Bad
Moral Credentials	"Performing an initial moral act does not mean that one has earned the right to perform an immoral act with impunity, but instead that subsequent behavior is less likely to be interpreted as immoral" (Mullen and Monin, 2016)	By reinterpreting the meaning of the bad deed Interpretivist, experiential	It is not the same. It is different.	Bad deed's meaning	Good	Bad deed's meanings (interpreted by the one's past track record)	Ambiguous
Reversed Moral Credentials	Performing an initial moral act does not mean that one has earned the right to perform an immoral act with impunity, but instead that former behavior is less likely to be interpreted as moral.	By reinterpreting the meaning of the good deed Interpretivist, experiential	It is no different. It is also the same.	Good deed's meaning	Ambiguous, but similar to bad	Good deed's meanings (interpreted by the one's totality of consumption experience)	Bad
Moral Supplement	Performing an initial moral act or reinterpreting the meaning of the good and the bad deed does not mean that one has earned the right to perform an immoral act with impunity, but instead of that subsequent behavior is repracticed to decrease the impact of the bad deed.	By changing the practice of the bad deed Contextual, calculative, practical	Instead, I do as follows... At least, I can do...	Bad deed's practice	Good	Negative impact decrease	Bad
Moral Societal Position	Performing an initial moral act or reinterpreting the meaning of the good and the bad deed does not mean that one has earned the right to perform an immoral act with impunity, but instead the relative and interpreted societal position of self or the others in community liberates towards a bad deed.	By highlighting or changing the self's or other's relative moral societal position Interpretivist, social, observational	Even her... But me... As everyone...	Moral identity of self and others	Good	Relative societal positions in relation to morality	Bad (but acceptable)
Moral Systemic Position	Performing an initial moral act or reinterpreting the meaning of the good and the bad deed does not mean that one has earned the right to perform an immoral act with impunity, but instead the relative and interpreted impact of a consumer in market system liberates towards a bad deed.	By highlighting the relative impact of an individual in consumer society/ market systems/ dominant social paradigm and temporarily surrendering to system. Interpretivist, critical, observational	A drop in the ocean Chasing rainbows Producers, regulators, global consumers do ...	Impact of: Individual Global consumer society Market Systems Dominant Social Paradigm	Good (but irrelevant)	Relative impact of an individual in relation to the broader systems' impact	Bad (but irrelevant and acceptable)

4.1. Reversed Moral Credentials: Reinterpreting the Meaning of the Former Good Deed(s)

The moral credentials model suggests that individuals can reinterpret the meaning of a bad deed to feel licensed as can be seen from the example above for the credentials model. This model suggests that this mode of ML happens through a construal lens shaped by the good initial behaviors.

However, in the model of reversed moral credentials by reinterpreting the meaning of the former good deed(s), a self-interrogation is performed by consumers on the former good deed's meaning for a liberation of an occasional bad deed. Even though informants follow certain ethical consumption patterns for some time while believing such behaviors have good impact for broader levels, they shift their focus during an inconsistency on the relevancy and differences of the good deed's meaning via a lens shaped by the bad deed. In this model, consumers reinterpret the former good deeds as ambiguous in the sense of their moral meaning. Reinterpretation occurs via similarizing good deed's meaning to bad deed's meaning for a licensed feeling to transgress. Unlike the meaning differentiation process of bad deed from the good deed (moral credentials model), a meaning similarization process of good deed to bad deed is utilized for moral self-licensing purposes in the reversed moral credentials model.

Nadia is a 51-year-old female who has ethical consumption behaviors such as boycotting brands exploiting worker rights, sustainable consumption practices such as recycling and not wasting food. Her most dominant ethical consumption behavior is relationship

purchasing from local stores. She highlights that her motivation of shopping from Agricultural Credit Cooperative Stores is “mainly to support local producers and to improve national economy”. Nadia also benefits the organic aspect of these products, states her trust to labels in these stores, and is aware of the good deed out of this ethical consumption behavior of hers:

I have been shopping from Agricultural Credit Cooperative stores lately. Even though it isn't written on products most of the time, they (referring to store owners) hang banners which say, 'organic vinegar' and 'no glucose'. (...) I can consume organic food for affordable prices. Some have 'organic' labels on it, too. (...) If they have such labels, then they must be conforming the standards. It is both healthier food and supportive of the local producers.

When commenting on her thoughts about the inconsistencies of her generally consistent ethical consumption behaviors, she mentions that she had bought some bottles of mainstream vinegars lately for pickling purposes from a mainstream grocery store, instead of purchasing locally produced organic products from Agricultural Credit Cooperative. While her main motivation for this inconsistency was mentioned to be balancing her budget, she continues:

(...) When I use normal vinegar, it will not harm my health as vegetables have a fermentation process in it. (...) Of course, when I go to farmers markets, I prefer our (local) produce but they might also have been using chemical fertilizer.

While her ethical consumption behavior of relationship purchasing from local stores has a meaning of healthy and trust to producers, during an inconsistency, she reflects an interrogation of these meanings. The good deed is approached with suspicion as the healthy and trust aspects are reconsidered in different ways. With the comfort in her

voice, her inconsistency is liberated by a rethinking of the good in the good deed and by mobilizing this meaning of good from a white to grey zone of morality.

A similar experience was visible in Mary's, 34, accounts. She mostly cares about relationship purchasing and sustainable consumption. As a loyal bicycle user, with considerations about ecological footprint, she admits that there are some deviancies of her ethical consumption behaviors with the personal transportation utilization. Even though she is aware of the environmental harm of a car ride, during such inconsistencies she thinks that:

Riding a bicycle also consumes a lot. (...) Instead of going to somewhere with bicycle for a month - which I eat four meals every day, take two times of shower every day, do extra laundry every day, wear the bicycle out during the trip-, riding a car to the same spot would have the same ecological footprint. As I tried every possible way, I feel comfortable, or I make myself feeling morally comfortable (...) 'What would I do if I did not do that (referring riding a car)? Is it more innocent (referring riding a bicycle)? No, okay, I did it, that's it.'

She is liberating her moral inconsistency by interrogating the moral meaning of the good deed she has been following generally. During such an inconsistency, the regular good deed is construed as not-that-good for the occasion as it is also "consuming a lot".

Riding a bicycle and driving a car are similarized and situated in a moral meaning of "not innocent". It is worth to note that she is aware of the comfort derived by this mode of approach to the inconsistency.

Finally, Isma, 29, mentions that she used to be obsessed with boycotting certain grocery stores which are associated with a political ideology she is opposed to. Now, she is less

strict about this moral route of hers and acknowledges that there are some inconsistencies. On what she thinks during such inconsistencies:

When I was living in the state's dormitory as a college student, I was shopping from Migros (a grocery store in Turkey) despite my low budget. I was quite obsessed with it. (...) Now, I think that every grocery provider has some associations to that ideology to an extent, so that they can sustain their businesses. They must be close to someone, too. (...) Even though we know these markets (referring to the ones she boycotts) associations, occasionally we shop from there. But for our once-in-a-3-weeks grocery shopping, we still use the Migros, Metro, or Carrefour (the stores which are not generally associated with the ideology she is opposed to).

In Isma's case, it is visible that the model of reinterpreting the meaning of the former good deed has become settled, almost normalized, throughout the time. Although she continues to follow her good deed of politically motivated relationship purchasing, her routine has altered by a liberation towards the transgression of purchasing from "bad" stores, too. It is worth noting down that Isma's case also demonstrates how the models of moral self-licensing potentially affect the totality of ethical consumption routine by acceleration and diffusion in time to withdraw the moral consumer from the ethical markets.

The reversed moral credentials model by reinterpreting the meaning of the former good deed is exemplified by the examples of similarizations from Nadia's locally produced organic vinegars to mainstream vinegars, Mary's bicycle to her car, and Isma's supported markets to corrupted markets. In this mode, liberation for a transgression comes from a reinterpretation of the good deed's meaning: Is the good deed even that good? This reinterpretation mobilizes the good meaning of the good deed to an ambiguous yet close to an immoral level which is the reversed version of moral

credentials model which reinterpretation takes place on the bad deed. In reversed moral credentials model, the meaning of the bad deed is not changed unlike moral credentials model, but the meaning of the good deed is questioned and altered. This model of ML gathers its foundations from a wholistic consumption experience which includes past consumption experiences, observations, and comparisons for the meanings of the good deeds and the bad deeds in the marketplace.

4.2. Moral Supplement: Re-Practicing the Bad Deed

In this model of ML, consumers get liberation for a transgression towards a bad deed by reconsidering and reapplying the practice of the bad deed in terms of amount, context, and execution. The bad deed is still assessed as bad in meaning, unlike credentials model, and earlier good deeds are not used for a credit balance to transgress, unlike credits model. The bad deed is practiced in less harmful amounts, in less harmful contexts, or in less harmful ways. This re-practicing of the bad deed does not change the earlier attributed meanings of the good and bad, but lesser of two-evils is chosen which liberates the consumers as they feel comfortable to an extent.

Biyu, 18, is a student and social media influencer on climate activism. According to her, fast fashion depletes environmental sources. Therefore, she is a strong proponent of secondhand consumption of fashion products. While she generally purchases her clothes from secondhand shops and online applications or wears her mother's clothes, when asked about her inconsistencies, she replies:

I wish I can do secondhand shopping on every occasion, but unfortunately no. But I can certainly say this: The malls are the last places that I will ever go. I don't like them at all. Instead of malls, I prefer the small boutiques run by female entrepreneurs. I put effort to visit such boutiques in the streets. (After naming some global outerwear brands) I know what happens at the hidden side of a matter with these brands. I would never shop from them. (...) I must have bought that dress to feel good, for myself and ego. I did not think about the world or environment, that's for sure.

Her latest purchase of a dress from such boutiques is not shaped by thinking about the earth, which she normally does. Yet, she bought this first-hand outerwear from a source of relationship purchasing, which is another context of ethical consumption behavior for her. This re-practicing by a contextual shift made her comfortable to an extent.

“Instead” can be an important word to determine this model of ML as it was also observable in other examples.

Isma, 29, has another inconsistency in her sustainable consumption routine. She does not do shopping very often, and wears donated secondhand clothes, yet she bought an extra morning rope lately. Unfortunately, she had lost her mother during Covid-19 pandemic, which became a fact related to her moral self-licensing. Her account for the inconsistency:

I rarely transgress of preferring national products. But you know the morning ropes, the polar fleece ones? I bought a third one since I can wear it interchangeably and they keep me warm. Yes, voluntary simplicity... Yes, I should consume less. But I love them, and it is an alternative. I purchased it while thinking about that I can keep the one my mother gave me as an heirloom, so that it would become a remembrance of her, and I can wear the other two interchangeably. Even though this behavior of mine is not a voluntary simplicity action...

During her inconsistency of purchasing extra clothing, she liberates herself by planning on doing another good deed in another moral context for the future. She makes plans on a re-practicing of her excessive -according to her- consumption: She will keep the heirloom as a remembrance instead of using that. The practice of the bad deed changes from consuming to keeping it for a good reason. The liberation comes from a contextually better practice of a bad deed that is yet to be executed.

Zoe, 31, is also aware of the fast fashion's impact on environment and society, but states inconsistencies about shopping for clothes from global brands:

Yes, when it comes to textiles, I might be doing that (referring inconsistent ethical consumption behavior). Such brands (referring to a global corporate fashion brand) are known to be exploiting workers. I am thinking about it during my purchase, unfortunately. (...) Specifically, I try to recycle my clothes. For example, if there is a piece of clothing that I have been wearing a couple of years and it is still in good condition, but I don't want to wear it anymore, I give this to a person in need and get a new one for myself. That kind of a recycle... Or for the packages of the food, as much as possible... But I know that recycling is also costly for environment to an extent, too. What really matters is consuming less. Yet, I specifically am considerate about it (referring recycling).

During another part of the interview, she remembers this case and continues:

The case of outerwear consumption... My body size is quite stabile. I have clothes which I have been wearing for 3-5 years and they are still in good condition. By giving them away to others, the ones in need... I gave many clothes this year. People come here from other cities of Turkey as seasonal farm workers. I gave them 3-4 big bags of shoes, clothing, and linens. I do such recycling and morally relieve.

Zoe is aware that shopping from some corporate global brands is an opposite of her moral concerns. Yet, as she felt tempted to buy the clothes she likes, she gets liberation from her routine of donating the former clothes, which she defines as recycling. She

focuses her attention to the moral side of giving away clothes to the ones in need. Zoe changes her behavior of consuming less and shopping from local stores with the practice of donation during an inconsistency. The liberation comes from a re-practice which is less harmfully executed. Instead of consuming more clothes, she donates some to generate less bad environmental and societal impact.

Ozan, 48, has many different and generally consistent ethical consumption behaviors such as relationship purchasing, anticonsumption, sustainable consumption, and boycotting. He highlights his inconsistency about eating meat even though he is a consistent consumer of animal welfare products. While he still considers eating meat as morally bad, he feels comfortable by eating less than before:

I can say that I lessened my meat consumption in the last few years. The climate related concerns are the biggest factors, of course (...) I know what I do is not %100 moral (referring eating meat). I don't suggest people that 'You should not eat meat!'. On the contrary, I advise them to lessen their meat consumption. I believe eating meat in minimum amounts as much as possible is the right thing to do but I could not give up on it totally.

Ozan is aware of the effects of eating meat to the environment. Yet, he prefers to lessen impact by re-practicing the amounts he consumes. He believes that an alteration in the amount of this bad deed is morally acceptable. The liberation comes from changing the practice of bad deed to lesser amounts. Consuming meat is still considered as bad, and earlier good deeds did not provide a right to consume meat, but re-practicing of the bad deed is morally acceptable enough.

Nina, 30, is an editor of a magazine and a social media influencer whose main ethical consumption focus is minimizing the impact. In her journey towards zero waste, she came to a point of realization that zero waste is not possible. Therefore, in her many ethical consumption practices, she aims minimizing her social and environmental impact. She remembers an inconsistency of hers for buying an extra pair of clothing from a mall which she almost never enters. Nina stated disguise earlier for malls and their stores. But when her mother-in-law insisted on visiting, she entered to a mall after a long time and bought some crop tops which she defines as not a necessity:

Nina: During my purchase of that crop top, I thought that ‘I will wear it, I will get the best out of it. I have no idea how it was produced, yes. I know it is a local producer, but I don’t know the details. (...) Yes, I like it and it is just for me. I will wear it a lot. I am sure, I will wear it a lot.’ Then, I bought it.

Interviewer: Did you wear it a lot?

Nina: A lot! (With emphasize)

Nina is aware that she is transgressing her ethical consumption behavior by that purchase. Yet, as she really likes the outerwear and want to buy that, she reconciles and self-promises in her mind to wear it for a long time, which is another of ethical consumption by durable consumption. She is liberating herself by a self-promise of re-practicing, which is wearing it for a long time, and lessening the impact and this liberation belongs to the near future.

Finally, Kara, 30, has quite strong relationship purchasing, boycotting/boycotting, anticonsumption and sustainable consumption motives. She especially cares about protecting fresh water sources and she does not use inorganic chemicals at her own

home. Kara states that she “has to” use regular dishwashing soap while staying with her family, as she cannot convince them to use alternative practices:

Interviewer: How does it make you feel to utilize chemicals while dish washing in your parents’ house?

Kara: Honestly, it is so hurtful, thinking about it (referring to dishwashing soap) diffusing into fresh water. But on the other hand, I am thinking that I wash my hand with this water (referring to the water she uses during dishwashing) and spare it for flushing purposes (she collects the wastewater in a plastic container for flushing purposes) and so on.

Kara is still aware of the environmental harm by utilizing mainstream dishwashing soaps. Yet, she plans on utilizing the wastewater on another water consumption context: toilet flushing. She re-uses the wastewater at least one more time for flushing purposes by collecting it in a container instead of letting it to be a waste in the first place. The liberation comes from a change of practice towards a less harmful way of consumption.

In the alternative model of moral supplement, ML happens through supplementing the practices of bad deed by morally acceptable re-practices of the bad deed. These supplementary re-practices may include lessening the amount of bad consumption, changing the context of bad consumption for a morally acceptable context, or re-using the outcome of the bad deed to lessen the impact. While earlier good deeds do not secure moral credits towards a transgression or the meanings of the good and bad deed are not reinterpreted, a practice level change towards a plan C licenses consumers. One distinguishing attribute of this model is that moral supplement can be temporarily elastic. Re-practice of the bad deed, which is the moral part of the ML in this mode, can take place immediately or in the near future.

4.3. Moral Societal Position: Repositioning the Self or the Other

Consumers may derive liberation to follow a bad deed from their perceived societal position which they interpret from their wholistic consumption experiences including past track records, sense of self, and observations about other consumers. In this model of ML, consumers relate to or differentiate themselves from some portions of society with regards to ethical consumption behaviors. Often, such licensing depends on a perceived societal position derived from a track record of what they have been doing, observations of what other consumers around them are doing, and the comparison of the two in the ethical consumptionscapes. In a comparison of their interpreted societal position by ethically consuming and others', they can feel licensed to transgress by repositioning of the self or the other. Because they feel differentiated by a sense of self derived from the earlier good deeds, they reposition themselves among the society in a regular position during an inconsistent ethical consumption behavior. Sometimes, consumers' superiorization of another person -e.g., even the one with an impeccable ethical record can transgress- can be utilized for liberation purposes. In this mode, ML occurs via intellectual and careful interpretation of comparative societal positions from ethical track records, and not solely from the amount of the good deed as the moral credits model suggested or from a meaning focused past track record as the moral credentials model suggested.

Kara, 30, uses handmade soaps instead of shampoos and lessens her water consumption in general as mentioned earlier. Broadly, she tries to consume everything as little as

possible in her voluntarily simplistic lifestyle. But she highlights her inconsistency about toilet paper consumption:

I try to use it as little as possible (referring to the toilet paper). There is one influencer girl in Instagram whom I have been following. She was saying ‘Toilet paper consumption is a hot button for me.’ (...) She is so considerate and careful about many things as she composts, shops from local stores, and so on. But there is not solution to toilet paper, she says. Even she cannot do without it. So, one cannot do it. (...) A person who is ethical in every aspect but still consumes toilet paper... She literally follows every moral topic; you can observe her life and what she does. But when it comes to toilet paper, she cannot find a solution.

Kara relieves her struggle about consuming toilet papers by reminding herself a social media influencer’s consumption experience. By stating “even her”, she repositions the influencer -the other- in a superior layer over a group of ethical consumers in particular. This relocation does not change the meaning of the bad or the good, nor directly comes from the amount of calculated good deed. It comes from observations about a person’s sense of self and others in the ethical consumptionscapes. This observation and repositioning liberate her to follow a bad deed by providing her some comfort: “Even she does it.”

Biyu, 18, with high considerations about climate change and diverse ethical consumption behaviors highlights her general attitude about ethical consumption and her inconsistencies about recycling at the beginning of the interview:

Actually, people, who care and think about ethical stuff, like me eat such food (referring to organic and pesticide-free food). I read and do my research a lot. I don’t think a regular Turkish citizen does such readings and thinking. It takes effort. (On her attitude about ethical consumption and consuming “clean” food)

Sometimes I feel really demotivated. There is this psychological mood, which everyone faces, not just me: ‘What would change if I threw this trash here just for once? Everyone is throwing their trash around already.’ (On her inconsistencies)

In Biyu’s case, she positions herself and other ethically minded consumers to a superior position above the rest of the community while expressing her ethical consumption attitudes. Yet, during an inconsistency, she repositions herself from the former superior position to the regular one: She is a part of “everyone”. During a good deed, she is superior. Yet, during a moral transgression, she liberates herself by associating herself to the regular community around her.

Scenario three (See Appendix 1) generated similar answers with a repositioning of self and the other of ML. Ozan, 48, reflects upon scenario three:

Ozan: I don’t think a considerate person would be comfortable of such an action (referring to climate activist Furkan’s action of throwing the bottle to a regular trash bin). But as I said earlier, he probably had to and he will probably make up for it in the future, so he did not feel bad, I assume.

Interviewer: So, do you mean that he must have thought about making up for it?

Ozan: With all the things he has done, if he lives as you described, he is already beyond most of the people.

A careful reading of this projection reveals that Ozan considers the hypothetical inconsistency of Furkan as less bad and morally acceptable since he is assessed to be morally beyond most of the people. Ozan repositions Furkan from “most of the people” level to a superior social position and liberates his behavior. Liberation does not come from the amount of the good deeds Furkan have done but is derived from the

interpretation of his societal position in the community shaped by his earlier good deeds in total.

Similarly, Mary, 34, projects her thoughts to scenario three as follows:

He must have thought that the plastic bottle's environmental harm can be compensated by the climate activism he did in the morning and comforted himself. 'I did something more beneficial for the earth. What would happen if I drank one plastic bottled water? I am so thirsty. I need to exist, too. My sustainability is almost as important as the environment's sustainability. If I don't exist, who would do these activisms?'. I think he thought of this.

Mary's account is quite unique among most of the other examples. She projects her thoughts by mentioning a moral credits model in which the plastic bottle and climate activism balance the moral bank account. But she further demonstrates liberation by repositioning Furkan in a superior position among society. The superior position is shaped by the totality of his good deeds. Such tiered ML in this example by two models functioning highlights a potential of a hierarchy among different models. Some models of ML might be more liberating and strategically preferred under certain conditions and contexts.

All in all, moral societal position by repositioning the self or the other is an alternative model of ML which the liberation is derived from altering the perceived societal position gained by earlier good deeds among the community. If someone has established a moral stance in the consumptionscapes, she liberates herself to transgress by this superior position. Additionally, if someone transgressed towards a bad deed, she might liberate herself by similarizing herself to the regular community around her. Finally, liberation

can be derived from a superior other's societal position. Consumers' capability of societal level of observations founds the tenets of the model of ML.

4.4. Moral Systemic Position: Temporarily Surrendering to The System

In this model of ML, consumers liberate their transgressions by temporarily surrendering to the “system”. This liberation does not directly come from the number of good deeds they accomplished or meaning changes. It is derived from an observational comparison of the good deeds and the occasional bad deeds they conduct in relation to the ones of broader systems and other parties who/which are also responsible towards a better future. While moral societal position model of ML is dependent on consumers capability to observe, compare, and contrast themselves and the community around them, moral systemic position model of ML is dependent on same capabilities but towards the system with its structures and aggregated actors in it. Licensing consumers transgress by temporarily surrendering to the system by comparing their impact to the ones of producers, regulators, and worldwide consumer societies. Besides, in this model of ML, consumers assess their effort to do the good deeds or their inconsistent bad deeds as irrelevant in this broad system and they liberate themselves by the lack of control over changing for a better world which is derived from this assessment.

Barack, 33, is a farmer with strong dedication to conventional farming and protection of unprocessed local seeds. As a political scientist, he was often concerned about accessibility of organic food from unmodified seeds. Later in life, he and his friends dedicated themselves for finding and protecting such seeds and they travelled all around

the Turkey to start their “moral” farm. This search shaped his consumption, too, as he follows relationship purchasing, anticonsumption and sustainable consumption behaviors. He mentions that he never eats industrially produced meat, and almost never consumes refined sugar. He reflects a change of perspective lately while commenting on scenario three and mentions eating a packaged chocolate last night as the interview continues:

Barack: I lately developed a flexible perspective to most of the issues I was very strict about before.

Interviewer: What did change between your former and current attitude?

Barack: I relieved. There are a couple of reasons. Firstly, I lost my hope in comparison to my earlier phase. It is not just about settling to the suburbs. I have traveled around 25000-30000 kilometers in Turkey during my visits to producers, search for production methods, the ways and locations of production. Also, the more I care about ecology and environment, the more I tried to be considerate about the totality of things as I searched, read, watched, listened more. Then, I started to think that my efforts are futile. I still consider my individual effort as valuable, and I don’t give up of it, but I don’t torture myself anymore... (Shares some scientific knowledge and observations about the protection of soil and unmodified seeds) ... The system does not want you to keep and sustain these seeds. You shall buy seed; you shall buy fertilizer and pesticide. The system pushes you toward that.

On his inconsistency of eating packaged chocolate:

Barack: I craved for it. Then I took the chocolate. I thought ‘I am unpacking this plastic packaging; this packaging will probably stay in someplace on earth for 1000 years for my one minute of pleasure.’

Interviewer: Did you think so in that exact moment?

Barack: Yes, of course. I have been thinking the same thing for years and that’s why I don’t consume (referring packaged goods). But this issue is so aggregate and my one and only chocolate’s plastic package is not even a drop in the ocean while the industry operating roaringly with all the toxic materials, chemical usage, and the consumption of lots and lots of medicines or plastics on the other

parts of the world. Why would I torture myself for a chocolate's package, which is also nostalgic to me? I was born into this (referring to system). I accept it.

His observations and research about the production systems and worldwide consumption provide a base for him to be “not that strict” about ethical consumption behaviors in general and for the occasional packaged good in particular. He thinks about the systemic level of bad deeds and compare that to his “one and only” bad deed to liberate his inconsistent behavior. He feels “relieved” by temporarily surrendering to the system.

A similar reflection was from Ozan, 48, for the scenario three:

Furkan is doing his best. We can all have one plastic bottle of water occasionally. It really does not matter whether he trashed the bottle to a regular bin or recycle bin. His city and recycling system should be checked. (...) Such little behavioral mistakes are the least proportion of what causes the climate crisis. I think Furkan just remembered who are actually guilty (referring for the climate crisis) during this fault of his.

He associates himself to Furkan by starting the sentence by “We” in his reflection. He suggests that Furkan can do occasional faults. But these faults can only be defined as a fault within the local system for recycling and within the broad system of different shareholders. During an inconsistency, a comparison of the impact among different systemic actors utilized for liberation.

Nadia, 51, when asked about the breaking points of her ethical consumption behaviors:

(...) The consumers always loose. I always think about the next generations, young people, and kids. And I feel sorry for them. I mean, is there anything we can do for them? I don't know. Our efforts can be chasing rainbows. So as a

consumer, I might be chasing rainbows, only my rainbow. But if we look at the full picture, there is a broad society that is consumed by consumption.

Nadia portrays a general picture of her inconsistencies by highlighting the relative impact of an individual ethical consumer among a consumer society. She describes her breaking point by comparing her effort to a broader level of impact. Her efforts are assessed as irrelevant which is a way of thinking she liberates herself for a transgression.

Finally, Zoe, 31, reflects upon her inconsistencies on sustainable consumption practices in terms of recycling. Even though she consistently recycles household waste, she mentions that she occasionally put some waste into regular trash bins instead of recycling, especially when she is outside:

Zoe: Actually, municipalities are in short of in this matter. How much of the separated trash is actually being processed? There is a problem with this. I try my best to recycle a lot, but this is a domain which my inconsistencies take place mostly. ... (She gives details about how the recycling system is very different and successful in Germany) ... This is a situation beyond me. That's why I cannot fully do recycling.

Interviewer: Can you walk me through such inconsistencies?

Zoe: Geography is destiny! (Laughs) (...) We have been talking about this with my friends. Sometimes, our efforts feel like a drop in the ocean. While big corporations are polluting the environment enormously, my tiny thing here... It feels like a utopic behavior. I feel sad when I think about it. My individual behavior is not fulfilling for me. But on the other side of the world, big corporations or other masses of crowds do it much worse.

It can be seen in her accounts that her inconsistencies of recycling are perceived as dependent on municipalities, corporations, and other populations around the world.

Similar to the other accounts above, she liberates her bad deed by referring to the impact by broader level of actors who/which are also responsible towards a better future.

In the model of temporarily surrendering to the system, consumers derive their liberations from a comparison of their impact and systemic actors' impact, such as producers, regulators, and global consumer society. This comparison is enabled by their wholesome consumption experience including observing the system, assessing their own impacts, and the individual effort for scientific research. The alternative model of temporarily surrendering to the system has systems focus on it, unlike credits model of balancing and credentials model of meaning change. Consumers who utilize this model of ML are systemic actors with capabilities beyond balancing and interpreting meanings of the good and the bad. Experiential and research wise observations about the system allocate them to compare their good and bad behaviors to ones of other elements in the system, which eventually opens the path for liberation.

The alternative models of ML have been suggested and elaborated in this chapter: reversed moral credentials, moral supplement, moral societal position, and moral systemic position. These models are explained to be different than empirically revealed moral credits model and conceptually suggested moral credentials model. By giving attention to the earlier research calls on “qualitatively different experiences of individuals” (Mullen & Monin, 2016: 367) and “independent pathways to licensing that operate in different situations” (Merritt et al., 2010: 350), this thesis expands the ML research stream. In addition, the findings also inform the ethical consumption literature

in general and the attitude behavior gap literature in particular to an extent which will be discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In this chapter the findings of the thesis will be discussed in the light of the theoretical framework in the literature review chapter. First, the three contributions of the thesis will be elaborated and integrated to the literatures of moral self-licensing and the attitude behavior gap. Then managerial, policy, and societal level implications will be suggested. Finally, future research directions will be addressed before mentioning the limitations of the research.

5.1. Theoretical Contributions

While Monin and Miller (2001) has introduced the effect of moral self-licensing to the social psychology literature and Khan and Dhar (2006) to the marketing literature, the empirical studies to date heavily focused on the correlation between the presence of an earlier good deed and occurrence of a subsequent bad deed with. Concurrently, moral self-licensing studies could not reach beyond moral credits model with similar methodological choices and explanations except for the theoretical conceptualization of moral credentials model, which suggests a focus on “different qualitative psychological processes” (Mullen & Monin, 2016: 367). Similarly, although the topic provides a fruitful venue for this research in the context of ethical consumption with its ethical

decision-making processes at the forefront, empirical studies fulfilling this gap are mostly conducted lately and/or some showed contradicting results (Giebelhausen et al., 2021; Urban et al., 2019; Bauer & Menrad, 2020; Engel & Szech, 2020; Mazar & Zhong, 2010). Considering the heavily studied attitude behavior gap research stream under the domain of ethical consumption (Carrigan & Attala, 2001; Auger & Devinney, 2007; Carrington et al., 2010; Papaoikonomou et al., 2011; Claudy et al. 2013; Shaw et al., 2016), no studies until now have congregated moral self-licensing effect to attitude behavior gap phenomenon. Finally, the overall literature around the moral self-licensing effect fell short on the qualitative perspectives and on explaining *how* individuals/consumers do and experience moral self-licensing. The aim of the present thesis is filling these theoretical and empirical gaps by re-exploring the moral self-licensing effect in the ethical consumption context and challenging, strengthening, expanding the theory of moral self-licensing besides contributing to the discussions around the attitude behavior gap in ethical consumption.

The contributions of this thesis are threefold: (I) Moral self-licensing has different models which are shaped by individuals' totality of consumption experiences around the different layers of the market in the ethical consumption context, (II) moral self-licensing is not simply an unconscious cognitive bias, yet can be a conscious and deliberate strategy towards the internal and external tensions during moral dilemmas, and (III) the attitude behavior gap in ethical consumption may occur via moral self-licensing experiences of individuals.

This research utilizes less axiomatic yet more capacious conceptualizations of moral self-licensing effect and ethical consumption context. A moral dilemma, where a moral self-licensing effect is often situated, does not simply consist of an established good deed, the moment of dilemma, and the bad deed in the context of ethical consumption. There is a variety of ways for approaching to the morality from the consumers emic level perspectives: The good, the right, what a virtuous person would do, and what is worth to care about (Barnett et al., 2005; Van Staveren, 2007; Shaw et al., 2016). In addition, there are other concerns whether a moral behavior is to be executed individually or collectively, agentic or non-agentic manner and so on (Carrington et al., 2021). Even the ethical decision-making process is so complex that it is regarded as “black box” (Schwartz, 2016) with moral judgements, reasonings, emotions and intuitions (Rest, 1986; Jones, 1991; Haidt, 2001; Sonenshein, 2007). This thesis has been tried not to be refrained by these plural complexities and aim to unearth the “coherence of inconsistencies” (Moraes, Carrigan & Szmigin, 2012). In doing so, this thesis was able to unpack and problematize almost solidified empirical assumptions by the earlier studies of moral self-licensing and was able to situate new perspectives to the attitude behavior gap phenomenon in the ethical consumption context.

This research has revealed that moral self-licensing effect has different models which are shaped by individuals’ totality of consumption experiences, and not just by a moment of a moral dilemma dependent upon the mere presence of earlier good deed. While earlier studies of moral self-licensing situated the presence of established good deeds, in a consecutive and temporal manner, at the core of the moral self-licensing

effect to determine the effect size and moderators of the phenomenon (Monin & Miller, 2001; Khan & Dhar, 2006; Mazar & Zhong 2010; Blanken et al., 2015; Mullen & Monin, 2016; Simbrunner & Schlegelmilch, 2017) , this research utilized a broader perspective on lived ethical consumption experiences of consumers in general and lived ethical inconsistent consumption behaviors in particular.

This broadened lens provided the first and the main theoretical contribution of the thesis as it was revealed that moral self-licensing is beyond the dominant moral credits model and even beyond moral credentials model, which is still in empirical infancy. Firstly, reversed credentials model suggests that consumers may liberate themselves through reinterpreting the meaning of the preceding good deeds by comparing them to the meaning of the proceeding good deed and similarizing both. This mode is a reversed version of moral credentials model suggesting that past track record can recontextualize, disambiguate, and differentiate the bad deed from the good deed to depict it as not immoral (Merritt et al., 2010; Mullen & Monin, 2016). Second, the moral supplement model demonstrates that the practice of a bad deed can be internally negotiated and reconciled by consumers for a liberation towards a transgression. In this model, the meanings of the past good deed and prospect bad deed are not changed and the presence or the amount of past good deeds is not the liberating proxy of moral self-licensing. Yet, consumers' tendency to decrease the bad impact of the bad deed by applying different practical solutions creates liberation to an extent for transgression. Third, the model of moral societal position shows that aggregated good deeds may depict an individual or others around her/him for a perceived superior position in community and aggregated

bad deeds in that society can be utilized as a comparison step. In this form of moral self-licensing, past good deeds are relevant to the extent that they build a concept of self (Belk, 1988). Yet, the liberation actually comes from these societal stance and identities with regards to aggregated ethical consumption behaviors and not directly from the presence of the established good deeds. Finally, the moral systemic position model revealed that moral self-licensing can occur via the comfort raised by temporarily surrendering to the system, which is a feeling derived from a comparison of the impacts by the good and bad deeds of an individual to the impacts by the good and bad deeds of producers, regulators, global society, and so on. Consumers tend to feel licensed to transgress their ethical consumption routine when they feel that their impact for a better world by consuming ethically is limited, even restrained. Existence of an earlier good deed or any meaning change do not license them, yet intellectually observed individual level impact in compared to system level impact raises a feeling of surrendering, which gives them the license to transgress.

The alternative models of reversed moral credentials, moral supplement, moral societal position, and moral systemic position are all inclusive of “moral”, “self”, “licensed” tenets of moral self-licensing (Effron & Conway, 2015) with a focus of relativity and comparability between the good and the bad deed. Yet, via broad lens over wholistic consumption experiences and retrospective trajectory from ethically minded respondents, mere existence, the amount, and/or the meaning of the preceding good deed are depicted as less relevant in these alternative models suggested by this thesis. This finding suggests that presence and meaning of a good deed should not be considered as

the only proxies or determinants for moral self-licensing to occur. Moral dilemmas consumer face in their ethical consumption experience are not only heterogeneous and contextual (Cherrier, 2005; Carrington et al., 2021), but also temporarily elastic and interpretivist. The emergence of alternative models suggests that the overemphasizing of past good deed as a proxy measure for moral self-licensing in a strict temporal and sequential setting has only limited the research of moral self-licensing. Individuals, ethically minded consumers in the context of the research, may liberate themselves by re-interpretations, re-practices, observations, susceptions, and aggregated experiences during moral self-licensing.

To sum up the first contribution, consumers in the context of ethical consumption do not facilitate just the very last good deed they conduct to transgress towards a bad behavior. They derive their liberation from contextual meaning comparisons of moral and morally dubious behaviors, re-practice of bad deeds, observations about the self's and the others' moral societal stance, and accumulated knowledge about the dominant social paradigm which they live in. While earlier research on moral self-licensing focused on initial moral behavior as the proxy for licensing to happen (Khan & Dhar, 2006; Effron et al., 2009; Hui et al., 2009; Mazar & Zhong, 2010; Engel & Szech, 2020; Bauer & Menrad, 2020) this thesis suggests that initial moral behavior can be a proxy in some cases but not the only one. In alternative models of reversed moral credentials, moral supplement, moral societal position, and moral systemic position, initial moral behaviors are relevant to different extents as consumers utilize them to assess or compare moral meanings, practices, a social stance, and impact. Yet, the liberation which is the essence of moral

self-licensing may come from temporarily elastic, non-sequential, and contextual linkages consumers interpret in the light of their consumption experiences.

Second contribution of this research to the literature of moral self-licensing is that some forms of moral self-licensing are revealed to be not simply “cognitive bias” (Simbrunner & Schlegelmich, 2017) or “non-conscious” (Khan & Dhar, 2006). Some thick descriptions in the findings suggest that consumers are quite aware of the comfort derived from several models of moral self-licensing. Additionally, the comfort and liberation are not just internally negotiated but also discussed in social settings which leads a moral self-licensing discourse to be shaped.

In the example of Terry’s dilemma on caring about animal welfare but still eating meat, Terry was aware of the comfort derived from his way of thinking, which is analyzed to be as moral credentials model of moral self-licensing. In addition, Mary was quite aware of the relieve occurred from her comparison and meaning similarization of bicycle to car. Similarly, Zoe’s dilemma for shopping from global outerwear brands even though it is against her moral stance was licensed by the re-practice of donating which she later defined this situation as relieving. Finally, Ozan’s reflection on scenario three suggested that the climate activist person would not feel bad for his immoral consumption behavior as he must have compared his moral stance against the community. These examples depict that ethically minded consumers are not only aware of the moral dilemma they face but also aware of the relief and comfort derived from their modes of moral self-licensing.

Additionally, Zoe's another account on how she generally recycles her trash but there are certain inconsistencies with this behavior of hers, she mentioned that how she and her friends are talking about their ethical consumption efforts as "a drop in the ocean" which is coded as moral systemic position type of moral self-licensing. Such social interactions about the roots of moral self-licensing can potentially set a discourse and influence common types of moral self-licensing strategies to be dominant exit doors by ethically minded consumers from ethical markets. Because accounts can be shared, learned, and internalized (Orbuch, 1997). This thesis partly confirms the earlier studies which suggest that moral self-licensing can be conscious (Kivetz & Simonson, 2002; Lin, Ma & Johnson, 2016).

As this research focuses on inconsistencies of ethically minded consumers' experiences to reveal alternative models of moral self-licensing, a final contribution is to the ethical consumption literature in general and attitude behavior gap in particular. First of all, as some earlier studies suggested that past behaviors can be good predictors for consistency in ethical consumption behavior (Belk et al., 2005), moral self-licensing effect with its different alternative models suggests approaching to the established past behaviors as predictors with caution. The informants of this study are shown to be inconsistent in their ethical consumption behaviors even though they established many ethical consumption behaviors before. This finding would expand the literature of attitude behavior gap by highlighting that inconsistent ethical consumption behavior can occur via a behavior- behavior gap in the form of moral self-licensing. Secondly, this thesis confirms that the key interdisciplinary themes about consumer ethics in Carrington et

al.'s (2021) conceptualization (See Figure 1) can provide a fruitful venue to approach the gap since different moral self-licensing models in the research revealed that these polars are not just etic level conceptualizations but also embedded in emic explanations of the participants. For example, the model of systemic position depicted that consumers may license themselves in a comparison of individual level impact to a collective level impact or in a comparison of the agentic and non-agentic level. Similarly, through the models of reversed credentials, it was observable through changes in meanings that the consumer ethics are negotiated for being stable or variable. Finally, as mentioned earlier the attitude behavior gap literature is shaped around two camps of thoughts which explains why there is an attitude behavior gap and when the attitude behavior gap is more likely to happen or not (Carrigan & Attala, 2001; Auger & Devinney, 2007; Chatzidakis et al., 2007; Claudy et al., 2013; Shaw & Shiu, 2003) Yet, the findings of this thesis with a branch of moral self-licensing models provide significant insights to how the attitude behavior gap is experienced by the consumers and contribute to the experiential level of the attitude behavior gap explanation (Shaw et al., 2016; Papaioikonomou et al., 2011). As Shaw et al. (2016) suggest that the attitude behavior gap may occur due to a care deficit and Papaokinomou and Giniesis et al. (2011) suggest that the attitude behavior gap can be influenced by the ethical market's infancy, we suggest that the attitude behavior gap may also occur by consumers observations of systemic deficits. The moral self-licensing models in this study demonstrated that ethically minded consumers do not only care about and give care to their world in general but also are observant and interpretivist about the society, marketplace, and system they are living. Ethically minded consumers can occasionally go to the exit door

of the ethical markets by mimicking systemic faults as they would feel liberated. Yet, such occasions should be given importance as they can turn out to be permanent (i.e., Isma's market preference example in the findings) and may set dominant discourses as a reflection of coherent inconsistencies (Moraes et al., 2012) (i.e., feelings of a drop in the ocean or chasing rainbows in the findings). All in all, moral self-licensing effect is shown to be utilized as a liberating consumer level strategy towards the experience of attitude behavior gap and revealed that the gap can occur via systemic deficits.

Several notes on this final part of the third contribution are required. As ethically minded consumers' accounts of inconsistent ethical consumption behaviors revealed that, while moral self-licensing is not a mere unconscious act, so is the attitude behavior gap. Put plainly, ethically minded consumers of this research have often declared several comparisons about their presence in the moral markets, society, and system in general. Concurrently and obviously, their moral self-licensing experiences were not solely dependent on their internal tensions about assessing moral and immoral in consumption, but dependent on external tensions intellectually observed and reacted about the moral and immoral in the consumptionscapes. They were often challenged by the neoliberal mythology of shared responsibility (Carrington et al, 2016; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014) as can be specifically seen in the model of moral systemic position. External tensions potentially trigger the moral self-licensing effect and concurrently the occurrence of an attitude-behavior gap and behavior-behavior gap. Therefore, we agree with the earlier critics by Carrington, Zwick, and Neville (2016) who point out an approach to attitude-behavior gap from a sole behavioral perspective can bring a myopia and exploration of

the phenomenon can be futile with this restrained approach. As the moral self-licensing models conceptualized in this thesis suggest, inconsistent consumer behavior in market is not solely dependent upon established goods or construal level alterations but is also dependent upon consumers' positions in the dominant social paradigm. Consumers are observant and proactive about the external tensions in the marketplace while regulating their internal assessments.

5.2. Managerial, Policy, and Societal Level Implications

This research demonstrates valuable insights and offers implications for businesses, policy makers, and NGO's by further exploring the exit door of ethically minded consumers from the moral markets.

First of all, it was shown that not only the attitudes or intentions towards products or services of moral markets by individuals tend to be costly proxies, but established behaviors may also mislead when assessing the growth of the moral markets. Corporate social responsibility campaigns or ethical products/services may face with attitude-behavior gap and behavior-behavior gap in the form of moral self-licensing. Therefore, expected growth rates for the ethical services or products' sales should be approached as non-deterministic and with scrutiny due to moral self-licensing effect. In addition, as moral self-licensing with its different models is conceptualized as a not solely behavioral level deviancy but as under the influence of many external factors, businesses may render their marketing strategies in a more comprehensive approach. For example, the meanings of the product's moral aspect and the role of the company towards a better

world, which should be major than an individual consumer according to findings of the study, should be clearly and repeatedly communicated. But more importantly, meanings and responsibilities by businesses should be established rigidly or shown to be processing as well as possible because consumers are intellectually observant and may mimic any deviancy in production side on their consumption behaviors. Overall, these suggested strategies are unlikely to be comprehensive until the research in moral self-licensing effect generates deeper level of scientific knowledge in future.

Policy makers and NGOs should also approach the implementation and execution of social and environmental responsibility policies and projects with utmost attention to the moral self-licensing effect. Ethically minded consumers can pause or stop their ethical behaviors such as recycling or shopping from agriculture cooperatives because they can observe the systemic level deficits which later depicts their efforts as futile. Any public policy implementation or social marketing intervention should be approached from a perspective of systemic comprehensiveness. In addition, it may be acknowledged that consumers cannot be expected to behave consistently all the time in the moral markets. Deviancy should be acknowledged but might be aimed to bracketed. The moral self-licensing model of moral supplement can be utilized as to prevent relatively worse modes of bad deeds. The alternative practices of a morally dubious behavior can be structured and communicated by the policy makers and NGO's. For example, an intervention based on zero waste or ecological footprint decrease can educate consumers with different practices for a morally dubious behavior (i.e., food waste, plastic bag usage). Different practices and their impact levels should be delivered to the consumers

so that in a moment of moral dilemma instead of choosing the worst-case scenario (i.e., throwing the food to trash bin), they can proceed with alternative options. Contextual expertise would be needed to structure such alternative practices and assess impact levels.

Finally, this research provides significant societal level implications as it focuses on a topic that potentially prevents alternative economies with environmental, social, and political benefits. This thesis is situated on “the link between individual consumer behavior and the macro concerns of understanding and influencing aggregate consumption levels.” (Schaefer & Crane, 2005: 76). For envisioning a better future, the relationship of ethical markets’ sustainable growth and the moral self-licensing effect should be approached with importance. Although moral self-licensing effect might seem quite of a micro element in the market systems, the contextually different yet coherent discourses around the attitude behavior gap experiences in the form of moral self-licensing can potentially reveal the “bugs” towards envisioning a better future. Consumers’ moral self-licensing experiences in this study revealed the dominant “reasons against” (Chatzidakis & Lee, 2012) towards ethical consumption. The findings of this study can be utilized to eliminate barriers of ethically minded consumers who wish to be consistent in the ethical markets. It is suggested that context-based expertise should be provided by businesses to assess the consumers’ “reasons against” and coherent inconsistencies (i.e., How do consumer license themselves in their shopping experience of Agricultural Credit Cooperatives?). By determining dominant models of

moral self-licensing in the context of context, sustainable growth for the markets that operates with a notion of better future can be provided.

5.3. Future Research and Limitations

This thesis suggests further research directions to expand the definition of moral self-licensing effect. First of all, the alternative models unearthed by this research have contextual tenets to an extent. Further studies can research whether these alternative models also operate in different contexts. Also, the findings reveal that consumers sometimes utilize more than one moral self-licensing model to license themselves (i.e., Mary's reflection on scenario three). Different models of moral self-licensing can be utilized by consumers in a tiered manner and might have different licensing weights which should be researched further. Additionally, some established models of moral self-licensing may influence individuals towards a permanent withdrawal from ethical behaviors (i.e., Isma's market preference changes) which also needs further investigation. Also, alternative models of moral self-licensing from this thesis can be tested by quantitative approaches via item generation from qualitative data. Finally, future research can reveal the contextual dynamics of ethical consumption and related models of moral self-licensing. As ethics are considered as heterogeneous and contextual (Cherrier, 2005), different cultures or communities with different contexts and backgrounds would assess the question of "What is ethical?" in different terms. As moral aspect is the main tenet of moral self-licensing, these dynamics will potentially influence the dominant utilization of moral self-licensing. Further research can interlink the different modes of ethics to different models of moral self-licensing in a variety of

contexts. Morality and ethicality should be approached with scrutiny as it is highly heterogeneous and context dependent.

Some important limitations of the study are related to the field of the study and the nature of the topic. First of all, the data collection was based on Turkey and Turkish people's ethical consumption experiences. More research should be done in different regions of the world with cultural differences to establish the models of moral self-licensing. In addition, as the context of the study is ethical consumption and it is considered as a sensitive topic in its nature, social desirability bias has been a limitation of data collection process even though it tried to be eliminated by data triangulation. As such, future research on moral self-licensing topic can utilize different projective and observational techniques for a higher level data triangulation to overcome this issue.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Story Templates and Interviews Questions

Story Templates

Scenario 1: Ms. Selin does not prefer purchasing animal cruelty cosmetics. During a cosmetic shopping of hers she bought some cosmetic products that is labelled as “not tested on animals” and later on she bought a shampoo that is NOT labelled as “not tested on animals”.

Can you continue to this story by expressing Ms. Selin’s thoughts on this behavior of hers?

Scenario 2: Mr. Ismail always shops from agricultural credit cooperatives. He believes that local producers must be supported. He also believes that the produce in agricultural credit cooperatives is healthier and more affordable than mainstream markets. Mr. Ismail shopped from there on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. But he went to a mainstream market (let’s say CarrefourSa) on Thursday even though he could have gone to agricultural credit cooperatives. On Friday, he continues to go to agricultural credit cooperatives.

Can you continue to this story by expressing Mr. Ismail’s thoughts on this behavior of his?

Scenario 3: Mr. Furkan cares about the protection of natural sources of the earth. Therefore, he recycles his waste: Glass, plastic, paper, waste oil, used batteries and so on. Mr. Furkan is also a climate activist. One day he organized a climate activism protest with his friends and gave information about climate protection to the locals. When the protest was over and he was on his way to home at night, he bought and drank water from a single used plastic bottle and throw the bottle in a regular trash bin.

Can you continue to this story by expressing Mr. Furkan’s thoughts on this behavior of his?

Scenario 4: Ms. Ezgi cares about ethically consuming almost in every context and defines herself as an ethical consumer: She recycles, boycotts animal cruelty products, sustainably consumes water and energy sources, wears secondhand fashion products, uses public transport, drinks fair trade coffee and so on. Ms. Ezgi is working as an engineer in a company and had a very bad day at work. After work, she did something which she never does normally: She went to shopping from a global fashion brand (Let’s

say Mango). She knows that Mango products are not considerate about world resources and heard that the brand is exploiting children as a workforce in 3rd world countries. Can you continue to this story by expressing Ms. Ezgi's thoughts on this behavior of hers?

Interview Questions

1. What do you think about people who are considerate about the political, social, and environmental consequences of their consumption practices?
2. (After reading Andorfer's definition of ethical consumption) Do you have ethical consumption attitudes, too?
3. Can you recall one of your latest experiences on ethical consumption and give me as much as details for that experience? This experience can be related to any of the phases of consumption: Purchasing, using, disposing.
4. Can you describe me the context and conditions of that experience?
5. Can you describe me your feelings and thoughts before this experience occur?
6. Can you describe me your feelings and thoughts during this experience occur?
7. Can you describe me your feelings and thoughts after this experience occur?
8. What was your rationale of preferring that ethical product/service?
9. Were there any other similar ethical consumption practices before? Can you share details?
10. Were there any other similar ethical consumption practices after? Can you share details?
11. Do you remember a moment that while you had the chance to be consistent with this ethical consumption behavior of yours but did not follow the same route?
12. Can you walk me through this inconsistent ethical consumption behavior of yours? Please give some details about that day, context, situations and so on.
13. How did you feel about this inconsistency?
14. What did you think during this inconsistency?

15. How come you did not consider the ethical aspects of the product/service for that experience?

Now, I will be asking similar questions about five different contexts to facilitate recalling:

16. Do you have ethical consumption attitudes during groceries shopping?

- a. Can you explain your motivation for that?
- b. Do you follow this behavior consistently?
- c. Can you walk me through your inconsistencies in this context?

17. Do you have ethical consumption attitudes during fashion products shopping?

- a. Can you explain your motivation for that?
- b. Do you follow this behavior consistently?
- c. Can you walk me through your inconsistencies in this context?

18. Do you have ethical consumption attitudes during technology products shopping?

- a. Can you explain your motivation for that?
- b. Do you follow this behavior consistently?
- c. Can you walk me through your inconsistencies in this context?

19. Do you have ethical consumption attitudes during services consumption?

(Examples are given to clarify: Transportation service, web services, accommodation services, telecommunication services, banking services and so on)

- a. Can you explain your motivation for that?
- b. Do you follow this behavior consistently?
- c. Can you walk me through your inconsistencies in this context?

20. Do you have ethical consumption attitudes during the disposal phase of consumption?

- a. Can you explain your motivation for that?
- b. Do you follow this behavior consistently?
- c. Can you walk me through your inconsistencies in this context?

21. Can you share me your opinions about the inconsistencies of ethical consumption behaviors of yours?

22. Would like to add further thoughts?

Appendix 2: Ethical Consumption Typology

	Product-oriented purchasing	Company-oriented purchasing
Boycotts	Aerosols (UK) Peat (UK) Timber from unsustainable forestry (international)	Nestlé (international) Shell (international) Philip Morris (USA)
Positive buying	Fair trade Mark (in Europe) Blue Angel eco-label (Germany) No Sweat 100 per cent union-made apparel (USA)	British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection Approved Product Guide Body Shop 'against animal testing' (UK and international)
Fully screened (comparative ethical ratings across whole product area)	Green Consumer Guide (Elkington & Hailes) Which? appliance energy consumption tables (UK Consumers' Association)	Ethical Consumer magazine (UK) Shopping for a Better World paperback book (USA) Ethical screening of investments (international)
Relationship purchasing (consumers seek to educate sellers about their ethical needs)	Community Supported Agriculture (Farms in the USA and UK) Seikatsu Club (Japanese consumer co-operative)	Individual consumer building relationship with shopkeepers
Anti-consumerism or sustainable consumerism	Avoiding unsustainable products (for example, cars) DIY alternatives (for example, mending clothes)	Adbusters – (Canadian 'culture jamming' magazine)

Figure 5: Typology of ethical consumer practices

Adapted from Harrison et al. (2005)

