Drawing on depth interviews with eight socially conscious consumers, this study explores the way socially conscious consumer orientations can help to foster the kinds of prosocial orientations, such as a concern for others, that facilitate civic and political engagement. The data suggest that these consumers reap several private benefits from their socially conscious choices (authenticity, social embeddedness, empowerment, and self-actualization) while also helping to secure broader public virtues, such as a clean environment or workers' rights. In so doing, they face certain costs (such as inconvenience and limited choice), but these sacrifices are reframed as pleasurable. This perspective challenges conventional, republican views of citizenship that see individuals as selfless and sacrificing for the sake of a common, greater good. Instead, these socially conscious consumers embody an alternative kind of citizenship in which the acquisition of private, self-serving benefits is inextricably linked to the pursuit of broader, collective virtues.

**Keywords:** political consumption; motives; citizenship; depth interviews

Consumer culture is often criticized for the deleterious effects it is assumed to have on civic connectedness and concern for the social good. The rising trend of socially conscious consumption, such as buying fair-trade products, offers a challenge to this view of consumer behavior. However, there is insufficient research empirically testing the ways socially conscious consumption and civic and political engagement are related. To date, the modest amount of scholarship that does explore these connections is largely conceptual and assumes a negative relationship, with consumer preferences winning out over civic ones. The research outlined here challenges these shortcomings. Using a series of depth interviews, I demonstrate that

*Lucy Atkinson is an assistant professor in the Department of Advertising and Public Relations at the University of Texas at Austin. Her primary area of research focuses on the intersection of politics and consumer behavior, particularly among young people.*

DOI: 10.1177/0002716212448366
socially conscious consumer orientations can help to foster the kind of prosocial orientations, such as a concern for others, that facilitate civic and political engagement.

Accepted wisdom among critics of consumer-oriented civic involvement holds that this consumer focus fosters individualism and self-interest at the expense of a collective orientation and that it redirects civic action away from the political realm to the corporate arena. Equating consumer behavior with politics, critics say, breeds self-interest and submissiveness, individualizes civic culture by eclipsing collective elements of citizenship, fails to challenge the legitimacy of the capitalist system, and preferentially positions those who have sufficient economic capital to participate while marginalizing those who do not (Bennett 1998; Carter and Huby 2005; Schudson 1991; Stolle and Hooghe 2004). The concern is that politically motivated consumers will be civic-minded only to the degree that their own issues can be resolved and will avoid collective action aimed at resolving more generalized societal issues. The data in this study, which were analyzed using an existential-phenomenological approach, suggest such fears may be overstated. Among socially conscious consumers, marketplace behaviors offer a viable and meaningful way to connect their private concerns with concerns for their community, both near and distant. It is by attending to their private, individual concerns that consumers address moral and ethical issues at the collective level. Socially conscious consumption taps into and encourages a kind of enlightened self-interest whereby concern for the self, as expressed through consumption, facilitates concern for the collective.

Although considerable scholarly work paints the relationship between civic concerns and consumer interests as contentious, with the two being incompatible, a small and growing body of work questions the simplistic logic that reduces consumption to a social ill that is antithetical to “real” republican values. These less critical voices argue that the merging of politics and consumption has the potential to inspire solidarity and common purpose, empower individuals in the market, offer people an easy and enjoyable way to enact their civic duties, and conform to the norms and realities of a postmodern, rights-oriented society (Bennett 1998; Giddens 1991; Norris 2002, 2007).

These trends embody what scholars have referred to as the changing norms of citizenship. Dalton (2008) has argued that the more conventional view of citizenship, embodied by the dutiful citizen, is giving way to the engaged citizen. The former puts a premium on electoral participation, such as voting, while the latter is turning away from these institutionalized expressions of citizenship in favor of individualized, direct forms of action, such as boycotting. Norris (2002) explains this shift as one away from the “politics of loyalties” to the “politics of choice.” Dalton’s view echoes Bennett’s (2005) reconceptualization of citizenship norms, which he breaks down into the dutiful citizen and the self-actualizing citizen. Similar to Dalton (2008), Bennett’s self-actualizing citizen versus dutiful citizen (or AC/DC model) posits that the dutiful citizen is aligned more closely with conventional means of political engagement and is based on expectations of
understanding the basic workings of government and becoming informed about issues. The self-actualizing citizen, on the other hand, sees political engagement in very personal terms, motivated by a desire to enhance the quality of his or her personal life and social relations rather than to support government institutions.

Against this broader backdrop of changing political norms and behaviors, this study sought to clarify the relationship between personal consumer motivations and collective social concerns. It was driven by the following research question: How do socially conscious consumers connect their individualized consumption practices to their public roles as citizens? The data suggest that in their capacity as socially conscious consumers, individuals are able to manifest their concern for others through attention to the self.

Alternative hedonism. Soper’s (2007, 2008) model of “alternative hedonism” is a starting point to understand the synthesis of self and other in socially conscious consumption. She proposes that rather than being entirely selfless or altruistic in their prosocial consumer choices, socially conscious consumers adopt a self-interested disaffection with consumerist consumption. The good life, which up until recently consumers have pursued with gusto, now represents contentious terrain. Consumption, especially affluent consumption, is complicated by its negative side effects, such as pollution, congestion, overwork, stress, anxiety, and the potential for consumption to preempt other enjoyments. For example, in many cities, congestion from cars has brought traffic to a standstill, clogged the air with pollution, and left public transportation wanting.

It is in this space of disaffection, anxiety, and concern that Soper proposes a “consumer whose privately experienced and self-interested needs may come to encompass public goods and the gratifications of a more socially accountable consumption” (2007, 205). For example, individuals may choose to bike to work instead of adding to automotive congestion, noise, and pollution. In his carnivalesque approach to understanding socially conscious consumption, Thompson (2007) cites a similar but older example. Before cars dominated the roads, horses were the main form of transportation, and similar to cars today, they were seen as a public health menace. Horse manure posed significant health and quality of life issues for residents; cars were seen as the solution. In both examples, threats to self-interests are the energizing force, or, as Thompson writes, “nothing mobilizes consumer-citizens to social activism more than shit in the face” (2007, 119).

Soper (2007) also contends that for the alternative hedonist, this decision to consume differently is motivated by not only selfish desires to limit the unpleasant consequences of consumption but also by the enjoyment to be had in consuming differently. For the individual who chooses to bike to work instead of drive, cycling offers enjoyment in and of itself (such as fresh air, a self-directed pace, sociability with other riders)—enjoyment that cannot be had behind the wheel of a car. “One is talking here of a response that may in part derive from altruistic concern for the global ecological and social consequences of the consumerist lifestyle, but is also reflecting an altered—or now changing—conception
of self-interest. In this conception, the individual acts with an eye to the collective impact of aggregated individual acts of affluent consumption on consumers themselves, and takes measures to avoid contributing to it” (Soper 2007, 211).

The study described here expands on Soper’s framework by offering an explanation of the process behind self-interested attention to the wider social good. Specifically, it is proposed that consumers engage in a process of making pleasurable compromises and trade-offs. Socially conscious consumers reap a number of benefits (beyond the simple acquisition of goods or services) by engaging in prosocial consumption. A socially conscious consumer is defined as one “who takes into account the public consequences of his or her private consumption or who attempts to use his or her purchasing power to bring about social change” (Webster 1975, 188). In so doing, the socially conscious consumer is aware of both the individual and the collective qualities of his or her choices (Micheletti, Føllesdal, and Stolle 2003). These individual and collective qualities reflect the fact that individuals may be motivated by private virtues, public virtues, or a combination of the two (Micheletti 2003). For example, a mother’s decision to buy organic food may be motivated by a concern for her family’s health as well as a concern for the farmers who cultivate the produce.

Socially conscious consumption is more encompassing than political consumption, which is generally defined as either boycotting or buycotting (see, for example, Dalton 2008; Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005). In this form, political consumption operates essentially as either a carrot or a stick. Consumers punish (boycott) those companies whose values and politics they disagree with and reward (buycott) those companies whose values and politics they agree with (Baek 2010). Socially conscious consumption, though, can entail consumer choices that are motivated not by punitive (or rewarding) concerns, but by a desire to bring about the kind of environment that benefits society as a whole. For example, a socially conscious consumer might buy only fruit that is in-season because it puts less stress on the environment. Such a decision is not a form of boycotting or buycotting, per se, but it is a way for consumers to manifest their prosocial concerns through private shopping choices.

Across each informant interview in this study, four particular and interrelated themes emerged: socially conscious consumption as authentic, as socially embedded, as empowering, and as self-actualizing. For each of the socially conscious consumers interviewed, the reasons behind certain consumer choices were clearly energized by personal concerns, such as family health. And while broader social concerns—such as the environment or animal rights—played into their consumption calculus, individuals did not differentiate among these different collective concerns or prioritize one over the other. As explicated below, these collective benefits were thought of as a package, and working toward them was part and parcel of enacting the individual’s own self-interest. This self-interest was tempered through a process of compromises and trade-offs that were rationalized as enjoyable and pleasurable.
Method

This study draws on Soper’s notion of the alternative hedonist to understand how socially conscious consumers connect their private consumer practices to public social goods. It relies on a series of depth interviews with socially conscious consumers aimed at understanding the meanings they ascribe to their consumer choices. These meanings are uncovered through existential-phenomenological (E-P) interviewing and hermeneutic analysis (Thompson 1997; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). Depth interviews consist of one-on-one, semistructured conversations with informants. The benefit of this kind of technique lies in the richness and detail that conversations can yield. In particular, depth interviews focus first and foremost on the consumer and her lived experience, allowing her the space to describe the consumption act in her own words and at her own pace without leading questions.

Participants and procedure. To explore the consumption as politics thesis, a group of white, middle-class, college-educated consumers who self-identify as socially conscious were interviewed, using the E-P approach, about their consumer practices and motivations. Literature about socially conscious consumption indicates that socially conscious consumers tend to be middle class, well educated, and white, as they are the individuals likely to have both the means and the opportunity to engage in socially conscious consumption (Stolle and Micheletti 2005; Ward and de Vreese 2011; Webster 1975). It is important to note that this leaves out those consumers who might be motivated by conservative issues, such as buying American-made products or boycotting businesses that clash with conservative values, such as Ford, Ikea, and Subaru, because of the inclusion of same-sex couples in their advertising. However, socially conscious consumers tend to be found among the ranks of Democrats and liberals/moderates more so than among Republicans and conservatives (Baek 2010; Berlin 2011; Micheletti 2003).

Informants were recruited from a small midwestern city in two phases: first, through the researcher’s extended social network; and second, through these informants’ social networks. In total, eight informants were interviewed over the course of two months in spring 2009. Although all informants were white and middle class, they represent a relatively diverse group in terms of age, occupation, gender, and family structure, as described in Table 1. Six of the interviews took place in the informants’ homes, one took place in the researcher’s home, and one took place in a coffee shop. They were all semistructured and lasted between 35 and 85 minutes, yielding eighty pages of transcribed interview notes. The interview format was informed by the E-P approach advocated by Thompson, Locander, and Pollio (1989). As such, although the researcher relied on a brief interview guide, the interviews were allowed to develop freely and naturally.

Analysis of the transcribed interviews followed the guidelines suggested by Thompson (Thompson 1997; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). The interviews were interpreted within a hermeneutical framework, with each
informant’s story being understood in relation to the broader contextual backdrop of socially conscious consumption. Analysis followed Thompson’s three stages of intracase analysis, intercase analysis, and contextualization of the conceptual framework.

Results

Socially conscious consumption for these informants was an oblique means of being political. That is to say, these individuals thought of their decisions to buy local food, or ride bikes instead of drive, or farm at a community garden plot as civic-minded; but that did not fit their conception of what a “citizen” is or ought to do in the conventional, republican sense of the word. There was a shared feeling of obligation and responsibility to help to build and maintain a strong community and to foster the values and beliefs that are conducive to democratic stability, but no one thought of this as “political.” Instead, it was framed as being a good person. This echoes the findings of scholars (e.g., Bennett 2008; Dalton 2008; Zukin et al. 2006) who have shown that those born after 1965 (i.e., Gen X and the Millennials) do not think of themselves as formally “political” and are more likely to opt for the civic route to engagement, by volunteering or boycotting, for example, than the conventional political route, by voting, for example.

This notion of being a good person was also punctuated by self-interest and private motivations. When Emily described how her regular visits to the farmers’ market fit into her sense of civic responsibility, she identified how supporting the farmers’ market was a way of helping others by helping herself. “We’re shaping the culture of our city. If we don’t support them then they’re not going to be

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Sophia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Tamara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Joanne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Wendy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Emily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Tyler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Mike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Jared</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. These informants had temporarily opted out of paid employment and were, at the time of this writing, full-time stay-at-home mothers.
here, and then that’ll change the dynamics in the city. That’s more like shaping your city, making your community what you would like it to be.” In this view, civic responsibility via consumer behavior is informed by securing private interests. This theme of collective benefit through personal gain ran through each of the interviews; four general categories of personal gain were identified.

**Authenticity.** Informants identified their socially conscious consumer choices as an opportunity to reflect their true selves. Buying organic food or fair trade chocolate, for example, is a chance for these consumers to enact and affirm their identities as compassionate, caring, and concerned individuals. Not being able to do so would be a form of dissonance. Jared thinks of his socially conscious consumption choices as a means to hold onto the essence of who he is and notes that if he were not able to be conscientious in his consumption choices, he would feel incomplete. “I would feel sort of hollow, and like I was walking away from my most deeply held beliefs that you should be good to other people, or to plants and animals, and you know, it wouldn’t be right.”

Tamara views her choices as a socially conscious consumer, particularly of locally produced and sourced goods, as a way to regain an authentic identity and return to a more genuine community, one that has been lost to modernization and rationalization. She cites an example of her family’s decision to switch from butter to margarine when she was growing up, a decision she reversed as an adult. About the decision, she said, “It was like, oh my god, we just got totally duped by our desire to eat something modern, and people have been eating butter forever. That’s like the local fat in Wisconsin. You could buy palm oil, you could buy olive oil, and if we lived in Greece that would probably be the right thing to do. If we lived in Africa we would eat palm oil and that would be the right thing to do. But we live in Wisconsin. The right thing to do is eat butter.” Wendy reinforces this view in her critique of food labeling that denotes industrially grown food as “conventional.” The implication then is that organic food is unconventional or abnormal, when in fact organic food represents traditional, authentic food as it was cultivated before the rapid rise in pesticide use.

This notion of authenticity is defined in part by a comparison with others. For example, Sophia recalled a visit to her friend in another state. When she learned that this individual did not recycle and actively rejected the very idea of recycling as a meaningful act, she was left questioning this person’s character, wondering if he was “really a good person.” Emily also recounted a trip she took to visit her grandmother in Florida. Emily’s grandmother gets anxious about the prospect of cooking vegetarian items. Emily knows this is a source of stress and acknowledges that she and her family could probably eat meat while they are there to ease her grandmother’s worries. But they do not; they remain true to their consuming selves.

The possibility of consumption serving as a means of finding and retaining authenticity contradicts the Marxist-based arguments made by some who insist that consumption can never compensate for the alienation workers are subjected
to by being separated from their productive labors (Zavestoski 2002). Since people have little say in production or distribution, they are left with only the realm of consumption as a means of effecting change. Socially conscious consumption, however, uncovers the patterns of production and distribution and allows individuals input into that domain. It lets consumers hold onto their authentic selves. Consumers “can gain proof of the importance of their aspirations, feel as if they have the capacity to contribute to change and claim a new kind of identity for themselves” (Sassatelli 2006, 221).

**Social embeddedness.** A second theme that emerged concerned the social elements of socially conscious consumption. Being a prosocial consumer gave individuals the opportunity to make social connections and embed themselves in a community, all while satisfying their private consumption needs. Farmers’ markets represent one of the main locations where community and consumption were bridged. Past research has identified these sites as spaces where collective-oriented moral and ethical issues are deliberated and embodied in social practices (Moore 2006). For the informants in this study, the farmers’ markets also offered direct personal benefits. Informants appreciated knowing who was cultivating or producing their food. It guarded against false advertising by providing a guarantee of sorts that the food was healthy. By being able to shake the hand of the dairy farmer producing her milk, Sophia felt that she could trust him and his promises about not using antibiotics or growth hormones.

Beyond the space of the farmers’ market, socially conscious consumption also provides these informants with information about where their money is going and to whom. Included in the mix of public benefits that informants considered (i.e., animal rights, the environment, workers’ rights, etc.) was the importance of locally grown or processed foods and commodities. Supporting local farmers, vendors, and other workers was seen as a vital component of building and sustaining community, but it also helped informants to guard against being taken advantage of or duped. Tamara buys bread from a small-scale vendor who makes it himself and delivers it to her door. Tamara enjoys the social connection she gets from the consumption interaction and likes knowing where her money is going. She also feels confident that the product she is buying conforms to her socially conscious criteria.

In addition to strengthening community, there was a strong element of fun that these informants derived from the social aspect of farmers’ markets. A trip to the farmers’ market is an event, a spectacle.

Well, I mean, some of them, one, we just have nicknames for them. “Herb guy.” It’s this really, really old man who’s got really gnarled hands, and he’s really sweet and he whistles when he talks, and his wife is there, and . . . I didn’t see him last year though. His son has been there more and more, but I also didn’t go as much last year, so, but, I’ve seen him for years. (Wendy)

Socially conscious consumption also allowed these informants to make more distant social connections. Tyler thinks about his global connections, his place on
the planet, and how his choices affect everyone as a whole. Jared thinks of the
workers who cultivate his produce, especially those who live in developing coun-
tries. “I actually think about that a lot with the bananas, especially when it’s like
a dollar more per pound. And I’m like, ‘Oh, well.’ I think about those people.
That’s one of those things that pops in my head.”

**Empowerment.** A third private benefit of socially conscious consumption that
emerged from the interviews was the benefit of becoming empowered and
informed consumers. Every informant cited a number of sources for information
about socially conscious consumption, including newspapers, magazines, docu-
mentaries, books, and interpersonal communication. Each one emphasized the
need to become informed. Tamara and Sophia are perhaps the most dramatic
examples of this, but each informant put a premium on understanding the poli-
tics and logistics behind his or her consumption patterns and choices. Sophia and
Tamara read widely about issues related to food politics and viewed their knowl-
dge acquisition as part and parcel of their consumption lifestyles.

Being informed facilitates the need for authenticity. Sophia, for example,
draws on her wealth of expanding knowledge to make sure she is living the right
kind of socially conscious lifestyle. She sees herself as personally implicated in the
production-consumption cycle, so she needs to be informed to make the best
decisions. For example, Sophia consciously decides to keep meat in her diet,
even though she is an animal lover. In deference to animals and their sacrifice,
she has learned all she can about how to prepare and cook different cuts of meat.

> It became really important for me to know how to make the most of that, and so I started
learning. I can now use things like ham hocks, you know, which I wasn’t able to do
before. It’s been really important for me to learn to use all of that if I’m going to. . . .
I’m now implicated, right? If I’m going to be a carnivore, it means these things.

Not only does being informed help to bolster an individual’s identity and
secure her or his authenticity, it is also partly a defensive mechanism. Knowing
where food comes from, who is producing it, and under what conditions helps to
ensure that the individual can be true to his or her socially conscious consumer
motivations and avoid being duped.

> Part of the point is knowing about your food, and so you can’t just rely on a USDA
organic seal or whatever the new seal is going to be. Because if big companies find out
that that’s what sells, then they’ll find a way to get that seal on their product, and it
doesn’t necessarily mean that the intention, spirit, the reason for doing it is intact.
(Tamara)

Sophia, for whom avoiding national and transnational corporations is an
important factor, recounted the time she learned that a seed company she had
originally been led to believe was small and employee-owned was actually a sub-
sidiary of Monsanto. “It was just really defeating. Yeah, it was. So when Johnny’s
sends me their seed catalog, and it says employee-owned, I want to believe that.
And so I guess I just felt like Johnny’s Seeds, the subtitle says employee-owned and I feel like they lied.”

Information allows these consumers to guard against such deceit. Brunori (2007) has argued that this empowerment, which he defines as the process by which individuals or groups increase their capacity to control their environment, is vital to understanding how socially conscious consumption appeals to consumers and helps to sustain their practices.

**Self-actualization.** The final theme that emerged was that of self-actualization. Adopting a socially conscious consumer lifestyle is an ongoing process, one that allows the informants to work toward their full potential as citizen-consumers. Whereas authenticity, as described above, refers to the way socially conscious consumption allows an individual to stay true to the current conception of self, self-actualization refers to the way socially conscious consumption facilitates an individual’s growth and evolution into the person he or she hopes to become. As a self-actualizing force, socially conscious consumption is a loose blueprint, a trajectory that allows individuals to realize their full potential. It underscores the fact that socially conscious consumption is a means to an end, an ongoing process, a way to achieve certain goals of personal development.

In terms of her socially conscious consumption choices, Sophia referred to herself as “a work in progress.” The narratives of each of the informants suggested that this was true for each of them. Becoming socially conscious had been a years-long evolution. For all but two, it started decades before with giving up meat and switching to a vegetarian diet. Although a couple of these informants have since gone back to eating meat, the logic of care and compassion that was behind the initial decision still informs their other consumer choices.

In their evolution as conscious consumers, information and becoming informed were vital parts of the process. As informants learned more about the back story and impact of their consumption choices, they felt implicated and compelled to act. Tailoring their consumer choices was an effective way of maintaining a consistent, authentic identity that saw the self as other-minded and politically aware. Consumption as a means of self-actualization was demonstrated several decades ago by Brooker (1976), who showed that socially conscious consumers were likely to be more altruistic and other-minded, two dimensions of self-actualization. Drawing on Maslow’s (1968) theorizing about a hierarchy of needs, Brooker maintained that socially conscious consumers were concerned less with lower-order physiological needs and were focused more on higher-order issues.

Indeed, socially conscious consumer repertoires have been shown to align neatly with identity projects of self-realization or morally transformative behavior (Kozinets and Handelman 1998). Consumer actions, especially boycotting, are “tool[s] for self-elevation and realization. Boycotting behavior allows a consumer to differentiate herself from ‘the crowd,’ to stand above them, particularly in terms of defining a personal morality that has ‘evolved’ beyond hedonistic commercial interests” (Kozinets and Handelman 1998, 477).
These four emerging themes suggest that for socially conscious consumers, enacting citizenship through consumption reaps rewards for the individual while at the same time working toward meaningful social change at the local and global levels. These socially conscious consumers benefited by becoming empowered and socially connected, by finding authenticity in their lifestyle choices, and by working to realize their moral potential. These private and personal benefits were not at the exclusion of broader social gains. Rather, these socially conscious consumers supported local economies, animal and workers’ rights, environmental sustainability, and economic redistribution.

Translating these private choices into public goods is made possible through a series of compromises and trade-offs. Each informant noted how his or her consumption choices entailed a degree of effort and sacrifice, but these sacrifices were made willingly. Rather than focus on the cost (literal and figurative) of leading a socially conscious consumption lifestyle, informants focused on the enjoyment such compromises brought. By reframing the extra effort as a source of potential pleasure and as another possible benefit, the informants were able to reconcile the burdensome side of prosocial consumption with the self-interested, private motivations that underpinned it. The interviews yielded three categories of cost or sacrifice that informants reframed as pleasurable.

*Being overwhelmed with information.* While becoming an informed consumer was a central benefit of adopting a socially conscious consumer outlook, it also opened up the possibility of becoming overwhelmed with too much information. Sophia recounted several anecdotes of how her struggle to become an informed consumer—knowing which clothing companies did not employ sweatshop labor or which seed companies were locally owned—was a massive task. And every so often, she would learn something new that undermined her previous assumptions (for example, she had unwittingly been buying seeds from a company owned by Monsanto).

Rather than feeling defeated, though, Sophia and other informants reframed the situation as a learning opportunity and a chance to acquire more knowledge, to be armed with more facts. This learning process was defined as enjoyable. Tamara, for example, emphasized the pleasure she got through knowledge, particularly about her consumption choices. “I feel happy knowing where my food comes from.”

*Spending more money and making more grocery trips.* A very practical burden that the informants had to deal with was the additional capital required to buy these prosocial commodities and the multiple shopping trips required to fulfill a grocery list. Joanne, for example, goes to three different stores in different parts of the city to buy everything on her list. One of the stores, a co-op, is the farthest from her house. Traveling to it is inconvenient and the food is expensive, but Joanne reconciles the higher cost and logistical inconvenience by viewing it as a treat because the quality of the produce is “incredible.” In a perfect world, she says, she would shop there every day.
Most of the socially conscious food items that the informants bought—local meat or raw milk or farm-fresh eggs—had a price premium. Emily estimated that she spent a significant portion of their budget on food each week, but it was worth paying the price. Wendy makes a similar point:

I feel like that’s where most of our money goes. But I guess it’s sort of one of the things I’d rather spend my money on than other things. I mean, we don’t go out. We don’t really drink much. Well, I don’t drink at all anymore. I mean, sometimes I think ‘Wow, we could have more money for travel, or those kinds of things.’ But that’s important for me. And I worked in a lot of restaurants, and my past boyfriends were the chefs of restaurants, so I’m used to living in a house that’s all about food.

This quote exemplifies how the cost of socially conscious consumption is not only rationalized and justified but transformed into something that she associates with pleasure and enjoyment—being surrounded by quality food.

Limiting choice. A final area of compromise involved a self-imposed limiting of choice. It was not always possible to find products that met an informant’s standards. For example, Emily and Tamara make an effort to buy locally and to limit their food consumption to produce that is in season. Walking through the grocery store aisles and seeing items they could not buy—fresh tomatoes in February—was a source of temptation. Sometimes, Emily would reward herself and give in. “Sometimes we splurge and get a pineapple or something. But you know that you’re splurging more, like this is out of season. And it’s not local.” More often than not, though, Emily would resist temptation and postpone her consumption of produce until it was in season. Doing so offered another layer of sensory and emotional enjoyment. By postponing pleasures, they were that much more enjoyable when she did give in. “We like the excitement, like, ‘Oh, strawberries are here!’”

Discussion

The themes explicated above indicate that socially conscious consumers pay attention to the collective good by meeting their individual private interests. Each of the informants had adopted a socially conscious consumption lifestyle that enlarged his or her own benefits and increased the return on his or her investment. Informants garnered a number of rewards, mostly experiential, by positioning their self-interest as part of the consumption equation. These rewards and consumption choices also led to a number of obstacles or burdens—information overload, logistical difficulties, restricted choice—that consumers had to resolve. This was done by reframing the costs as sources of enjoyment.

Virtue ethics offer an explanation as to why these informants would alter their consumption habits to benefit others while also benefiting themselves. In understanding socially conscious consumption behavior, three philosophical approaches
are often relied on: deontological, consequentialist, and virtue ethics. According to consequentialist ethics, ethical conduct is defined by the outcome of consequences or actions. Within deontological ethics, individuals act ethically because it is the right thing to do, regardless of the outcome. Both these views consider self-interest to be an obstacle to altruism and ethical behavior. Virtue ethics, however, acknowledges “enlightened self-interest in caring for others” (Barnett, Cafaro, and Newholm 2005, 17).

Whereas consequentialist and deontological approaches focus on duties and responsibilities, virtue ethics is concerned with the good life and how to achieve it. The good life here is one that leads to well-being, maximizes moral self-realization, and fosters harmonious social relations and intellectual development (Cafaro 2001). Socially conscious consumption fits neatly into this ethical view and recognizes that these kinds of consumer choices are “not simply a matter of wholly selfless beneficence” but are a combination of “other-regarding and self-regarding virtues” (Barnett, Cafaro, and Newholm 2005, 14). Informants in this study embodied this ethical approach by making the consumption choices they did, such as buying organic food, because it served them while also serving others. It allowed individuals to become, as Soper (2007) terms them, alternative hedonists.

Consumption here becomes much more mindful and deliberate. And although it offered rewards for consumers, it also introduced a new set of costs, such as having to pay more for the organic food or shopping at a store that was not conveniently located. These costs were reconciled back into a virtuous self-concept by reframing them as sites of pleasure.

Work by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) offers insight into how consumers might transform consumption costs into benefits. Hirschman and Holbrook argue that commodities should not be thought of simply in terms of their utilitarian or functional attributes—as object entities—but as subjective symbols. Consumers engage in hedonic consumption when they impart subjective meanings to objects and incorporate emotion into their consumer practices. This emotional aspect muddies the simple cost-benefit analysis that rationalizing consumers are assumed to make but also explains why consumers will make decisions that are not always the easiest or most cost-effective. “There are contexts in which emotions such as love, hate or jealousy will override consumers’ economic decision rules based on deductive reasoning” (1982, 94). Instead of focusing on the problematic aspect of consumption (“the store is difficult to get to” or “I can’t eat strawberries in January”), the informants emphasized the potential joy (“the store delights my senses” or “the wait for in-season strawberries makes them taste that much sweeter”). Emily underscores this mental readjustment: “We don’t feel like we’re sacrificing anything really. It’s all a gain.”

By understanding the informants’ consumption practices through a virtue ethics lens, it is possible to understand how socially conscious consumers privilege their private wants while also benefiting the collective good. As alternative hedonists, socially conscious consumers consider collective benefits when
engaging in consumption but are initially motivated more so by the individual benefits that accrue. Indeed, it is through the private concerns of socially conscious consumers that consumption can work to effect social change.

These patterns also suggest interesting implications for what it means to be civic-minded and for conventional notions of citizenship. The results indicate that rather than being distinct realms, consumption and citizenship overlap; the individualized benefits of the marketplace share common ground with the other-minded concerns of the civic sphere. That is, for the socially conscious consumer, private rewards are indistinguishable from public benefits. Buying organic bananas secures private virtues (a healthy family) while simultaneously working toward public virtues (safe working conditions for farmers). This is in contrast to the conventional republican view of civic-mindedness, one that defines citizenship as selfless and altruistic. Individuals are expected to sacrifice some of their own resources—be they material or social—for the benefit of unknown others and the larger social good. For example, one donates money to charity to help others. Consumption, on the other hand, is frequently seen as devoid of any kind of selflessness or concern for others. Consumer behavior is critiqued for being motivated by a calculus that takes into account only personal cost-benefit analyses. It is self-directed and materialistic, whereas citizenship is other-directed. Rahn argues that the consumer-oriented postwar generation has turned away from government and other citizens in favor of “an unhealthy emphasis on making money and acquiring possessions” (1998, 2).

This distinction assumes that consumer behavior is selfish and that citizenship is selfless. The data in this study challenge this dichotomy. They support previous work that argues that this distinction is overly simplistic and misses the fact that a great deal of consumer behavior is focused on other people, for example, through gift-giving or providing treats (Miller 1998; Schudson 2007). Bennett (1998) has pointed out that materialism has its benefits and does not automatically equate with greed or selfishness. For example, drawing on Weber’s analysis of the origins of capitalism, he points out that materialism inspired solidarity and purpose. Micheletti and Føllesdal (2007) underscore the political philosophy of Iris Marion Young, who put forward a social connection model of political responsibility, in which “shopping implies a practical and personal moral responsibility or commitment to those who create consumer goods for us. In this way, consumer goods are de-commodified, politicized, and imbued with morality because consumers’ act of choice among them has ramifications for others, regardless of the views of governments” (p. 173).

When it comes to socially conscious consumption, private benefits and public benefits are homologous. The socially conscious consumer acquires benefits in the form of greater authenticity, stronger social connections, marketplace empowerment, and steady headway in becoming the kind of socially aware and concerned individual he or she aspires to be. At the same time, these private benefits come with concomitant public or collective benefits, such as a cleaner environment or safer working conditions. As with the conventional view of the selfless, sacrificing citizen, socially conscious consumers also face costs and
compromises, both material and psychological, such as increased costs and information overload. However, these sacrifices are readily accepted by socially conscious consumers who are able to reframe them as enjoyable and beneficial.

References

Baek, Young Min. 2010. To buy or not to buy: Who are political consumers? What do they think and how do they participate? Political Studies 58 (5): 1065–86.


