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Reconceptualizing Consumer Responsibility: From Rosters to Philosophy

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Abstract: Conceptual papers reflect a researcher's theoretical thoughts and philosophical speculations about a topic and are especially useful for generating ideas that incentivize theory development. This conceptual paper shares a philosophical reconceptualization of consumer responsibility, which people traditionally approach using rosters of corresponding responsibilities and rights. After profiling rosters from both the United Nations and Consumers International, the consumer responsibility phenomenon was reconceptualized through three philosophical queries: (a) what is it to be responsible (moral reasoning, feelings, or virtue/character trait); (b) what is a person responsible for (past and future orientation – retrospection and prospection); and (c) before whom is someone responsible (self-attribution versus diffusion)? Future researchers are encouraged to use this new conceptual framework to study and theorize the different ways people might philosophically understand being responsible consumers.

Keywords: Consumer responsibility; philosophy; rosters; consumer rights; conceptual framework.

I. Introduction

This conceptual paper advances and systematizes knowledge by focusing on a substantive domain of study that could benefit from additional conceptual attention (Yadav 2010). That domain is consumer responsibility, and the additional attention is philosophically conceptualizing consumer responsibility instead of using rosters. Very little scholarship (research or theory) exists around philosophizing consumer responsibility (McGregor 2017a; McGregor 2017b; Wells et al. 2011).

A roster is a list of *duties* that guides behaviour, while a philosophy is a collection of *beliefs* that guides behaviour (Stevenson 2011). Philosophy "deals with questions not obviously addressed by other areas of enquiry" (Brookes 2010, para. 1). Herein, philosophy deals with questions that consumer responsibility rosters simply cannot address. Ethical and moral dimensions of consumer decisions may not have solutions in our lifetime. Compared to rosters, a philosophical approach to consumer responsibility

may provide deep-rooted ideas on judging what should be, or was, done when consuming given the constraints of the purchase context (Korneeva et al. 2022) (e.g., products made or services delivered in sweatshops and prisons; pillaged ecosystems and natural resources; and animal mistreatment for product development).

Furthermore, assuming that philosophy has no place in the responsibility dimension of consumer decisions (i.e., philosophical aloofness from consumption – distanced, detached, indifferent) can trigger ethically and morally undefendable consumer behaviour. Drawing on philosophy to understand consumer responsibility may offset this eventuality.

II. Literature Review

Indeed, "the purpose of the consumer responsibility philosophy is to assign the responsibility for ... impacts to the end consumer who purchases a good or service" (Martinez et al. 2022, 2). Many researchers have developed scales for empirically measuring socially and environmentally responsible consumer behaviour (Samavatyan et al. 2014; Vitell 2015), but few have explored the philosophy of responsibility in the consumer realm. "Philosophy ... forces people to question their fundamental beliefs about themselves, the universe, and their place in it. Such questioning is not something that most people care to undergo" (Robinson 2017, para. 2) because it can be discomfiting.

II.1. Consumer Responsibility

As a caveat, because the Results section contains the outcome of employing the conceptual paper method – a discursive essay that profiles a philosophical conceptualization of consumer responsibility (McLean 2011; Watts 2011) – a detailed discussion of the consumer responsibility concept is not articulated in the literature review section as would normally occur. Generally speaking, responsibility is "the duty to answer for any actions within one's sphere of influence" (Franzini Tibaldeo 2024, 300). Thus, consumer responsibility means being answerable for one's consumer decisions made within an area where one has an impact through their relationships and advocacy (*sphere of influence*). This differs from a *sphere of control* where people have complete control and can make direct consumer decisions, which differs again from *sphere of concern*, which cannot be directly influenced but can be affected by ripple effects (e.g., climate change, sustainability, social justice, and inequity) (Thorneycroft 2023).

II.2. Philosophy and Consumer Responsibilization

Recent research has affirmed that simply knowing about responsibilities was not enough for people to actually *be* responsible consumers (Huth 2015). Instead, "consumers resist ... being responsibilized [and experience] philosophical discomfort" (Eckhardt & Dobscha 2019, 651). Giesler and Veresiu (Giesler & Veresiu 2014) acknowledged that the

process of consumer responsibilization entails "the philosophical (personalization)" (p. 843), which itself entails "contrasting the idealized responsible consumer subject with an irresponsible other" (p. 845). People undergo a shift, whereby they personally assume responsibility for the consequences of their consumer decisions rather than assign them to societal and structural issues. People often feel uneasy when facing consumer responsibilization interventions and push back when asked "to negotiate the meaning of responsible consumption" (Döbbe & Cederberg 2024, 21). Indeed, Giesler and Veresiu (2014) said consumer responsibilization can lead to self-blame.

The "literature shows that consumers negotiate and struggle over *who* is to take responsibility and for *what*" (Döbbe & Cederberg 2024, 24). Should they assume responsibility or attribute it to others? Under what circumstances? Cherrier and Türe (Cherrier & Türe 2022) claimed that these philosophical questions can impede even the most committed consumer's enactment of responsibilization. This conceptual paper contributes to this nascent research thread (so characterized by Döbbe & Cederberg 2024) by sharing a philosophical reconceptualization of consumer responsibility prefaced with an overview of two consumer responsibility rosters.

II.3. Consumer Responsibility Rosters

Consumer rights have been articulated since the 1960s – for nearly 65 years (Lampman 1988). But a right (entitlement) always implies an attendant responsibility (obligation) (Schmidt 1997). Rights are moral or legal entitlements *to* something. Responsibilities are moral or legal obligations to *do* something in a particular role (Anderson 2014; Gablentz 2018; Stevenson 2011). Responsibilities are traditionally tied to rights (Gablentz 2018; Schmidt 1997). This tenet especially holds in the consumer behaviour discipline, where rights and responsibilities are intertwined. Rights are intended to accommodate power imbalances encountered when transacting with businesses and state-owned enterprises (SOEs). People thus wear two hats in their consumer role – anticipate protection and behave responsibly (Fazal 1982).

II.3.1. United Nations Consumer Responsibility Roster

Over time, two types of consumer responsibility have evolved. People have duties in relation to (a) their own consumer rights or (b) to other humans, species, and the environment (Tulsian & Tulsian 2003). The former is profiled in Table 1, which contains the 11 consumer responsibilities and attendant rights currently entrenched in the United Nations' (UN) (2016) *Guidelines for Consumer Protection* (Consumers International [CI] 2016; Hunter 2023; McGregor 2017b). During the eighties, CI (a consumer-advocacy group) actively lobbied the UN to entrench these rights and responsibilities and was closely involved in their development and revisions. They primarily serve as guidelines for governments and businesses, but consumer, trade, and standards' organizations use them as well (CI 2016).

Consumers have the right to	Consumers have the responsibility to
Access basic goods and services be able to consume (have access to) basic goods and services (i.e., necessities essential for survival to satisfy basic needs): adequate food, clothing, shelter, health care, education, public utilities, water, fuel, and sanitation; and the right to freedom, equality, and adequate conditions of life	**Sustainably use basic goods and services** appropriately and sustainably use these essential goods and services, so others can meet their basic needs too; if feasible, become vocal advocates for poverty reduction, equality, equity, and justice
Inclusion vulnerable and disadvantaged consumers can access goods and services that accommodate a diverse range of needs and abilities; this access must withstand market changes and be consistently present at all touchpoints (e.g., real-time purchase/service environment, telephone and online services, and published materials)	**Become involved in product and service design focused on inclusivity** vulnerable and disadvantaged consumers must take action to ensure that their diverse and unique needs and abilities are accommodated in product design and service delivery; this better ensures that businesses and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) hear and heed their unique voices
Safety be protected against products, production processes, and services that are hazardous to health, life, or well-being (this refers to responsible business behaviour [good faith efforts to provide safe merchandise and services], government regulations, and international standards)	**Consume safely** read and follow instructions on products and use and dispose of them as intended (includes proper maintenance); check service providers' qualifications before the transaction; refuse and report shoddy merchandise or unqualified service providers to protect oneself and others; remain alert for future warnings; and be aware of standards for product safety and professional services
Information be given the facts needed to make an informed choice and be protected against fraudulent, dishonest, or misleading advertising, marketing, and labelling; clear and comprehensive contracts; privacy and data protection; consumers with communication-related disabilities have the right to receive any information in a format that meets their needs; and right to information that facilitates ethical and sustainable consumption choices	**Become informed** seek out, ask for, critique, and discriminate between product and service information, so one can make an informed and critical choice; keep abreast of innovations and changes in the marketplace; read contracts before signing; request information be presented in a format that meets one's needs; vigilantly protect personal data and information; and encourage the provision of information about the ethics and sustainability of product sourcing and service delivery
Choice be able to select from a range of products and services offered at fair and competitive prices with an assurance of satisfactory quality; physical and/or virtual access to the marketplace; reliable after-market services; market conditions that provide consumers with sustainable and ethical choices (freedom to choose consciously and mindfully); and right to corporate social responsibility	**Choose carefully and consciously** research and compare a range of products and services before purchasing; demand fair and competitive prices and assurances of quality; make informed, independent decisions; ask for help; resist high pressures sales; make needs and desires known to businesses, governments, and consumer organizations; promote and engage in sustainable consumption by expanding choice criteria to include 'labour behind the label' and environmental impact; and gain an appreciation that consumption choices can have ethical and moral overtones
To be heard (voice and representation) have consumer interest represented in the making and execution of government policy and in the development of products and services; have the importance of the consumer in the economic process recognized; form independent consumer and other relevant groups or organizations and the opportunity for them to present their views in decision-making processes affecting them and the consumer interest; and have the right to intervene in capitalism and question the consumer culture	**Make themselves heard** make one's needs and expectations known to vendors, governments, and consumer organizations; appreciate what constitutes *the consumer interest* and consumer issues; form and/or join consumer associations and related groups to make one's voice heard and encourage others to do so; make one's opinions known; and actively question and challenge the capitalistic system and the consumer culture

Consumers have the right to	Consumers have the responsibility to
Redress to complain if dissatisfied with a product or service; receive a fair settlement of just claims including compensation for misrepresentation, shoddy goods, or unsatisfactory services; timely and respectful redress; and access to avenues to obtain redress and seek assistance and advice	**Seek redress** insist on a fair and reasonable deal if not satisfied with the purchase; keep records, receipts, and warranties; seek redress and complain so sellers' practices can change, those at fault can be penalized, and those victimized can be compensated; do so in a timely, honest, and respectful manner; and report abusive or illegal business practices (i.e., make the effort to complain if dissatisfied)
Data and identity security when using electronic commerce expect the same level of protection (e.g., financial protection, redress options, and identity and data security) when using e-commerce platforms as brick-and-mortar or mail-order stores; at the minimum, the protection in place cannot be less than that afforded for non-electronic platforms	**Responsibly use e-commerce platforms** be ever vigilant about sharing personal data and information when purchasing or banking online (especially minimize chances of identity theft); use secure Wi-Fi connections; and actively recognize, avoid, and report adware, fake apps, spam, and phishing
Consumer education access to knowledge and skills needed be an informed consumer throughout one's life; make confident decisions and choices about goods and services; access to education on the environmental, social, and economic impacts of consumer choices; be able to function effectively in the marketplace; and be advised that consumers have rights in the marketplace	**Seek consumer education** seek out and avail oneself of education programs during one's lifetime; advocate for inclusion of consumer education in public school systems, adult education, and higher education; inform oneself about goods and services to be purchased; continually ask questions and critique the marketplace; be aware of consumer rights and responsibilities and how to act on them; be an ethical consumer; and anticipate and initiate changes in the marketplace
A healthy environment right to freedom, equality, and adequate conditions of life (live, work, and leisure) in an environment that is nonthreatening to the well-being of present and future generations; life with dignity that enhances quality of life for other individuals and society; learn how to be an ethical and moral consumer and to consume sustainably; and learn that governments and corporations have social and ecological responsibilities	**Build and sustain a healthy environment** help build a healthy environment by conserving natural resources and choosing products and services that do not harm the environment (or other species), now or in the future (sustainable consumption); minimize damage and harm; respect the individual and collective power that consumers have in the marketplace; appreciate the interconnectedness of the marketplace with the world; and encourage corporate social responsibility (the highest levels of ethical conduct)
Promotion of sustainable consumption right to expect other marketplace players (e.g., government, business, and consumer and environmental organizations) to actively promote and better ensure that options and messaging are available, so consumers can engage in sustainable consumption	**Promote sustainable consumption** like other marketplace players, consumers must become informed about sustainable consumption, and then (a) consume in a manner that is sustainable and (b) promote the idea that everyone's consumption decisions must be sustainable

Table 1: United Nation's Roster of Consumer Rights and Responsibilities (adapted with permission from McGregor 2017b).

II.3.2. Consumers International's Consumer Responsibility Roster

CI was initially the International Organization of Consumers Unions (IOCU), which was founded in 1960 as a consortium of 200+ consumer advocacy groups. CI's approach to consumer responsibilities reflects the duties-to-others-and-the-environment approach (Tulsian & Tulsian 2003). Instead of matching a consumer responsibility with a consumer right, IOCU (1980) tendered generic responsibilities to both humans and the environment, and CI has since continued this approach.

"Prof. Heiko Steffens of Berlin [spearheaded this initiative] at the [1978] 9th IOCU Congress" (Fazal 1979, para. 8). A year later, IOCU fleshed out the audience's suggestions and collapsed them into five responsibilities: (a) critical awareness, (b) action and involvement, (c) solidarity, (d) environmental awareness and (e) social concern and social responsibility (called CASES) (Ellwood & Fazal 1984; Indira Gandi National Open University 2017; IOCU 1980; Steffens & Rosenberger 1986) (see Table 2). Fifty years later, stakeholders and governments still use this approach (see Philippines Department of Trade and Industry, 2023; Siyachitema 2018).

Solidarity and Collective Action – assertively organize with other consumers to develop the strength and gain influence to promote and protect the consumer interest, well-being, and welfare (rights); collective actions can more effectively counter the individualism of a consumer society because this mutual strength helps people subordinate their own interests for the common good
Critical Awareness – be vigilant, alert, critically aware, and question all goods and services (i.e., design, production, marketing, and selling); question the consumer society and consumer culture; identify the root causes of and underlying context, rules, beliefs, and values that make any consumer purchase controversial
Action and Involvement – take assertive action to ensure everyone gets a fair deal and transaction; act confidently to exert one's power and make one's voice heard because remaining passive (inactive and not involved) means losing power and risking exposure to exploitation; respect the difference between and necessity of both equity (give people what they need to obtain justice and fairness) and equality (treat everyone the same)
Environmental Awareness – understand and be sensitive to the ecological consequences of consumption on the environment, social relations, and overall well-being and common good; recognize one's responsibility to conserve and consume sustainably; promote and contribute to public participation, discourse, and debate on sustainable production and consumption
Social Concern and Social Responsibility – be aware of the impact of consumption on other citizens, especially the disadvantaged and powerless (want equitable distribution of resources); take into account individual consumer's concerns and the shared concerns of society relative to prevailing economic, social, and political realities, and then act accordingly

Table 2: Consumers International's Roster of Consumer Responsibilities (adapted with permission from McGregor 2017b).

IOCU's president in the late seventies (Dr. Anwar Fazal) characterized the consumer responsibilities profiled in Table 2 as "a frame of reference for (...) consumer action" (Fazal 1979, 2). A *frame of reference* is a particular set of beliefs, values, or ideas on which people base their judgement to do something (Anderson 2014). People *refer* to this *frame* (i.e., a structure holding ideas together) to help them make responsible consumer decisions and choices. This approach to consumer responsibilities respects that when people consume, they do so in relation to others; that is, their consumer actions have consequences for other humans, other species, and the environment (Tulsian & Tulsian 2003).

Fazal (1982) later described the responsibilities in Table 2 as *principles* that "provide a framework for action as responsible consumers" (p. 3). Principles are important ideas comprising a system of thought that guides behaviour. As fundamental truths, principles inform people's judgements about the rightness and wrongness (morality) of any decision and choice they are contemplating (Sokolowski 2023). Because frameworks are underlying (often invisible or implicit) supportive structures (Anderson 2014), the principles in Table 2, in effect, *support* people's decisions pursuant to responsible consumption.

II.4. Research Inquiry

The crux of this paper is that it is one thing to create a roster of consumer responsibilities relative to rights (see Tables 1 and 2) and quite another to philosophically ponder how different people might understand what constitutes being *responsible* in the first place. As the name suggests, responsibility (*response-ability)* means the ability to choose one's response (Covey 1989). Etymologically, responsibility (Latin *respondēre*) means accountable or answerable for one's actions (Harper 2025). Are people responsible if they choose to (a) buy free-trade instead of fair-trade coffee, (b) shop at stores known for selling unsustainably sourced products or (c) knowingly buy products from corporations that rape the land and exploit human labourers?

Answers to such queries are influenced by philosophizing how different people *might* conceptualize consumer responsibility, which in turn impacts their own consumer actions and how they judge others who are consuming. Present-day consumers can honour an ethical and moral responsibility for future generations if they commit to "the promotion of ethical considerations that are concerned with the distant future, and the future of humankind in general" (Vladimirova 2014, 67). I maintain that this commitment requires a sharp focus on the philosophy of consumer responsibility.

IV. Method

This research entailed the development of a conceptual paper, which can contribute significantly to a discipline's intellectual evolution (Smithey Fulmer 2012) and is "especially useful for idea generation that can eventually initiate theory development" (McGregor 2018, 502). This matters because there is no generic theory of consumer responsibility. Quazi and colleagues (2016) suggested that conceptualizing consumer responsibility is a "neglected aspect of consumer research" (p. 48).

At best we have the theory of planned behaviour (TPB), which psychologists formulated to predict human behaviour in different contexts (Ajzen 1988). Researchers have used TPB to study the ethics and morality of consumer behaviour (Samavatyan et al. 2014; Vitell 2015). Unfortunately, "existing theory—particularly the widely applied theory of planned behavior (TPB) — cannot fully explain ethical purchase decisions [which include consumer responsibility]" (Sun 2020, 260).

As a method for conducting and reporting research, conceptual papers reflect a researcher's theoretical thoughts and philosophical speculations about a topic. The researcher makes their case for specific lines of thought by developing and supporting logical arguments that link defined concepts to the phenomenon in question (Gilson & Goldberg 2015) (in this case, link philosophical concepts to consumer responsibility). Conceptual papers do not include empirical data unless drawn from the literature to support specific thoughts and conclusions (Dauber 2014). Instead, the researcher poses

and addresses questions. In this case, these were philosophical questions pursuant to how people might understand consumer responsibility: (a) What is it *to be* responsible? (b) What is a person responsible *for*? and (c) Before *whom* is someone responsible? (Lenk 2006; Williams 2006).

Using the conceptual paper method, the researcher prepared a discursive essay using critical thinking, logical arguments, research, and reasoned opinions. The intent of a discursive essay is not to persuade readers to a specific point of view but to provide a balanced and nuanced argument and discussion based on evidence (McLean 2011; Williamson 2021). This method included a detailed accounting of the new conceptualization (Watts 2011).

V. Results

This section articulates the result of employing the conceptual paper method: a discursive essay that profiles a philosophical conceptualization of consumer responsibility (see Figure 1) to augment the traditional roster approach (see Tables 1 and 2). Regarding the wording of the three central philosophical questions (Lenk 2006; Williams 2006), *to be* is a verb that relates something to its qualities or characteristics. *For* is a preposition referring to a purpose or reason. *Whom* is the object of a verb – the entity on the receiving end of an act (Stevenson 2011). In effect, these words respectively represent the philosophical *how*, *what,* and *who* of consumer responsibility. Each question is now addressed.

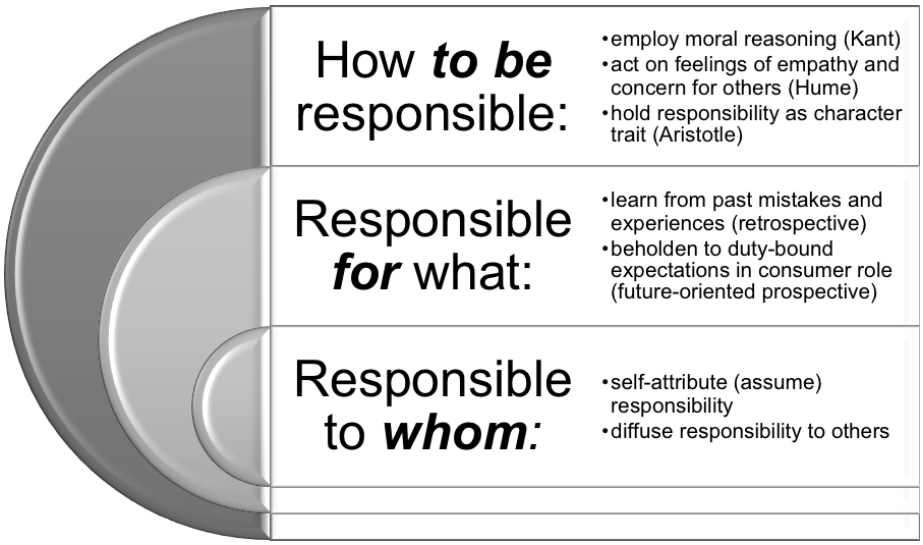

Figure 1: Proposed Philosophical Conceptualization of Consumer Responsibility.

As a caveat, although not recognized as a central philosophical question (Lenk 2006; Williams 2006), a fourth line of discussion for future analysis is "W*hy* be responsible at all?" – for whose sake or for what sake? This question is intuitively answered herein, but Franzini Tibaldeo (Franzini Tibaldeo 2024) suggested that being responsible for an object

while consuming in the present is future-oriented behaviour triggered by the object's vulnerability (e.g., people, ecosystems, plants and animals). Furthermore, assuming responsibility changes the person (the consumer) because they enter a relationship with the object that needs protecting from an endangered future made worse by the object's impotency (Jonas 1984).

V.1. "What Is It to *Be* Responsible?"

"Any discussion of [consumer] responsibility must respect that it can be viewed from three different perspectives, with each taking a very different slant" (McGregor 2017a, 571): moral reasoning, feelings, and virtue or character trait. How people judge consumers' decisions will depend on which of these three lenses they employ.

Respectively, one person may judge anyone buying free-trade coffee as irresponsible, while another person may say they were not morally in the wrong, as they could not afford or avail themselves of fair-trade options. One person may fault someone for buying products made using child, sweatshop, or prison labour, while another may empathize with and excuse this behaviour, as there were no retailers or vendors in the geographic locale that sourced fairly. Someone may truly want to consume responsibly (i.e., responsibility is a character trait) but cannot in their locale; others thus wrongly judge them as irresponsible. Each of three ways *to be* responsible is now discussed.

V.1.1. Consumer responsibility as moral reasoning

Immanuel Kant proposed that people can act responsibly by applying general principles and reasoning (i.e., think about, understand, and form judgements using logic) instead of habitual thinking. *Moral* reasoning goes a step further. It involves critically analyzing a situation to determine right or wrong (knowing harm is possible) and then pondering what *should* be done versus what can be done, has always been done, is expected, or what people want or feel able to do (Williams 2006). Moral reasoning (a) provides right or wrong (moral) guidance when making decisions and (b) motivates people to engage in *right* consumption. This means they are aware that their consumer actions may cause harm and thus want to mitigate any fallout – 'make things right' (McGregor 2010).

The moral approach to being responsible assumes that people (a) have the capacity for rational choice and (b) can act of their own volition (i.e., free will) (Williams 2006). According to rational choice theory, instead of letting tradition, unconscious drives, and environmental contexts influence their decisions, people would use reason and logic (i.e., rational consideration) to weigh the consequences and potential benefits (Appelrouth & Edles 2015). Free will refers to the control people have over their decisions. When *free to exercise their will,* they can choose among different options without impediments. They can act of their own volition without the constraints of fate or necessity (De Caro & Marraffa 2014; O'Connor & Franklin 2022).

Thus, engaging in intentional, rational deliberations about contentious consumer

choices makes someone responsible. Conversely, lack of reasoned consideration is irresponsible, as the consumer did not engage in moral reasoning about what *should* be done to mitigate harm (McGregor 2010). A downside of moral responsibility is that the person judging someone's behaviour as immoral has no legal recourse to sanction or punish them for perceived wrongdoings (Lenk 2006). This presents a conundrum. "Morally speaking, a human being cannot intentionally withdraw responsibility [as it] is not attached to specific roles, but is a principle universal and applicable to everyone" (Lenk 2006, 30). In effect, everyone is expected *to be* a responsible consumer (i.e., a universal obligation), but no one can be officially or formally sanctioned or punished by others if judged otherwise.

V.1.2. Consumer responsibility as feelings and emotions

Williams (2006) explained that David Hume rejected Kant's moral reasoning stance and opted instead for the influence of certain feelings and emotions relative to being responsible. From a Humean philosophical perspective, people can only become moral agents when they feel sympathy for others, develop an inclination to want people's actions to benefit the social good, or both. Only then will people assume it is rational to think and act morally when consuming.

Hand in hand with this philosophical lens on consumer responsibility is the human inclination to feel both guilt and shame. Hume believed that these motivational emotions affect how people respond to one another (Williams 2006). *Guilt* refers to emotional discomfort and feelings associated with having done something wrong or failing in an obligation (i.e., morally or legally bound). People feel responsible for consequences arising from their harmful behavior or attitude. In contrast, *shame* concerns a perceived discrepancy between one's actual and ideal self. This inner negative self-evaluation arises from self-awareness of shortcomings and/or impropriety in one's behaviour or character. It manifests in feelings of humiliation or distress (Anderson 2014; Stevenson 2011). In short, "shame implies perceived *lack of power* to meet the [moral] standards of one' ideal self, whereas guilt implies perceived *power and willingness to be harmful*" (Miceli & Castelfranchi 2018, 711).

Hume proposed that under the influence of these emotions, people are less concerned with judging themselves and more for how others judge them, their character, and actions (Williams 2006). To wit, consuming *irres*ponsibly could generate feelings of both guilt and shame and increase the risk of being blamed. Consuming *res*ponsibly could generate feelings of esteem from others and elicit their praise (i.e., respect, admiration, approval, and gratitude). Responsible consumers would, thus, mitigate blameworthy behaviour and strive instead for praiseworthy decisions. Hume philosophized that there is *something* about human interaction that makes people hold one another accountable, which can lead to socially and mutually beneficial conduct (Williams 2006) including responsible consumer behaviour.

V.1.3. Consumer responsibility as a virtue or character trait

From a third perspective, people would value and draw on responsibility as a character trait when making consumer decisions. This approach reflects the Aristotelean stance of *virtue,* which is behaviour exhibiting high moral standards for right and wrong (Williams 2006). Virtuous consumers would take their responsibility to others very seriously. They can be trusted to examine their decisions to determine any failings and successes and act accordingly in the future. Basically, without this character trait, people cannot be trusted with the moral implications of their consumer decisions. Conversely, people valuing responsibility can be relied upon to judge and act (consume) in morally defensible and desirable ways. Moreover, if things go wrong, they can be counted on to consume differently going forward – make things right. It is in their very nature to do so (McGregor 2010).

As a caveat, Aristotle posited there are circumstances when others cannot expect virtuous people to act responsibly especially when no effective choices are open to them (Williams 2006). This philosophical escape route theoretically holds for virtually all modern-day consumers, as the marketplace is flooded with unethically and unsustainably sourced, produced, distributed, sold, and consumed products and services – a fact supportive of political governance of the economy and production. Through no fault of their own, people cannot always consume responsibly, as circumstances preclude them from acting on this virtue despite knowing that they should for the good of humanity, other species, and the environment (McGregor 2010) (i.e., why be responsible at all?).

In summary, there is no clear-cut answer to Williams' (2006) central question, "What is it *to be* responsible?" But he tendered three plausible philosophical stances. (a) People are responsible if they employ moral reasoning. (b) They are responsible, if they lean into their natural inclination to be concerned for others and the common good. (c) And people are inclined to be responsible if it is part of their character makeup (i.e., they hold responsibility as a virtue). These philosophical lenses (a) accommodate four dimensions of responsibility (i.e., actions and results, role expectations, personal morality, and legal liability) (Lenk 2006); and (b) strongly impact whether those observing consumer behaviour judge it as responsible or irresponsible.

V.2. "What Is a Person Responsible *For*?"

Williams' (2006) second central philosophical question was "What is a person responsible for?" (para. 7). What should be critiqued? Are they responsible for their (a) past actions (retrospective — the act of looking back on something) or (b) future actions (prospective – the act of looking forward) (Anderson 2014; Schon 1960)? "Prospective deliberation may include both the judgment that an act is right and the decision to perform it; [but] one may make the judgment and fail to make the decision. On the other hand, all retrospective deliberation is evaluative" (Schon 1960, 477).

In a retrospective approach, people would take the time to look back, examine and critique their history as a consumer, identify anti patterns, and try to reduce or eliminate them. This exercise serves as a tool for gaining input into improving future consumer behaviour. Conversely, the prospective approach concerns behaviour that has not yet happened. People would judge and anticipate future actions and try to create a model for responsible consumer behaviour. Retrospective strives to find out why something happened and how, while prospective concerns what could happen, how, and why it should (Bhatawadekar 2020; Schon 1960).

V.2.1. Retrospective consumer responsibility

Retrospective deals with after-the-fact contemplation and critical reflection on past decisions and actions (Schon 1960; Williams 2006). Based on the consequences that unfolded, people would ponder: "What went wrong and what went right? Am I to blame or deserving of praise? Should I feel remorse or pride? Should I make amends or accept gratitude?" (Williams 2006).

The retrospective approach to consumer responsibility accommodates both causation and accountability. Causation (i.e., making something happen) concerns the cause-and-effect principle the application of which assumes people can learn from past experiences (Williams 2006). Regarding accountability, "people are responsible for their choices (able to live with the consequences), but are accountable if they can neutrally and accurately report on the sequence of those choices leading to the consequences. People *take* responsibility but are *held* accountable [by] others" (McGregor 2017a, 569). Responsible consumers can *give others an accounting* of the thinking, reasoning, emotions, and virtues behind a consumer decision.

Williams (2006) proposed that when people *cause* harm, retrospective responsibility becomes relevant, as others need to hold someone *accountable*. At the heart of this philosophical approach to consumer responsibility is the quandary: "What reactions do people deserve from others given how they consumed in the past?" The retrospective approach assumes that when a consumer decision causes harm, others want to know why and seek to place blame. They want irresponsible consumers to experience reproach (i.e., disappointment or disapproval) and feel remorse, guilt, and shame if warranted. Experiencing these negative emotions should make people think twice before consuming that way again. When things go right in a consumer decision (i.e., no harm ensues), people want to know who acted well, as it is assumed, they deserve praise, approval, and gratitude for their moral stance (Williams 2006).

V.2.2. Prospective consumer responsibility

Rather than judging people's past actions (retrospective consumer responsibility), the prospective approach concerns what people are duty-bound to do if they want others to judge them as responsible consumers. Because this approach is premised on the *roles*

that people hold (Gablentz 2018; Williams 2006), the burning question becomes, "What is the expected realm of people's responsibility in their consumer *role*?" – to whom or what are they responsible for?

To illustrate, consumers have a responsibility to themselves, their household, and families to purchase, use, and dispose goods and services pursuant to food, shelter, clothing, utilities, transportation, medicine, and so on. Most of these purchases are rife with moral challenges. Conversely, in the global citizen role, people also have a responsibility to consume in a way that not only takes care of their own but also sustains society, other species, the environment, and the future (Brinkmann & Peattie 2008; McGregor 2010). With its future-oriented, role-bound stance, the prospective approach focuses on how people *expect* others to act (Williams 2006), so they are responsible in their consumer *role*.

Williams (2006) tendered the caveat that there are degrees of prospective responsibility – limits to how forward thinking people can *expect* others to be. He suggested that "it will not be appropriate to hold someone (fully) responsible for his [sic] actions if he was faced with responsibilities that were unrealistic and over-demanding" ("Prospective Responsibility" section, para. 7). This sentiment holds for those facing the daunting task of consuming in a marketplace bereft of fairtrade options in virtually all purchase categories. Fair trade represents only 0.01% of all commerce worldwide (FARO 2025). In this reality, expecting people to consume responsibility in the future is unrealistic, as it asks too much of them given current constraints.

To further complicate matters, *compulsion* is the philosophical opposite of responsibility. Sometimes people are compelled (driven) to act in a certain way; that is, they encounter an irresistible urge. They may feel pressured or even obligated to act this way. A compulsion (i.e., powerful impulse to behave in a certain way) can overwhelm someone's preferences (Gablentz 2018). Unfortunately, compulsion prevails in a consumer society in which people are socialized into the consumer *role* — they are *expected* to spend to ensure a healthy economy. But when their identity becomes dependent on consuming, it is hard to resist the *compulsion* to spend. People end up adhering to compulsive materialism and conspicuous consumption (McGregor 2010). This compulsion can trigger irresponsible *prospective* consumer behaviour leading people to perform disappointedly in their consumer role and be judged irresponsible, even immoral.

V.3. "Before *Whom* Is Someone Responsible?"

Part of philosophically conceptualizing consumer responsibility is the issue of who assigns or accepts responsibility. In that spirit, Lenk posed a third central philosophical question, "Before *whom* is someone responsible?" (Lenk 2006, 29) – to another person, a group, an organization, or assigned to oneself? Allowable empirical research (Dauber 2014) has revealed insights into this particular philosophical query with results falling under consumers' (a) self-attribution and (b) their diffusion of responsibility to other humans and other agencies.

V.3.1. Self-attribution of consumer responsibility

Research shows that consumers who mistrust other social agents to act responsibly are inclined to assign it to themselves — self-attribute responsibility. They are more disposed to trust in the effectiveness of their *own* responsibility relative to others. The upshot of self-attribution is that consumers can (a) gain more authority over their lives, (b) have an increased feeling of citizenship and (c) view themselves as politically active. Those who self-attribute also tend to (d) feel less manipulated by business and government thus enabling them (e) to view themselves as a decisive marketplace citizen (Middlemiss 2010; Portilho 2010).

That said, consumers do not always have a clear view of the boundaries of their self-attributed responsibilities. In those instances, they do the best they can by approaching consumption through the lens of their own core values and vision of the future, which may or may not align with what reality demands (Caruana & Crane 2008; Middlemiss 2010). Also, consumers are more inclined to self-attribute responsibility if they sense a general lack of available social agents to assume this obligation (Portilho 2010). In effect, self-attribution happens most often when few people are present to share the load (Ciccarelli & White 2009).

V.3.2. Diffusion of consumer responsibility

Rather than assuming responsibility (self-attribution), some consumers shift it to others because they are either (a) afraid of or (b) uncomfortable with assuming this role – with consumer responsibilization. This *diffusion* of responsibility (i.e., spread over a wide area with lessened concentration and clarity) also tends to happen when (c) people feel anonymous (as in a crowd), (d) responsibility has not been assigned or (e) others are present to take on the role or (f) are presumed to have already done so. Diffusion is less so apathy or indifference and more so the presence of others who can absorb the fallout (Ciccarelli & White 2009; Müller et al. 2014). This is inevitably the case given the billions of consumers available to share responsibility — whether they do or not. Also, the weakened sense of responsibility caused by diffusion may compromise and confuse its uptake.

To elaborate, Müller and colleagues (2014) commented on "the usefulness of scattering the responsibility for sustainable consumption among various stakeholders" (p. 901). Indeed, Bemporad and colleagues (2012) reported that three quarters (74%) of consumers (N = 6000 from six countries) said consumers, businesses, and governments should each be "very or extremely responsible" for society and the environment. Two-thirds of respondents also said nonprofits, charities, and philanthropists should share this obligation.

Luchs and Miller (2015) found instead that consumers felt businesses should foremost be responsible (36%) followed by governments (33%) and then consumers

(31%). Compared to businesses and governments, consumers should be most responsible during the purchase and usage stage (52%) followed by the disposal stage (42%) and least responsible when considering the front-end production of goods and services (19%) (i.e., the material sourcing and labour behind the label).

Luchs and Miller's (2015) result suggests that consumers tend to diffuse responsibility onto businesses and governments rather than fellow consumers. Worse, their responsibility kicks in mainly after the transaction rather than before. Their avoidance of earlier-stage responsibility may reflect their sensed futility with the complexity of modern-day supply chains. These are rife with (a) irresponsible sourcing, manufacturing, distribution, and retail operations; and (b) inadequate government regulations and compliance monitoring. Also, consumers may *believe* they should be responsible but find they cannot thus triggering a diffusion mentality (Luchs & Miller 2015; Müller et al. 2014).

VI. Analysis and Discussion

The UN (2016) defined 11 consumer responsibilities relative to attendant consumer rights, and CI related five consumer responsibilities to the rights of other humans, species, and the environment (Ellwood & Fazal 1984; see Table 1 and 2, respectively). Despite this entrenched practice, agreement about what constitutes consumer responsibility as a concept is not well established (McGregor 2017a). This is problematic but expected. Its conceptualization is part of a longstanding philosophical conversation about what constitutes *responsibility* in general (Franzini Tibaldeo 2024; Gablentz 2018; Lenk 2006; Williams 2006).

Three central philosophical questions around that very issue were used to organize the presentation of a philosophical conceptualization of consumer responsibility (see Figure 1) to augment the roster (corresponding duty) approach (Tables 1 and 2): (a) What is it *to be* responsible? (b) What is a person responsible *for*? and (c) Before *whom* is someone responsible? (cf. Lenk 2006; Williams 2006).

Respectively, people can *be* judged responsible consumers because they employed moral reasoning, were inclined toward empathy and a concern for the common good, or they held responsibility as a character trait (virtue). They can be held responsible *for* learning from past consumer actions (retrospective) or *for* duty-bound, future consumer actions (prospective). And if responsibility has not been assigned (*whom*), people can either self-attribute consumer responsibility or diffuse their obligations (i.e., spread the load) for myriad reasons.

The result herein affirmed that separately answering these three philosophical questions provided useful insights into what might philosophically constitute consumer responsibility (see Figure 1). All three questions are considered paramount (i.e., none can be excluded) because a too-narrow lens risks inadequate philosophical conceptualization.

For example, a sole concern for what it means *to be* responsible may lose sight of what people are responsible *for*. Too much attention on self-attribution versus diffusion (*whom*) may shift focus away from *what* is involved in *being* responsible (i.e., moral reasoning, feelings, or character). Viewing responsibility as arising from retrospection or prospection (*for*) may overshadow concerns for the different ways people can *be* responsible and to *whom*.

Now imagine how further complicated this becomes when the three philosophical questions are combined (i.e., *to be, for,* and *whom — how, what,* and *who*) rather than addressed separately. Consider the following illustrative triadic constellations. First, someone employing moral reasoning may do so because they have learned from critiquing their past consumption experiences that they are duty bound to act responsibly in the future regardless of available others to share the load.

Second, an empathetic and society-conscious person may find it difficult to eschew their future duties in the consumer role (prospective) but still welcome diffusion, as it provides relief through anonymity, which takes the spotlight and pressure off them. Third, someone who holds responsibility as a character trait may still grapple with retrospection, as they can see the merit of sharing responsibility with others (diffuse and spread the load), which, unfortunately, could mitigate any future-oriented prospective consumer behaviour (i.e., let them off the hook).

VII. Conclusion and Recommendations

Very little scholarship (research or theory) exists around philosophizing consumer responsibility (McGregor 2017a; McGregor 2017b; Wells et al. 2011). Also, little is known about how (if) the philosophical consumer responsibility constructs in Figure 1 interact (heed the illustrative triadic constellations). To address this lacuna, future researchers are encouraged to design mixed-methods studies to better discern the validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of the philosophical conceptualization presented herein and the many constellations possible among associated constructs.

Mixed-methods research designs would (a) employ sophisticated statistical analyses to discern interactions, significant associations and correlations, and causality; and (b) generate qualitative data especially by using (i) grounded theory; (ii) phenomenology (i.e., consciousness, judgements, perceptions, and emotions); and (iii) hermeneutics (personal meaning and interpretation). The integration of quantitative results (numbers and facts) with qualitative findings (text and meaning) about how individuals might philosophically understand what constitutes consumer responsibility would augment the longstanding, 50-year focus on responsibility rosters.

Rather than just listing responsibilities relative to rights, people would intellectually and philosophically ponder what might constitute responsibility in their own and different people's minds. Insights from research and critical deliberations could inform

future research agendas, marketing and media efforts, corporate management and production strategies, consumer education initiatives, and consumer protection agendas and frameworks vis-à-vis people being *responsible* in their consumer role. Ultimately, mixed-methods research about the philosophical conceptual framework herein would feed into theoretical formulations for this phenomenon (McGregor 2018).

To elaborate, this paper focused on philosophically conceptualizing consumer responsibility, which involved ideation — forming and articulating a mental image (picture) by drawing on facts (previous research), existing scenarios and situations, and available examples (in this case philosophical insights). Per the nature of conceptualizing (compared to theorizing), the constructs in Figure 1 were richly defined but untested, and relations among them were not proposed (i.e., no formal set of propositions) (McGregor 2018; Nalzaro 2012; Shoemaker et al. 2003).

But the time is ripe for theory development around this phenomenon (Wells et al. 2011). To reiterate, Döbbe and Cederberg (2024) characterized consumer responsibilization as a "nascent [research] stream" (p. 21). Quazi and colleagues suggested that conceptualizing consumer responsibility is a "neglected aspect of consumer research" (Quazi et al. 2016, 48). Future theory development would entail (a) articulating assumptions about the responsible consumption phenomenon viewed through a philosophical lens (see Figure 1); (b) identifying and defining myriad concepts; and (c) developing a network of propositions that relates these concepts to each other to help explain, understand, predict, or control the responsible consumption phenomenon (McGregor 2018; Shoemaker et al. 2003).

Eventual theoretical and research validation would then support or refute any theories of responsible consumption that were inspired by this philosophical conceptualization of consumer responsibility. To reiterate, it is one thing to create a roster of consumer responsibilities relative to rights and quite another to philosophically ponder how different people might understand what constitutes being *responsible* in the first place.

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