The ethical consumption cap and mean market morality

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Abstract
Since the 1970s critical marketing scholars have called for systemic change to overcome the ethical problems generated by consumption, such as unsustainable resource use, industry-induced climate change, and social inequities. Mainstream marketing research has instead problematised the individual consumer and sought ways to diminish the so-called gap between ethics and consumption. The current conceptual paper follows Carrington et al. (2016) and other contemporary critical marketing scholars in redirecting attention away from individual (un)ethical consumers and toward the (im)moral market structures that inflect their decision-making. Its first contribution to this line of thinking is to propose an ethical consumption cap rather than an ethical consumption gap. This subtle but significant shift in emphasis suggests that contemporary capitalism creates conditions in which ethical consumption is costly in terms of money, time and effort. Rather than the responsibilising rhetoric of the 'gap', the 'cap' acknowledges the plethora of systemic pressures that make it difficult for consumers to consume ethically and invites researchers to look elsewhere for solutions. The second contribution of this paper is to follow Grayling (2019) in delineating the character of ethics from the concept of morality, which is more suggestive of obligations and duties. With this etymology in mind, it is argued that other market actors can do much more to remove problematic choices from the market and thus raise the mean market morality. Attending to the average morality of markets instead of emphasising capped ethical consumerism treads a difficult conceptual path between conflicting political positions, but may buy enough time for viable socioeconomic alternatives to neoliberalism to emerge and expand.

Keywords
Ethical consumption gap, ethical consumerism, sustainability, market morality, mean market morality, consumer responsibilisation

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Introduction

“Contemporary consumption is going through a phase of increased ‘responsibilisation’ and ‘remoralisation’ following a period of demoralisation during the mass commodity consumption movement of the mid-late 20th century” (Chatzidakis, 2015: 81)

In the last few years, the issue of climate change has set the world on fire, literally (Klein, 2019; United Nations 2020; BBC 2020; Milman and Ho, 2020). Although ecological concerns have been voiced for decades (Fisk, 1973), more recently public opinion has shifted dramatically (Leiserowitz et al., 2021). Mainstream media discourses now favour more drastic and proactive responses to issues like plastic in the oceans, deforestation, supply chain transparency, and the pressing need to decarbonise the economy (e.g. Harrison, 2020; Tapper, 2020). In one recent survey, over two-thirds (68%) of Europeans said that being environmentally friendly is more important to them than it was 5 years ago (Hitchin and Bitterman, 2018), and millions of people all over the world took part in the Fridays For Future demonstrations, which were inspired by Greta Thunberg’s strike for the climate (Laville and Watts 2019). Yet, everyday consumption choices do not seem to be changing as quickly as environmentally conscious attitudes. In 2019 alone, consumers bought four and a half billion flight tickets, a figure that was up 300% from 1998 (Subramanian, 2020). Clothing consumption has doubled since 2000, with each item of clothing being kept half as long and 85% of clothes bought ending up in landfill at a global rate of one truck dumped every second (McFall–Johnsen 2019). Despite a slight drop early in the pandemic, Covid-19-related restrictions on socialising and travel appear not to have had any lasting effect on these trends. Global carbon dioxide emissions rose along with worldwide economic activity in the second half of 2020 (Tollefson, 2021).

The discrepancy between sustainability- and equity-related ethics, on the one hand, and actual consumption, on the other, has been dubbed the ethical consumption gap (Carrington and Neville, 2016), with much research devoted to finding ways to ‘close the gap’ by bringing consumption choices closer to ethical attitudes (Caruana et al., 2016). However, as Carrington et al. (2016: 24) point out, ‘the gap as an internalised and individualised condition maintains the belief in the consumer as a sovereign actor with the power – and thus the responsibility – to change the system and the world through moral consumption choices’. The first contention of this paper is that this is a big assumption to make. As reviewed below, marketing theorists have demonstrated a plethora of psychological, political, and practical pressures that prevent consumers from closing the gap between their consumption and their conscience (e.g. Carrington et al., 2016; Caruana et al., 2016; Longo et al., 2019). As such, it may be better to think and write in terms of an ethical consumption cap. The ethical consumption cap is proposed as a concept that crystallises the insights of previous studies but also catalyses future research to investigate the various pressures that prevent ethical attitudes from becoming manifest in consumption practices. At this point, it is worth noting that ethics is a term that encompasses a wide range of issues and one that should not be reduced to, nor conflated with, the environmental crises of climate change (Carrington et al., 2021). Thus, while this paper focuses solely on sustainability for the benefit of analytical depth over descriptive breadth, it should be asserted from the outset that the ethical consumption cap can also be applied to other ethical domains such as modern slavery, human rights, animal welfare, and so forth.

The ethical consumption cap contributes to a small but steadily growing body of marketing scholarship that problematises the very possibility that capitalism can become sustainable (Kilbourne et al., 1997; Borland and Lindgreen, 2013; McDonagh and Prothero, 2014; Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016; Carrington et al., 2016). However, the concept should not be taken as a call to continue
fetishising the individual. This would simply swap research that tries to ‘close the gap’ for research that tries to ‘raise the cap’. Rather, the ethical consumption cap should be thought of as a ‘provoking theory’ (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2021: 504). While the gap invites researchers to come up with micro-level solutions, the cap is somewhat more suggestive of an absolute limit, inspiring researchers to look elsewhere for transformative opportunities. This leads to the second contention of this paper - the real problem is not (un)ethical consumption but rather (a)moral marketing. While Chatzidakis (2015) is right to suggest that markets have become more morally-charged than they were in the 20th century, it can be said that much more can be done to raise the average morality of markets.

Although market-based progress should not be fetishised (Cronin and Fitchett, 2020), and although non-market solutions will also be necessary (e.g. Casey, Lichrou, and O’Malley, 2020; Chatzidakis et al., 2021), mobilising the morality of markets may significantly reduce harm in the chain of economic activity (Polonosky et al., 2003), or at least buy more time for postcapitalist possibilities to emerge over the horizon (Cova et al., 2013). Our argument, in short, is that the human condition combines with contemporary consumer culture to make the ideal of a consistently ethical lifestyle almost impossible to achieve (Coffin and Egan-Wyer, 2021; Lambert, 2019). The solution, therefore, is to seek consistency in the relational duties that exist between multiple market actors. We draw on Grayling (2019) to define these relational duties as ‘moral’, in contrast to the individualistic discourse of consumer ‘ethics’. Our intention is not to suggest a final definition for morality or ethics, but simply to use the delineation to help advance important conversations at a time when time is running short. With this aim in mind, we follow the ethical consumption cap with another concept designed to encourage a more relational approach: mean market morality.

**Never mind the gap!**

Critical questions about the compatibility of marketing ideology and ethicality began to be raised as early as the 1960s (Carson, 1962; Meadows et al., 1972; Kemper and Ballentine 2019). Notwithstanding early exceptions (e.g. Fisk, 1973), it took several decades before such questions appeared more regularly in mainstream marketing journals (McDonagh and Prothero, 2014; Kilbourne, 2004; Press and Arnould, 2009; Prothero and Fitchett, 2000; Prothero et al., 2010; Shultz and Holbrook, 1999; Thøgersen and Crompton, 2009). Even when they did, the proposed solutions to fundamental dilemmas like the (un)sustainability of ever-expanding markets were often premised on change within the existing system (Kemper and Ballentine, 2019). In short, marketing scholars typically promoted incremental reformation rather than radical transformation. There are some notable deviations from this rule, namely studies arguing that ‘business as usual’ is not enough and calling for a reconfiguration of the dominant social paradigm in order to transition to a sustainable way of life (Borland and Lindgreen, 2013; Kilbourne et al., 1997; McDonagh and Prothero, 2014). However, the majority of sustainability-related marketing articles do not address the macro-level values, institutions, and logics that prevent markets from becoming sustainable (Kemper and Ballentine, 2019). Instead, they focus on the micro-level ‘issue’ of individual consumers and how they make choices on the basis of sustainability criteria.

Studies at the micro-level have consistently observed an ‘attitude behaviour gap’, which describes the differences between what consumers say they care about and how they actually choose to consume in real-world scenarios (Shaw et al., 2016). In the context of ethical attitudes and consumption behaviours, this discrepancy has been described as an ‘ethical consumption gap’ (Carrington and Neville, 2016; Carrington et al., 2016). Detailed analyses have followed, seeking to explain why the gap emerges and how it might be closed (e.g. Auger and Devinney, 2007; Belk et al., 2005; Bray et al., 2011; Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Carrington et al., 2014; Chatzidakis et al., 2007; Connolly and
Prothero, 2008). However, these studies tend to assume that consumers are sovereign, self-aware, and largely stable decision-making subjects.

Such assumptions have been questioned by critical marketing scholars, who have highlighted the various ways in which consumers are disempowered by the market (Böhm and Brei, 2008; Bonsu, 2009; Varman and Belk, 2008), denied transparent self-knowledge by unconscious processes and structural forces (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011; Cluley and Dunne, 2012; Hill et al., 2014; Cluley and Desmond, 2015), and fashioned into more fragmentary and fluid subjectivities by the schizophrenic speed of increasingly digitised, de-territorialised, and detraditionalised societies (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020). Indeed, some argue that the subject is so fluvial and fractured that they are best described as products of subjectivation, insofar as they are subjected to forces outside their awareness and subjects of such powers (Hietanen et al., 2020). Taken together, these studies suggest it is increasingly unlikely that critical subjects, those who might mount a sustained and significant challenge to the unsustainable status quo, will emerge from within consumer culture (Lambert, 2019). Such perspectives hold out the hope that critical thoughts and actions may emerge from a serendipitous coalescence of forces within and between bodies (Coffin, 2021), but critical marketing theorists may wish to do more than hope (Coffin and Egan-Wyer, 2021).

Although macro-level and micro-level studies tend to differ significantly in most substantive areas (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011), in relation to sustainability there are overlapping insights (Arnould et al., 2019). Akin to their critical and interpretive colleagues, marketing theorists of a psychological bent have noted that information asymmetries make it difficult for consumers to assess which market offers are ethical (Francis and Davis, 2014; Kaiser et al., 1999; Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018; Young et al., 2009), unequal access to resources prevent some from acting ethically even with full information (Aschemann–Witzel and Niebuhr Aagaard, 2014; Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000; Francis and Davis, 2014; Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018), and embodied cognition means that additional processing of complex information is fatiguing (Longo et al., 2019; Connolly and Prothero 2008; Moisander 2007). However, while the psychological school of thought assumes that individual or micro-level consumption can be made more sustainable through a series of small interventions, the macro-level and critical-interpretive approach tends to adopt a more pessimistic position based on a less favourable ontology of the consumer subject. For instance, Cluley and Dunne (2012) have shown how commodity capitalism functions as a form of symbolic violence whereby a consumer can satisfy their sense of superiority by indirectly exploiting others (see also Zwick, 2018). Meanwhile, Bradshaw and Zwick (2016) have highlighted how the sincere but flawed faith in business sustainability is driven by a ‘fetishistic disavowal’ of the truth – rather than make any radical changes to actually solve the challenge of climate change, consumers and other market actors act as if business-based solutions will be enough because they unconsciously enjoy the process of (self-)destruction. Both of these studies suggest that, deep down, consumers do not desire to be ethical, in relation to sustainability or any other substantive domain.

For our purposes, the most relevant macro-critical analysis is the study of the ethical consumption gap by Carrington et al. (2016). Their argument is that the gap between attitudes and behaviours (or, in this case, ethics and consumption) is a false one. It is an individualised framing of the problem perpetuated by marketers and researchers to direct attention away from systemic issues. As Carrington et al. (2016: 33) conclude, ‘even if ethical consumption were to happen in reality, it would not be able to resolve capitalism’s underlying contradictions that rest on creating insatiable desire and consumption excess […] indeed, there is something tragic about maintaining the gap as a symbolic act when marketers realise that little would truly be resolved by closing it’. In short, market actors promote the idea of a ‘gap’ because it suggests the problem is with individual consumption choices, not with the market system that market actors are economically and emotionally invested in.
As such, it might be said that the ethical consumption gap no longer appears as an unexpected phenomenon that needs to be explained. It is, rather, an illusory problem that derives from faulty assumptions that need to be explained away.\footnote{1}

Despite such expert critical analyses, the ethical consumption gap persists as a pervasive heuristic, a scholarly shorthand, because it is practical rather than perfect. Unfortunately, this practicality can also be problematic, insofar as it hinders fresh thinking about the wicked problem of sustainability (Caruana et al., 2016; Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016). These same critical analyses also show that simply deconstructing a popular concept is rarely enough to discourage its use; instead, reconfiguring it may be more effective. Thus, the next section of this paper seeks to replace the idea of an ethical consumption gap with the similar, yet distinct, concept of an ethical consumption cap.

The cap is also an intuitive but imperfect concept, but it is arguably more helpful than the gap when it comes to addressing the issues outlined above. While a ‘gap’ engenders questions pertaining to discrepancies between desires and deeds, a ‘cap’ serves as a rhetorical reminder that the ethical actions of consumers are constrained by a range of forces beyond their direct control. Thus, we propose that the phrase ‘ethical consumption cap’ can be applied to describe all the forces that introduce a dampening or delimiting effect on a consumer’s attempts to choose ethically. We add that the ethical consumption cap intends to highlight the impossibility, and thus undesirability, of seeking out solely individualistic solutions to the collective problem of sustainability. In the section that follows, we look to the extant literature for some specific caps that have been shown to apply to consumer choices, before turning to some systemic solutions under the second heuristic concept of this paper – mean market morality.

**Why is ethical consumption capped?**

To recap, an ethical consumption cap suggests that individual consumers may act as ethically as they can within the parameters of various psychological, sociological, economic, political, ideological, technological, and material forces. These downward pressures on the subject limit, or ‘cap’, how ethical they can be. As an illustrative example, consider the consumption decision about what kind of milk to add to one’s morning coffee. The responsible consumer may choose soya milk, widely claimed to be better for the planet than dairy milk because of its smaller carbon footprint (Guibourg and Briggs, 2019). This decision may then be counterbalanced by the evidence that expanding soy plantations often encroach into virgin rainforests, given their location in Brazil and other countries whose current political elite endorse economic growth over environmental protection (Rajão et al., 2020; Campbell, 2015; Leahy and Schipani, 2018). Yet, given that most of this soy goes into feeding cattle (Soyatech, 2017; WWF 2020), the decision to switch milk products becomes even messier. Perhaps it would be best to switch to oat or almond milk instead? They, unfortunately, come with their own environmental costs, such as water usage and pollution (Guibourg and Briggs, 2019), and sometimes seemingly ethical producers enter into allegedly unethical partnerships (e.g. Helmore, 2020). Indeed, this highlights how supply chain infrastructures are ever-shifting in hyper-competitive and globalised market systems. This means that even if a ‘more ethical’ decision can be identified today, the same decision might be less ethical tomorrow. It is clear from the example of dairy alternatives that the quest for sustainability is rife with uncertain choices that threaten to overwhelm even the best-intentioned consumer at every turn.

But how might we analyse these examples to identify common caps and theorise their effects? Many of the pressures that cap ethical consumption come from without. As dairy demonstrates, knowing which activities and products are actually sustainable can be extremely challenging for consumers. In recent years, products and services are explicitly marketed as
sustainable’, ‘eco-friendly’, or otherwise marked as ethical (Chatzidakis, 2015), yet in many cases these may be acts of ‘carewashing’, or ‘corporations trying to increase their legitimacy by presenting themselves as socially responsible “citizens,” while really contributing to inequality and ecological destruction’ (Chatzidakis et al., 2020: 891). Although consumers are increasingly likely to research ethical claims and put pressure on companies with their collective ‘gaze’ (Caruana and Chatzidakis, 2014), production processes are often too complex and changeable for individual consumers to assess. One might also acknowledge cases where companies deliberately obscure or ignore the less desirable consequences of their business models, such as downplaying modern slavery in the supply chain (New, 2015), knowingly using a chemical that has now tainted the blood of almost all living creatures on Earth (Rich, 2016), or profiting from forced labour camps (Kossof, 2020).

Even where information is freely available, ethical intentions may also be capped from within, by disavowed unconscious desires to consume in order to demonstrate one’s superiority over others (Cluley and Dunne, 2012), or thanks to a lifetime of socialisation into pro-consumption values (Egan–Wyer, 2019), where happiness is always one purchase away (Shankar et al., 2006). In instances where altruism comes to the foreground of consciousness, it may compete with other considerations like cost or convenience (Carrigan et al., 2004; Davies et al., 2012; Gregory–Smith et al., 2013; Cairns et al., 2013), especially in situations like Brexit or Covid where survivalist instincts take over (Kerrane et al., 2021). Consumers may employ a form of ‘bounded rationality’ to make sense of these conflicting forces but also maintain a sense of self as ethical (Newholm, 2000). Put differently, consumers can often find eminently rational reasons why they cannot make an ethical purchase in a given situation, allowing them to still identify with ethical values in the abstract. Alternatively, consumers may feel guilty at having ‘failed’ to achieve the high standards that they have set for themselves. This conscious sense of guilt may then linger, taking the form of an unconscious guilt that then inspires more unethical acts as subjects seek to have something concrete to attribute their displaced sense of guiltiness to (Chatzidakis, 2015).

Ethical consumption caps will vary from person to person and over time and space, so the cap is best used as a performative device rather than a precise measurement. By this we mean that it can be understood as a concept, in the sense that it helps to make sense of market phenomena and provides a building block for theoretical explanations or provocations (MacInnis, 2011)², but for us the primary role of swapping the gap for a cap is to (un)consciously encourage scholars to resist the responsibilisation of individual consumers and instead ask more of other market actors. While a gap places ethical responsibilities on the individual consumer, the cap acknowledges how consumers are set up to fail the ethical consumption test because they are capped by a coalescence of psychosocial factors. But this acknowledgement should not be taken as a further act of consumer responsibilisation (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014). As noted earlier, this reconceptualisation does not simply transpose the task of ‘closing the gap’ into one of ‘raising the cap’. Echoing Carrington et al. (2016: 33), ‘the point is not that ethical consumption cannot happen’, but ‘that little would truly be resolved’ by finding ways to raise the ethical consumption cap.

Although the agency and accountability of individuals should not be entirely disregarded, the cap is an attempt to foreground the near-impossibility of the ethical consumption challenge. This is a point already made by critical marketing scholars like Bradshaw and Zwick (2016), but one that continues to be drowned out by a deluge of sustainability discourses from mainstream academics and practitioners, many of whom still (more or less inadvertently) invest in the ideological fantasy of market-based progress (Cronin and Fitchett, 2020). This is why we position the ethical consumption cap as a performative device or helpful heuristic. Put plainly, our contribution is not to develop a radically new way of thinking, but to ‘revise’ radical ways of thinking with a framing that we hope
will make these ideas more influential than before (see MacInnis, 2011). Yet, even if the cap is incredibly influential, we acknowledge that it simply reframes the problem in a way that efficiently encapsulates extant critiques. It does not provide a solution to the issues raised by these critiques, most notably the immanent issue of capitalism as a socioeconomic system. In a sense, neoliberal capitalism can be thought of as a collection of capping forces, an inherently unethical system (Cluley and Dunne, 2012; Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016; Carrington et al., 2016) that delimits the development of truly ethical lifestyles by shaping the choices of consumers and other market actors. While it may be possible to work within the current system towards more ethical ends, these will be capped by the ‘post-politics’ of capitalism unless political demands move societies toward alternative socioeconomic systems (Chatzidakis et al., 2012; Cronin and Fitchett, 2020). Although one should be wary of scapegoating capitalism at the expense of other forces (Cof fin and Egan-Wyer, 2021), it can still be asserted that the potential of the ethical consumption cap is itself capped by an eponymous emphasis on consumption. As such, it may benefit from being complemented by another conceptualisation that moves the focus of thinking elsewhere, onto the market systems that generate ethical consumption conundrums in the first instance.

When in Rome: from ethical consumerism to mean market morality?

The ethical consumption cap is meant to reinforce a more sympathetic and nuanced understanding of the ethical consumer’s role by situating it within a wider structural context. It is also intended to redirect attention and action toward the real, but rarely acknowledged, problem at the heart of the sustainability challenge – the relative amorality of markets. While ethics and morality are often used interchangeably, these two terms have subtle but significant distinctions. As noted by Grayling’s (2019: xvii) in The History of Philosophy:

“ethics’ comes from the Greek ethos meaning ‘character’, whereas ‘morals’ derives from a coining by Cicero from the Latin mos, moris (plural mores) which means ‘custom’ and even ‘etiquette’. Morality, accordingly, is about our actions, duties, and obligations, whereas ethics is about ‘what sort of person one is’, and although the two are obviously connected, they are equally obviously distinct.”

With these etymological roots in mind, it makes sense to distinguish between ethical acts, which communicate the character of the actor, and moral acts, which represent the relationship between an actor and a wider duty or obligation. A tacit deployment of this distinction can be discerned through a careful re-reading of the marketing literature. For instance, studies of ethical (anti-)consumption tend to focus on the importance of identity, such as the anti-capitalist identity of Exarchia and its residents (Chatzidakis et al., 2012). Meanwhile morality is used to describe more systemic issues, such as the increasing moralisation of the market (Chatzidakis, 2015), or collective action, such as the ‘moral consciousness’ that motivates members of brand communities to defend each other’s interests (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001). These may overlap in practice, as when the anti-capitalist identities of individual Exarcheians motivate commitments to collective obligations, in turn regenerating the material and emotional resources necessary to sustain less market-centric identity projects at the individual level (Chatzidakis et al., 2021). However, by clarifying the contradistinctions between these two concepts and trying to employ them more consistently, new lines of thinking may emerge. We now develop this distinction through a more thorough review of the extant literature in marketing. Grayling’s (2019) historical survey seeks to describe the moral or ethical positions of various philosophers, rather than developing a fully-fledged position applicable to contemporary market systems. Our argument is that Grayling’s (2019) etymological starting point can inspire us to explicate the tacit moral/ethical
distinctions within marketing theory, but we must make our own adaptations to create a workable model of market morality. To this end, the remainder of this paper follows a line of thinking that turns away from the extant emphasis on ethical consumerism toward a nascent notion of market morality that will aid those critical marketing theorists who argue that structural changes are necessary (e.g. Carrington et al., 2016; Cronin and Fitchett, 2020).

The term ‘ethical consumption’ was popularised by the magazine of the same name, first published in 1989 (Ethical Consumer Research Association, 2020), and is increasingly deployed to focus attention on the individual consumer as the primary actor. As mentioned in the previous sections, researchers have shown that ethical consumerism is increasingly espoused in attitudes but remains restricted in terms of behaviours – a gap that this paper has sought to reconceptualise as a cap. Thinking in terms of a cap problematises the idea of a powerful consumer actor who can drive market developments with their demand alone, instead demonstrating the ways in which markets engender unethical outcomes (Carrington et al., 2016; Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016; Cronin and Fitchett, 2020). For many, the solution is to turn away from capitalism altogether, looking towards communism and other postcapitalist political positions as a distant horizon of inspiration (Cova et al., 2013). Following Fitchett et al. (2014: 503), there has been a concerted effort to find or create ‘research spaces where the logic of consumption can be questioned in more critical terms, perhaps examining contexts where consumption either does not, and arguably should not, be the primary unit of analysis’. Unfortunately for the advocates of anticapitalism, empirical evidence from these studies demonstrates that alternative socioeconomic systems are difficult to scale (Hoelscher and Chatzidakis, 2020) and sustain (Chatzidakis et al., 2021). Furthermore, many forces that contribute to the ethical consumption cap are not entirely derived from capitalism, but rather biological and psychological aspects of the human condition that precede and exceed this socioeconomic system (Coffin and Egan-Wyer, 2021).

Looking across the critical marketing literature on sustainability, one is inclined to draw the conclusion that although consumption-driven, market-mediated solutions are insufficient and ideologically problematic, waiting for a citizen-led, socioeconomic alternative runs too great a risk. Campbell et al. (2019) have speculated that it is already too late, that the momentum of present-day and historic emissions means that a climate cataclysm is already inevitable. This paper adopts a more optimistic, albeit cautious and perhaps willfully naïve, position that there is still time to avert an apocalyptic scenario. If correct, finding ways to slow environmental degradation and ‘buy time’ to develop sustainable alternative systems will be necessary. In the context of sustainable capitalism buying time can be taken literally, with consumers increasingly paying for others to plant trees and ‘offset’ their emissions. Others have noted several issues with the popularisation of tree planting (Marshall, 2020; Zhang, 2020), but here it is worth highlighting how the commodification of carbon capture may entrap subjects within the event horizon of consumerist logics. This may frustrate attempts to open up spaces for truly critical thought (Fitchett et al., 2014) and action (Lambert, 2019). Yet, flipping this logic around, might it be possible to work within the current socioeconomic system to lengthen the time horizon for critical scholars and activists? In other words, might working with and in the market slow climate change just enough for socioeconomic experiments to come to fruition?

Enter Mean Market Morality, a second heuristic or performative device to help catalyse academics, activists, and other actors to demand change. Morality can be related to markets in many different ways (see Hill, 2018), but inspired by Grayling (2019: xvii) we define morality in regard to ‘duties’ and ‘obligations’. We interpret these terms as necessitating a relational ontology, insofar as most of our duties or obligations are oriented toward others, whether human, nonhuman, or abstractions (e.g. ‘the community’ or ‘justice’). Although we can speak of one’s duty or obligation to oneself, even here it may be argued that the concepts are relational insofar as looking after one’s self.
or interests often represents a relationship to past promises or future possibilities. The relationality of morality is also evoked by the term’s etymological entanglements with ‘etiquette’ and ‘custom’ (Grayling, 2019: xvii). As others may disagree with returning to these particular historical roots, and because morality is a highly charged word used in everyday language, we do not impose our interpretation onto the word ‘morality’. Instead, we distil our definition into a neologistic phrase that retains relationality but also introduces our interest in the role of market actors as (a)moral agents. As detailed below, relationality is represented as a mean between multiple actors, while the market is given an eponymous position. Taken together, mean market morality first explains how the relationships between market actors create a dynamic system of choices and consequences for other market actors, and then encourages critical marketing theorists to identify means through which these relationships can be reconfigured to raise the mean morality of markets.

They mean well, but…

When introducing market system dynamics as ‘a thriving and diverse subfield of marketing research’, begin by asking ‘how do markets change? What becomes valuable and virtuous, what becomes worthless and immoral?’ These are certainly questions that resonate with our concept of mean market morality, which is centred on the (im)moral but also on the possibility of changing relationships for the better. Two questions are raised. First, how might we analyse the mean morality of a given market? Second, how might we alter the mean morality of a given market? These are open questions best addressed through empirical research, but we conclude this paper by providing some concrete suggestions that may inspire critical marketing theorists. In doing so, we hope to explain why we chose the term mean market morality, especially given that the quantitative or mathematical associations of ‘mean’ clash somewhat with the primarily qualitative and interpretive epistemic culture of critical marketing theory. We also hope to convince readers of the benefit of thinking in terms of mean market morality. Frameworks like Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or Triple Bottom Line (TBL) are already well-established within academia and industry, but these tend to be used to assess the activities of individual organisations. Here the limitations of the ethical consumption gap may be repeated: the organisation is responsibilised and its struggles taken as a failure to live up to ethical intentions, rather than understood as a valiant effort against various caps. We are not acritical apologists for organisations - many engage in acts of carewashing or prioritise profit over people and planet - but we wish to stress that existing concepts like CSR and TBL tend towards individualising logics. Mean Market Morality (MMM?), in contrast, emphasises the need for collective or collaborative responses across organisations. We recognise that an idealised discourse of shared market morality may open up opportunities for free riding, with certain actors avoiding their responsibilities under the cover of collective action. This is why we stipulate that market morality is better understood as a mean, as this highlights the activities and inactivities of all actors in contributing to the common good. This is also why we organise this section into three main suggestions: the need to identify who is co-creating the mean market morality (‘they’), the need to interrogate the market incentives to work around the current average morality (‘mean well’), and need to intervene so that well-meaning market actors can be empowered to raise the bar (‘but…’).

First, mean market morality should not be understood as an abstract idea(l) but rather as a call for critical marketing theorists to work with multiple other actors to make a thorough assessment of a current market. Rather than individual organisations being asked to write CSR reports or to devise strategies based on their own TBL, multiple organisations could work together, and with governments, NGOs, universities and others, to assess the mean market morality of their industry or sector. There are already market-wide reports but these tend to be led by a single company like
KPMG (e.g. Threlfall et al., 2020), rather than the inter-organisational projects that we envisage here. Such an ambitious undertaking will certainly be fraught with conflicting interests, internal politics, and practical considerations, but this is why critical marketing scholars will need to understand the actors involved and their sociomaterial conditions, rather than treating mean market morality as an abstract system.

Second, and relatedly, mean market morality asks that critical marketing theorists and other actors acknowledge and address the incentives that create and sustain the mean. Why are market actors unlikely or unable to push standards, protections, and investments higher than the norm? Why do those that do remain rare, or even disappear? Why do some market actors remain below the mean? Questions like these coalesce into a more general concern: how are the relationships in a market distributed to set a moral norm from which individual actors struggle to deviate? This is one benefit of the mathematical metaphor of the mean – some markets may be visualised as clustered around the norm, so most actors act in a similar (normative or institutional) way, while in others there may be a greater standard deviation, with few acting normatively to create formal and informal institutions. In the former case, there may be competitive but also political or legal forces that make deviation difficult. In the latter, there may be more diversity but the difficulty comes from finding ways to make heterogeneous actors work together to move in a common direction. Thus, analysing how relationships are patterned is as important as knowing who is involved. It is also important to differentiate types of relational activity. In marketing theory the primary relationship between actors is that between marketers and consumers, but one must also consider the relationships between all actors that contribute to market-mediation, including products, places, and processes (Bajde, 2013). In this broader sense, market morality is a holistic perspective that asks how heterogeneous relationships interact to produce and preclude consumption possibilities within a market. By considering the consequences of these consumption possibilities, we can then make an assessment of how moral these market patterns are.

Third, once critical marketing scholars have a measure (however crude and caveated) of mean market morality, they can work toward devising interventions to improve it. As hinted above, this depends on who is involved and how their relationships are arranged. The process of trying to devise a mean measure of morality in a market will be a challenge, but even the attempt may mobilise resources and reset minds. This is another reason that we propose to make sense of market morality as a mean. We do not argue that a precise and accurate measure of morality can be provided. However, the mere process of attempting to quantify market morality will require the collection and analysis of vast and varied data sets, not to mention difficult and diverse questions in order to conceptualise a phenomenon as nebulous and nuanced as morality. As critical marketing theorists who incline toward interpretive and qualitative research, we are not keen to fetishise quantification. Yet, it must be recognised that many market actors (including consumers) are keen on quantification as a means of making sense of messy phenomena (Cluley, 2021). So, while we must still challenge the boon of big data and those who swoon over structural equation modelling (Thompson 2019; Dholakia et al., 2020), there is a strategic justification for marketing our concept under the aegis of enumeration. Critical researchers, activists, and practitioners must navigate between the Scylla of easily marketed but potentially misleading quantifications and the Charybdis of critical qualifications that do not take hold in an era of big data worship. Given the particularities of who forms relationships and how they relate, the precise interventions will vary from market to market, not to mention over time. However, we would emphasise that interventions should not simply focus on introducing new actors or relationships into markets, but also removing them.

Neoliberal thinkers typically assume that more choice is a good thing (Fitchett et al., 2014; Gabriel, 2015; Nixon and Gabriel, 2015), enabling consumers to drive market-based progress by
‘voting’ for the world that they want to live in through consumption choices (Cronin and Fitchett, 2020). In contrast, mean market morality takes account of the top-end – the most sustainable or otherwise ethical consumption possibilities – and the bottom-end – the least sustainable or ethical – with the mean market morality emerging from the average of all possible choices. This is already an established practice – within the retail field, for example, this is known as choice editing (Gunn and Mont, 2014) – but it is a politically-charged one. Thus, the value of excellent working relationships between market actors in the analysis phase of measuring mean market morality will need to be carefully leveraged into the intervention phase. How can market actors be convinced to remove immoral or less moral choices, especially if these are profitable for producers and desirable for consumers?4 Might there be unintended moral consequences for such censure, such as business closures or consumers excluded when cheaper or specialist resources are removed? We hope that the notion of mean market morality may help with this – if this term can be popularised it may help to legitimate such interventions in the minds of consumers, policy-makers, and others, just as the infamous nudge theory has legitimised altering ‘choice architectures’ even within the halls of neoliberal governments (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009), albeit primarily because such alterations benefit free markets (Dholakia et al., 2020). It is perhaps worth noting, at this point, that firms’ ethical intentions are also capped, because of limitations related to price competition, supply chains, distributors, subsidies, taxes, shareholder expectations, and so on. Thus, mean market morality may legitimate interventions that enable firms to act differently but with some oversight or collective gaze (Caruana and Chatzidakis, 2014). This is important because Bradshaw and Zwick (2016) have, quite rightly, critiqued the concept of business sustainability, where businesses are entrusted to address climate change with limited oversight from government. But mean market morality goes further, acknowledging that governments are also capped by various factors – most notably, limited election cycles that can encourage short-termism and a proclivity for popular policies (Krznaric, 2020). Rather than wait for one market actor to start a virtuous cycle, mean market morality is best mobilised in medias res, by bringing together multiple actors at once to move the mean, however slightly, recognising that they are all capped in various ways.

### Concluding remarks

Critical marketing scholarship has problematised the ethical consumption gap (Carrington et al., 2016), as well as its underlying neoliberal assumption that consumers and businesses can be left alone to solve the climate crisis and other ethical issues (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014; Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016; Cronin and Fitchett, 2020). This paper builds on these excellent studies by proposing an alternative term, the ethical consumption cap, which may help to redirect attention and interest away from the problematised gap. In short, existing research has undermined the gap but without an alternative it may continue to circulate and exert its insidious influence. Indeed, Carrington et al. (2016: 33) assert as much when they conclude that ‘there is something tragic about maintaining the gap as a symbolic act when marketers realise that little would truly be resolved by closing it’, and then ‘call on marketing researchers to refocus their investigation from the ethical consumption gap to the marketing construction of the gap and the underlying capitalist structures that predicate and benefit from it’. The ethical consumption cap is a response to this call by allowing marketing researchers and other stakeholders to refocus away from the gap whilst remembering the insights of critical marketing scholarship in relation to this concept.

Mean market morality is also a response because it provides a focus for these redirected attentions. It reinforces the key messages of critical marketing scholarship: that the gap was constructed in order to responsibilise consumers and minimise calls for marketers to become more moral (Carrington et al.,
2016), that businesses left to their own devices will not rise to the challenge of climate change (Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016), and that market-led solutions to the problem of sustainability provide a profitable, but politically limited, form of progress (Cronin and Fitchett, 2020). At the same time, mean market morality runs against the grain of most critical marketing scholarship, as it seeks to mediate between the acritical mainstream and the ambitions of anti-capitalists. It asserts the obtuse position that working with the current capitalist market system may buy more time for alternative socioeconomic systems to provide more equitable and enduring postcapitalist solutions to climate change and other ethical-moral crises. We are careful to avoid writing within the current capitalist market system, as we have argued that all manner of actors, including governments and non-profits, must also act to move mean market morality in the right direction. Throughout this paper we have described these as market actors in the consequentialist sense of the term (Bajde, 2013) – entities whose actions affect and are affected by market logics and market infrastructures.

Future research will need to find ways for academics, activists and other actors to shift sentiments in favour of accepting necessary interventions. Currently, government interventions that impose restrictions are likely to be interpreted as overly paternalistic, even communistic, by influential neoliberal commentators. For instance, any call to ban meat and restrict food options to locally grown, vegan produce owned by fairly paid communes would be roundly critiqued in the mainstream media. While some may turn to nudge theory to negotiate the tensions between choice and intervention (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009), more critical alternatives could also be found. As just one example, Nixon and Gabriel (2015) turned to psychoanalysis to explain how consumerism can also be processed in the unconscious as a form of pollution, motivating consumers to withdraw somewhat from the valorisation of choice. While future research may advance by building on any number of theoretical traditions, mean market morality insists on a common focus in the form of relational duties. While not a full solution, this is at least a move away from the fetishisation of choice at all costs that seems to pervade neoliberal logic. Other avenues of future research could be to consider where ethical consumption is heavily capped, such as food deserts and other areas where poverty puts undue pressures on the consumer. These may serve as case studies to further highlight the difficulty of consuming ethically, but also acute empirical contexts that can flesh out the theoretical arguments made in this paper. Future research may also attend to those who simply do not care about consuming ethically. Our theory-development has presumed that everyone wants to consume ethically but cannot due to a number of factors, but we acknowledge that this may not always be the case. The question of how to approach these apathetic (or willfully unethical) consumers will also need to be addressed. Another area that needs to be addressed is the conflation of ethical consumption with the more specific phenomenon of sustainable consumption. Sustainability is just one of many (albeit interrelated) ethical issues, including also issues like modern slavery, animal welfare and institutional racism. One could purchase a product that is very sustainable but also profits from child exploitation in the supply chain. Conversely, someone else may choose a service that avoids animal cruelty but is unsustainable in terms of the amount of single-use plastics and carbon-intensive electricity used. The interrelated but irreducible character of these different issues represents an important and interesting line for future research to take. It is for this reason that we have chosen to think and write in terms of an ethical consumption cap, so that future researchers can conceptualise all manner of caps and their interrelationships.

Regardless of which avenues future researchers choose to take, we wish to reiterate that our arguments about ethical consumerism should not be misconstrued as a call to find ways to raise the various caps that affect individual consumers. We, like Carrington et al. (2016), treat the ethical consumption gap/cap as a fantasy of individual agency promoted to misdirect critical attention away from the systemic issues of capitalism. We, like they, are critical of the idea that a number of
individuals have enough agency to make the world a better place, even if they achieved the ideal of entirely ethical consumerism. Our turn from the ethical consumption cap to mean market morality is an attempt to acknowledge and aver this individualised approach to sustainability. But even then, this runs the risk of slipping into the fantasy that business sustainability is enough to save the world (Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016; Carrington et al., 2016). A relational understanding of market systems is now well-established (Bajde, 2013; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014), but ‘duty’ is a concept that has received far less attention. Indeed, while ethical considerations have moved rapidly up the agenda, morality remains rather underappreciated. In line with Grayling’s (2019) etymological excavation, it might be said that this is because ethics focuses on the character of the individual, and thus fits into the framework of the sovereign consumer in a market of multiple choices (Carrington et al., 2016). Morality does not fit easily into this framework. As Chatzidakis et al. (2012: 511, emphasis added) write, in ethical consumer culture ‘all that is left is a playing out of an impotent consumer culture and a condition of post-politics with activism reduced to a series of alternative purchase decisions [...] and moralistic dismissals of consumers’. The relational duties of morality are dismissed as restrictive in a consumer culture where individuals become accustomed to atomised identities with only loose commitments to people, practices, and perspectives (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). Relational duties are also increasingly difficult to sell to subjects living in ideologically-polarised echo chambers – how can a coalition be built between the anti-capitalist left, the centre ground of the status quo, and the anti-consumers of the far right (Cambefort and Pecot, 2020)? This paper has sought to tread a theoretical path between the left and centre, but more work will be needed to make mean market morality more mainstream. Our suggestion here is meant to mobilise more morality within market systems, buying time for further research and practice that can promote collective and critical responses to issues like climate change. Thus, Chatzidakis (2015) is right to suggest that moral issues have become more prominent in marketing discourses, but often only as a synonym for ethical consumerism and market morality, demanding less from the former and more from the latter.

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Notes
1. The authors acknowledge Bajde et al. (2013) as the inspiration for this evocative turn of phrasing.
2. We specify this sense of the term concept as others would (and have) defined concepts and their relationships to theory differently (see Bajde et al., 2021), but for present purposes MacInnis’s (2011) understanding is sufficient.
3. To help make sense of our compromising stance, it is worth noting that considering postcapitalism is the first author’s preferred choice, while the second author is more pragmatic in emphasising the need to work with capitalism.
4. Limiting choices does not necessarily imply limited choice. We suggest merely that certain choices are removed from the market so that consumers are not solely responsible for researching and choosing ethical options. The overall number of choices could be maintained if innovative alternatives are introduced. Indeed, mean market morality may be achieved not by restricting capitalism per se, but by mobilising the creative destruction that has been lost in the ‘neo-feudalism’ of recent years (see Zwick, 2018).

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