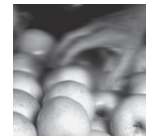

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Constructing and communicating an ethical consumer identity: A Social Identity Approach

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Abstract
In recent years the adoption of ethical criteria when making consumer decisions has gained increasing popularity and has been studied as a way of moving towards a more sustainable consumption–production paradigm. Much research has focused on what motivates people to engage in ethical consumer behaviours considered as the expression of an ethical self. However, there is a limited understanding of the construction and communication of these ethical selves. By focusing on how members of Spanish "Responsible Consumption Cooperatives" construct and communicate their ethical identities, this study sheds light on the underlying social psychological processes of ethical consumer behaviour from a Social Identity Approach. Findings from the multi-method qualitative study reveal how consumers negotiate their perceptions of ethics and respective behaviours through the construction and identification of in-groups and out-groups and communicate their shared social identity through different consumption practices, such as the deliberate avoidance of brands/symbols that embody the values of the consumerist society.

Keywords
ethical consumer, consumer communities, identity construction, social identity, qualitative, identity communication, Responsible Consumption Cooperatives

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Introduction

In contemporary societies, consumption has been recognized as central to the construction of the self (Belk, 1988; Hsieh and Wu, 2011). Firat and Dholakia (1998: 2) propose that ''understanding ourselves as people who consume may explain much of what we are about as human beings, since [..], consumption is much of our life''. In the marketing literature it is argued that consumer choices are the extension of the self in the sense that consumers adopt products and practices that they perceive as congruent with their personality, lifestyle and social role (Belk, 1988; Kleine et al., 1993). In addition, consumers show their membership of, or exclusion from, specific social groups through their consumption choices (Bearden and Etzel, 1982; Cherrier, 2005; Madrigal, 2001).

In this context, further research is required to advance the understanding of how individuals construct their identity by associating with a social group such as a consumption community, including mainstream brand communities and consumer subcultures (Mafessoli, 1996; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), as well as more radical counterculture consumer groups such as the anti-consumption movements (Cherrier, 2009; Portwood-Stacer, 2012) and the ethical consumer movement (Cherrier, 2005; Shaw and Shiu, 2003). In this study, we focus on the members of Responsible Consumption Communities (RCCs) of the ethical consumer movement in Spain. By theoretically sampling members of RCCs that Eisendhart and Graebner (2007) would refer to as extreme cases or extreme exemplars in terms of the opportunities they present for revealing an unusual and understudied phenomenon, such as non-mainstream consumer subcultures, we intend to advance current understanding of how ethical consumers construct and communicate their identity and to provide more in-depth insights into this process.

Ethical consumers are broadly defined as individuals whose consumption decisions are guided by a variety of social, political and environmental concerns, including animal cruelty, human rights, environmental degradation or anti-capitalist sentiments (Low and Davenport, 2007; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007). According to Newholm (2005), ethical consumer behaviour encompasses a wide diversity of conducts and concerns that may even be competing or contradictory, as individuals hold different conceptions on what constitutes ethical consumption. For example, Shaw et al. (2006: 1056) indicates that ''while many in the anti-consumption movement view marketing and capitalism as part of the problem in overconsumption, many consumers are using that very market system to influence producers and suppliers and find solutions illustrating the complexity of ethical consumer behaviours''. Recent years have seen a significant increase in the presence of ethical consumer groups, both online and offline. It has been argued that in order to extend our understanding of this movement, research should examine ethical consumers in their social contexts, as part of the ethical movement, rather than as individuals acting alone (Newholm and Shaw, 2007; Papaoikonomou et al., 2012).

The objective of this paper is to contribute to the knowledge on ethical consumer behaviour by examining how consumers construct and communicate their

identity as they participate in ethical consumer communities. More specifically, the study considers how the construction and communication of identity is influenced by associating with specific social groups and by engaging in ethical consumer behaviours. In terms of context, we chose Spain to explore consumers' narratives, because empirical evidence from this context is limited, and involves the collective purchase of products according to ethical criteria that are decided by the group. These ethical criteria usually include (i) supporting local and small farmers, (ii) offering fresh, seasonal and organic products, (iii) avoiding all intermediates. It is worth mentioning that the researchers did not presuppose the ethicality of these criteria. They emerged when respondents were asked about the ethical criteria they use as their bottom line for purchases. These criteria are similar to the Community Supported Agriculture programmes (CSAs) (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007), even though they differ in terms of their functioning. For instance, unlike CSAs, members of RCCs do not buy shares at the beginning of the season. They usually pay on a weekly basis for the products they receive. A Spanish ethical magazine and the cooperatives' directories were used as the initial sampling frames. Two strategies were employed to select the individual consumers and to ensure that they had a strong ethical orientation: (1) initial observation to become familiar with the groups and to establish rapport and (2) the use of gatekeepers (Cresswell, 1998) to help identify the more ethically minded individuals.

In light of the objectives of the study, an interpretive methodology is adopted to facilitate a more in-depth understanding of the experiences involved in striving to lead an ethical lifestyle (Silverman, 2000).

Regarding research methods, the authors use the ''qualitative tool kit'' suggested by Hall and Rist (1999: 295). In line with similar previous studies, such as Bishop and Hoel (2008) and Portwood-Stacer (2012), a combination of qualitative data collection techniques are employed in this study: observation, interviews (including focus groups) and document analysis. Table 1 describes the main characteristics of the research techniques employed. The use of different research techniques facilitates triangulation and testing of data validity. Other data quality control measures used are the peer audit and member checks (Cresswell, 1998). Peer audits were used as three different researchers checked the results and the interpretation of the data. Member checks were possible given the ongoing nature and duration of the fieldwork. This included explaining rough drafts of the findings to some of the participants to get their feedback on their accuracy.

Observation (both online and offline) helped the researchers to establish rapport with the cooperative members (Goode and Greatbatch, 2005), as in most cases members at first appeared distrustful of the study. The scope of the observational focus is quite broad: participants' interaction in the physical setting of the cooperative, communication through emails, dressing style, etc. In some cases, researchers would simply act as spectators. On other occasions the researchers completely immersed themselves ''in the setting as full participants'' (Patton, 2002: 265), chatting informally with participants, going for lunch, sharing a car ride, etc.

Table 1. Research design of the study.

Research method	Main characteristics
Observation	Online (mailing lists and websites of ethical communities) and traditional observation in physical settings (visits to the communities and to events organized by them. In the traditional observation, a field notebook was kept during the observational process. In the online observation, information was sourced through subscription to mailing lists of two groups resulting in 178 mails for the first group and 85 mails for the second one. Total duration of research technique: 14 months.
Focus Groups	Four Focus Groups with 32 participants. Sessions lasted from 90 to 120 minutes and all took place in the setting of the ethical consumer communities. All sessions were tape-recorded and videotaped. They were then transcribed verbatim.
In-depth interviews	Nine in-depth informal interviews followed with duration of 40 to 120 minutes taking place in diverse settings selected by the interviewees. All interviews were tape-recorded. They were then transcribed verbatim.
Document analysis	Analysis of documents provided by the communities (e.g. statutes, objectives of group) and of an online magazine written and published by the members of the groups. In this magazine, the participants of the cooperatives would write articles on various topics related to sustainability. Fifteen, 20-page extension issues were downloaded representing a 5-year period (2003–2008).

The interviews were conversational in nature, but a topic guide was used to make sure that the main topics were covered. The interviews and focus groups began with a general question about the main criteria employed in consumption decisions. The objective was to ask "truly open-ended questions" (Patton, 2002: 353) and to avoid directing participants' answers. We chose a sample of members from seven different cooperatives (their main characteristics are described in Table 2) with the aim of compiling a diverse sample of participants. We also carried out online observation through subscription to the mailing lists of two of the cooperatives and we regularly visited all seven cooperatives to observe as non-participants. In addition, it should be noted that during the fieldwork, we visited events at which many more cooperatives groups were present. We also visited the websites of many different cooperatives and held informal conversations with members of cooperatives apart from the seven described here. For the interviews and focus groups we sampled 41 consumers (25 women and 11 men), all of whom were active members of the seven cooperatives. They were aged from their late 20s to late 50s and most of them had attended higher education.[1]

Document analysis complements the other data collection methods, as unlike the other techniques, it does not involve any mediation from the researchers. In this study, the documents offered access to information that represented a 5-year

Table 2. Main characteristics of sampled cooperatives.

Characteristics **RCCs**	Location	Operating characteristics	Organizational structure	Size/ members	Phase of development
RCC 1	Provincial city	Open on daily basis	Shop open to public Discounts to members	170	Mature phase, web under construction, 30 years old
RCC 2	Provincial city	Orders every two months	No ceiling decided	26	Early phase of development, no warehouse, no web, not constituted legally yet, 2,5 years old
RCC 3	Urban	Open once per week	Ceiling of 45 F.U.	45	Established, web, highly organized, 13 years old
RCC 4	Urban	Open once per week	Ceiling of 40 F.U.	40	Established, web under construction, 4 years old
RCC 5	Urban	Open once per week	Ceiling of 30	24	Established, blog on the web, 9 years old
RCC 6	Provincial city	Open once per two weeks	Ceiling of 10–12 F.U. and maybe future intention to be open for the public	9	Early phase of development, 2 years old, no web of the group of consumption, not legally constituted
RCC 7	Suburban	Open once per week	Ceiling of 30 F.U.	30	Established, web, 5 years old

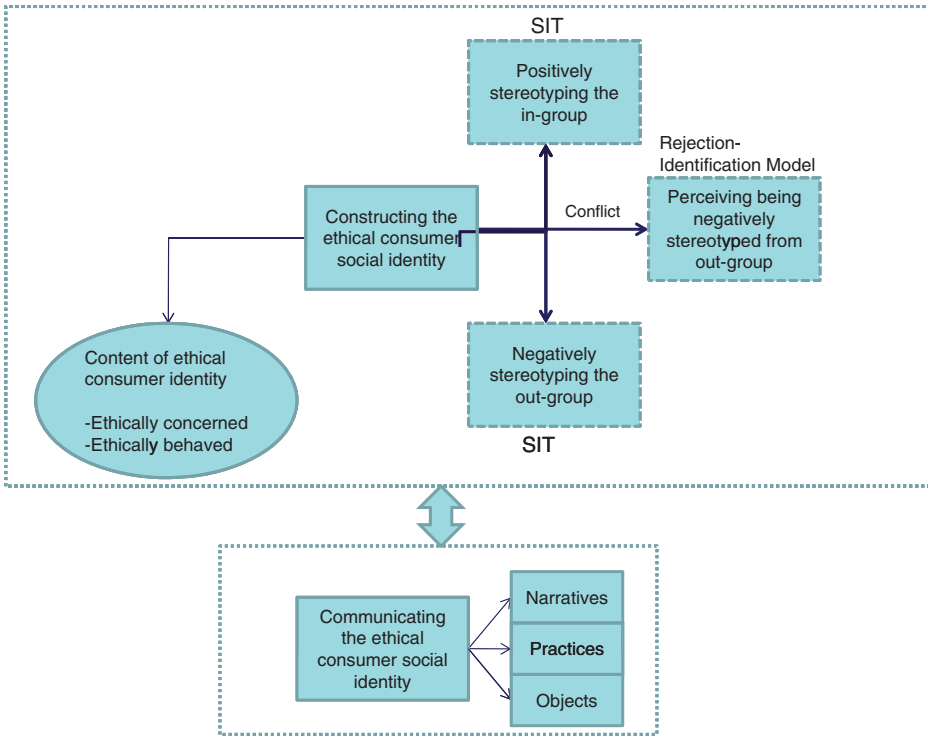

Figure 1. The process of construction of an ethical consumer identity.

period. According to Patton (2002: 559) "checking about the consistency of what people say about the same thing over time" is a form of triangulation of qualitative data sources.

To organize and manage the large volume of data generated and to increase data transparency, we used N-Vivo software in the data analysis process. Similar to the analytical process adopted by Bishop and Hoel (2008), we initially created multiple codes/themes. This was followed by the further refinement of these codes as the data analysis proceeded. The interpretation of the data is outlined in the themes in the following section and summarized in Figure 1. When we completed the data analysis, we returned to the literature and discovered a fit between our emergent model and Social Identity Approach (SIA) as a suitable theoretical framework.

Findings

This section explains the findings of the study on ethical consumer identity and how this is constructed and communicated through consumption.

To be or not to be an ethical consumer: The core valued dimensions of the ethical consumer identity

Although there are a number of definitions of the ethical consumer (e.g. Cowe and Williams, 2000; Strong, 1996), these are generally researcher driven, in so far as they do not adequately identify what makes a consumer ethical from the perspective of the actual ethical consumer.

Therefore, during the interviews and focus group sessions, participants were asked whether or not they considered themselves ethical. Although they often rejected the term ''ethical'' as excessive and demanding, they recognized their commitment to certain principles in their purchases, both within and outside the cooperative. These include buying local produce, fair labour practices and sustainable production patterns. However, most of the participants prefer to be seen as active and responsible consumers with a critical view of consumption, rather than being labelled as ethical consumers. They believe that the term ''ethical'' is inflexible and does not allow for the inconsistencies that form part of their everyday reality, such as when they opt for the easy but not necessarily ethical choice (Rosa, Focus Group).

> Kat (Focus Group): Man, being ethical would be ideal! But it is difficult to be consistent all the time!

These behavioural inconsistencies are also observed in other studies on ethical consumers (Chatzidakis et al., 2007; Szmigin et al., 2009) and seem to be the reason for the rejection of the label ''ethical''. Nevertheless, even though many participants reject the term ''ethical'', we will use it throughout this manuscript in order to be consistent with the terminology employed in the literature on this topic.

In spite of the partial rejection of the term ethical, participants see themselves as ethically conscious. The next step was to advance our understanding of the complex process of how the participants mark the boundaries of their ethically oriented in-group. Interestingly, although participants form part of an ethical consumer community, membership is not seen as a boundary that differentiates the ''ethical in-group'' from the out-group. Neither is it the core dimension when these consumers define their identity.

Instead, participants consider consumers that are engaged in the following behaviours as part of their in-group.

> *Active involvement with the operation of the cooperative*: This is a way to demonstrate commitment and involvement with the ethical project. For instance, some of the participants explain how many hours they spend at the cooperative keeping the accounts, cleaning, organizing the products or looking for new producers. Furthermore, the consumers that are perceived as ethically oriented by the other RCC members generally participate in most assemblies and other meetings, where all decisions are taken by consensus.

> Albert (Interview): Very few are implicated in an active way, maybe fifteen out of a hundred. We held an assembly a week ago and there were twenty people.

Participation in other activities within the context of the cooperative: This involves organizing or participating in seminars on ''cooking ecologically'' or even political activism, such as collecting signatures for campaigns against Genetically Modified Products (GMOs).

> Xavier (Focus Group): We started participating in campaigns. We joined the ''Catalonia free from plastic bags campaign'', ''Supermarkets, no thanks campaign'' and the one on the regulation of genetically modified products.

It is evident in the narratives of the participants that the cooperative represents more than just a place to buy fresh vegetables and fruits. As Montse (Focus Group) mentions: ''If you are here [in the cooperative], it's because you're looking for something''. The respondents value and invest in the political dimension of the cooperative. For example, the magazine TROC is published by the members of various cooperatives with the objective of becoming ''a vehicle for ideas, reflection, news and activities of consumer groups in Barcelona on issues related to consumption, ecology and new social movements''. This goal is reiterated on the first page of each issue.

Lifestyles generally characterized by political and civic activism: According to the founder of one cooperative, if people are really interested in social and environmental issues, they are usually involved in different social, political and environmental initiatives. She herself participates in the local trade union, in the management of a local alternative magazine and of a neighbourhood-based group that strives to improve the quality of life in their community.

> Rebecca (Interview): There are very few people interested in this [the Cooperatives] that will say: ''This is the only thing I am involved in''. Most are involved in a million things, ... social movements. And this is how you meet each other. The ones that are really interested are very active.

Even though all respondents accept that they are not always consistent in their ethical concerns, they strive to achieve ethical lifestyles by taking part in a number of ethical projects, apart from their participation in the cooperative. These projects are diverse, ranging from neighbourhood-based groups, to volunteer work with charities and Non-profit Organizations, to simply lecturing their friends and coworkers about the importance of being a responsible consumer.

> Manolo (Interview): The majority of people we are involved in many movements.
> Tony (Focus Group): I am also part of a Christian organization. I have relatives that need help. So part of our monthly salary goes there. It's our choice.

Thus, the core valued dimensions that define their shared social identity as ethical consumers and enables them to differentiate the members of the in-group from the out-group are summed up as follows:

- the perceived existence of real ethical concerns with regards to the sustainability and fairness of the modern economic system;
- the perceived willingness to take action by becoming involved in a range of ethically perceived initiatives;
- the commitment to lead lifestyles coherent with ethical beliefs.

Given our findings, the last dimension refers to respondents' commitment and willingness to be responsible and coherent. However, as this is not always possible, it leads to inconsistencies. Indeed, previous studies such as Newholm (2005) show that, through their participation in a range of different projects (Isenhour, 2012), ethically oriented consumers engage in behaviours that are ''not intentionally ethical or unethical, but simply represent a complex balance of personal values and daily life'' (Szmigin et al., 2009: 229). The respondents of this study acknowledge this plurality of projects and the difficulty of being ethically consistent at all times. This is reflected in the language they use: ''it's a fight'', ''it's a challenge'', ''swimming against the current'', etc. Nevertheless, they value the commitment and effort dedicated to supporting projects they believe in.

With this in mind, informants do not necessarily regard all members of the RCC as ethical consumers. The cooperative is not automatically seen as the in-group. Furthermore, participants also seemed willing to include people who do not necessarily form part of the cooperative in their in-group. This included individuals who also share their ethical concerns but express these by other means, such as self-produce, participation in environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or other neighbourhood-based communities. Therefore, participants do not see their cooperative project as the only ethical outlet. They are open to new and interesting initiatives that could challenge existing market and society structures.

Our findings also confirm that participants feel part of a larger imagined community (Anderson, 1983; Shaw, 2007) on the basis of the perceived existence of other like-minded individuals. In the first focus group some of the participants spoke about the existence of very large ecological markets in other countries such as Germany, the UK and the US. They consider this as evidence of the existence of ethically concerned individuals throughout the world. Travelling and greater access to information through the rise of mass media and the Internet (Shaw, 2007) encourage these feelings of belonging to imagined communities.

Using the Self-Categorisation Theory (SCT), we observed that it is possible to distinguish between representative prototypes of the ethical consumer in the context of the RCC. These prototypes refer to the more committed individuals that try to apply their ethical principles in as many consumer situations as possible. This includes behaviours such as bringing their own plastic containers along for packaging at the supermarket or buying more expensive, yet environmentally friendly,

appliances (the trade-off between commodity or cost and ethical action exemplifies the consumer's commitment). In fact, the stricter the ethical consumer lifestyle adopted, the more the individual epitomizes the ideal ethical consumer for the rest of the members. Participants acknowledged these members as the most informed and involved members of the group and even hold them up as "heroes".

This self-categorization process by which the participants construct their identities as ethical consumers is based on the match between category specifications of an ideal prototype and themselves. Therefore, it can be referred to as the SCT Normative Fit Principle. However, this self-categorization process is also based on the SCT Comparative Fit Principle. In other words, participants also define themselves as ethical consumers to the extent that the differences between members of the ethical in-group are perceived to be smaller than the differences between members of the in-group and the identified out-groups (Haslam, 2004; Hogg and Reid, 2006). This is further explained in the following section.

Constructing the ethical consumer identity: Defining positively the in-group by negatively stereotyping the out-group

Once they are categorized in terms of their group membership as an ethical consumer and when they have defined themselves in terms of that social categorization, as predicted by Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1981), participants seek positive self-esteem by differentiating their ethical consumer in-group from the out-groups. This section describes the identified out-groups.

The process of identity construction as an ethical consumer leads to the identification of two out-groups: one inside and one outside the RCC. Within the RCC, almost all participants mention the existence of free-riders among the membership of their cooperatives. Free-riders are categorized as members who joined the coop to purchase healthy, ecological products, but have no interest in the social and political significance of their community. Thus, free-riders are perceived as interested only in their own personal, utilitarian motivations and are unwilling to participate in activities organized by the coop (committees, assemblies) or related activities outside the coop. When pointing out the heterogeneity of the membership of the RCCs, participants feel the need to distance themselves from those with no other interest besides purchasing ecological products at affordable prices. According to the participants in the study, free-riders do not constitute "genuine ethical consumers". Therefore they represent an out-group.

> Silvia (Interview): As in all groups, there are people that push more or less. It's also about the level of awareness . . . . There are people that come along and their primary motivation is consuming ecological products. And that's it! [. . .] They come with the plan "I come here, I buy, and that's it!"

Participants negatively stereotype the free-riders, portraying them as opportunists who take advantage of the benefits of the cooperative, such as the

lower price for ecological products, without fulfilling their responsibilities as members.

> Laura (Focus Group): Regarding the level of commitment, there are very active people and others that do nothing [. . .]. There is a minimum but sometimes this is not even covered! And you think to yourself: I prioritize this group and other members only come here to buy?

In this manner, an implicit process of negative stereotyping begins. The participants differentiate between themselves as active and involved consumers, and the others, as the opportunists. In this way, they enhance their self-esteem as ''genuine ethical consumers'' through positive distinctiveness (Tajfel, 1981). At the same time, it constitutes an active process of natural selection of the cooperative members. In more established cooperatives (such as the Coop 3 and Coop 5), this lack of interest might lead to the ''natural elimination'' of members. This is illustrated in the following comments:

> Jordi (Focus Group): Among us there are people that stay for a long time and others that are here for shorter periods. Some join for a year, others for just three months.
> Xavier (Focus Group): We stay because we feel comfortable here [. . .]. If people join and are not comfortable, if they're not motivated [smiling], it's not long before they disappear. So that's a kind of filter.

The lack of normative fit of the cooperative member with the social identity of the group leads to this natural and voluntary exclusion from the group.

Nevertheless, this is not always valid for younger cooperatives (such as Coops 2 and 6) that cannot afford to lose members while they are growing in size. Consequently, younger RCCs are more heterogeneous and tend to have more variety in terms of their members' motivations and ideologies. In these coops, participants place more emphasis on the different levels of commitment of members to clearly demonstrate the difference between themselves and ''the others''.

The second out-group is to be found outside the cooperative. This out-group is referred to as those who are ''trapped in the comfort of their bourgeois lives'' (this is a quote from TROC but it is also based on some interviews with participants). The participants consider this out-group as individuals who are reluctant to engage in any kind of action, as this would mean that they would have to give up their ''comfortable, easy and pleasant lifestyles''. Judit (Interview) refers to the example of some of her friends:

> My friends don't understand me . . . Idealist, Idealist! [They call her].. I think that deep down they value me for what I do. But they think it is idealism, a utopia . . . [They think] It's better to live life to the fullest, going out to bars, shopping. On Sunday afternoon they go to the latest Hollywood movie, the latest crap that is showing. That's their lifestyle.

Figure 2. Putting the blame on others.

Despite their differences, Judit perceives that her friends value her general lifestyle and her choices. This interpretation by Judit fits with previous findings in the anti-consumption literature in which the ethical consumer is seen as an everyday hero (Autio et al., 2009; Pentina and Amos, 2011). However, according to the narratives of the participants, the out-group is perceived to question the effectiveness and practical value of initiatives like the cooperative. In this way the members of the out-group seem to justify their unwillingness to participate in such initiatives. Yet for the in-group, this lack of willingness is simply a matter of avoiding responsibility, and failing to undertake the necessary sacrifices (Chatzidakis et al., 2007). This is illustrated in the two satirical cartoons taken from the TROC ethical magazine (Figures 2 and 3).

Participants mark the ideological boundaries between the in-group members who are conscious of social and environmental issues and act on these, and the out-group members who prefer to live in their ''middle-class lie'' (this emerged during an informal chat with the respondents).

The negative stereotyping of the out-group could be seen as contributing to the construction of the collective identity of the in-group. By disengaging from the out-group and by asserting ''who they are not'', the in-group affirms ''who they are''. The social identity of the group is largely created through this process; they negatively stereotype outsiders and at the same time they positively stereotype the in-group. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), when an individual identifies himself as part of a social group, his membership is reinforced by viewing the group as superior to other groups. This is key to achieving positive self-esteem and enhancing perceived *entitativity* (''the property of a coherent, homogenous group with clear boundaries and common fate'') of the group (Hogg and Reid, 2006: 10). In-group favouritism is also evident in the way participants describe their social group. For example, Clara (Focus Group) describes

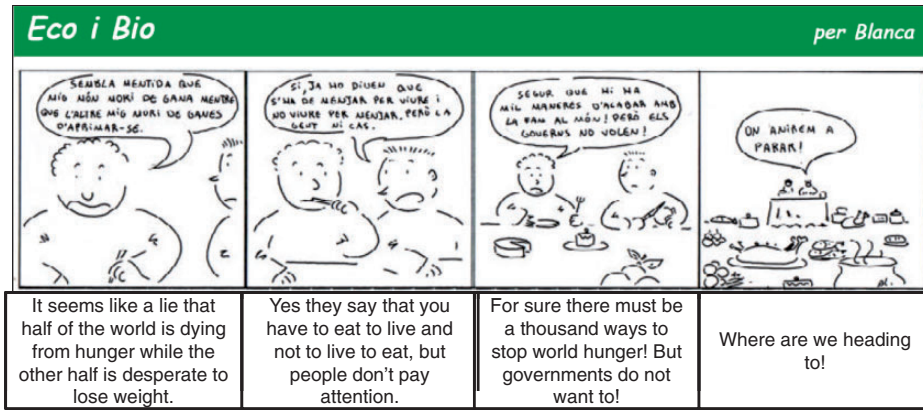

Figure 3. Putting the blame on others.

the in-group as intellectuals who strive to be coherent in terms of their ethical principles:

> Because we have a relatively higher level of studies, that's the profile here, we are concerned and we think [Xavier, another participant, nods agreeing] [...]. This is a space for reflection. You find people who are similar to yourself, have the same resources and are willing to make an effort for their principles.

"How the others see me"

Although this research is focused on the perspective of the in-group, it is also important to consider how the in-group think the out-group sees them. This is relevant for the identity construction process. This section focuses on further exploring this issue.

Participants see themselves as negatively stereotyped when acting as individual consumers and when they officially represent the RCC. In the following quotation one participant deals with the negative reactions from the out-group while representing the cooperative at a conference:

> Carmen (Interview): We attended a conference last October, invited by a wine producer who runs an eco-tourism farm, to talk about sustainable consumption and tourism. So we went along and did the presentation and then he says to us: "Well, you people are so close-minded!". [angry voice] But really, we're just survivors! After so many attacks from the outside! Look! We offer information, they invite us and we go. I think that they have a false conception of us. They say, these people, they're weird.

In further examples, participants recount the reactions they encounter when they explain to colleagues how they can reduce waste by bringing a reusable bag when shopping or unplugging appliances when leaving for vacation.

> Laura (Interview): Sometimes they look at me like thinking: This girl is stupid!
> Rebecca (Interview): Well, at times people laugh at me, but . . . They know me.
> Clara (Focus Group): People look at you in a weird way.

Participants are often laughed at or verbally reproached because of their ''non-mainstream'' behaviours. For instance, Xavier (Focus Group I) mentions that he often brings plastic containers to the market to avoid unnecessary packaging and that other shoppers often look strangely upon him. This kind of perceived marginalization is supported by Moisander and Pesonen (2002), who found that green consumers feel ''in the margin'' because they are often seen as socially deviant and radical.

It is worthwhile to mention that these findings should be understood in the specific context studied. Many of these behaviours (such as the consumption of Fair Trade products and the use of reusable shopping bags) are more or less common in different European markets (Krier, 2007) and are gradually becoming more mainstream in Spain. However, when the fieldwork was undertaken, the use of reusable shopping bags had yet to become popularized in Spain as the legislation that regulates the use of disposable bags was enforced in Spain later than many other countries (such as the US, Ireland and South Africa) (Cherrier, 2006).

Another example of this perceived marginalization is found in an article of TROC. It discusses how engaging in vegetarianism and exclusively consuming ecological products is seen as a new food disorder labelled orthorexia.

> Ferran (TROC): I couldn't understand how my vegan choice which predates carnivorism could be catalogued as an obsession. I found it surprising that the fear of hormones, dioxins, genetically modified products and other food components that are ingested by many people could be considered an illness. According to this new shitty globalization thing I cannot be a responsible consumer that worries about what he eats. I cannot know what food grows each season. I cannot check the labels of the products that I buy [. . .] They say that I am orthorexic!

Participants share these experiences with their fellow in-group members in meetings or in articles they write for TROC. These perceptions of being treated as ''different'' are shared and strengthen the awareness of participants' social identifications. According to the Rejection-Identification model (Branscombe et al., 1999), perceived discrimination may lead to increased in-group identification, which can help maintain psychological well-being in the face of societal devaluation. Therefore, on the one hand, the in-group's perception of how they are negatively stereotyped by the out-group reinforces their identity when compared to the out-group. On the

other hand, group identification buffers the perceived discrimination and marginalization.

Respondents seem to feel like a minority in their society. However, this also raises questions as to what might happen if ethical consumption becomes more mainstream in this specific cultural context. For instance, in the study by Thompson and Haytko (1997: 27), one of the respondents, who is interested in fashion, rejects highly commercialized ''looks'' and the ''pre-fabricated identity'' they offer. In a similar vein, would ethical consumers re-negotiate their consumer decisions if they cease being unique and become mainstream? For instance, Varul (2009) explains that Fair Trade consumption in the UK is a way of enacting the individual identities of the imaginative and confident middle-class British consumer (p.185). However, in Germany, Fair Trade consumers shop rationally following authority and expertise, such as well-known labelling organizations. Therefore, in terms of identity construction, the British consumer can accept more consumerist mainstreaming as they see themselves more as choosers and, hence, feel more confident to assemble an individual identity by selecting from the supermarket shelves as compared to the German consumer. Nevertheless, many participants in this study seem to mostly avoid mainstream channels; for example, they reject large-scale suppliers even though they only offer ecologic products, because they see them as part of the problem and accentuate the need for radical solutions and alternative market systems.

Communicating the in-group identity: Narratives, practices and objects surrounding the appropriation of ethical consumer identities

The previous sections show how participants construct their identity through the identification of the in-group and out-groups and the creation of stereotypes. This section presents the communication of the in-group identity through narratives as well as practices and objects, since the negotiation of shared identity is not always verbal (Kleine et al., 1993; Snell and Hodgetts, 2007; Tilley, 2006).

In this study, consumers' personal style is characterized by simplicity in their dress and the deliberate avoidance of keeping up with the ''mainstream fashion''. Informants purposefully avoid luxury brands and often mention that they use the same clothes and shoes until they wear out.

> Judit (Interview): I've had this sweater for five years and I will use it until it is completely destroyed. I do not want a closet full of clothes with different outfits for each day. The same goes for my shoes. Until there is a hole in them and water comes in, I will use them.

Wearing second-hand and repaired clothing has been previously identified as a regular choice for voluntary simplifiers as a way of de-cluttering their lives and living more spiritually (Alexander and Ussher, 2012). For the participants, wearing simple, non-fashionable clothes is a means of communicating their criticism of

excessive consumerism. This is key to their social identity, as voluntary simplicity practices enable them to feel authentic. By ignoring or even avoiding the fashion magazines' dictates on taste and style, they communicate their uniqueness and their intention to opt out of the system. Furthermore, by rejecting the mainstream, they further construct and communicate their identity. This is unlike other counterculture consumer communities in which the adoption of a certain dress style intends to shock others (Snell and Hodgetts, 2007).

Participants mention their use of cloth shopping bags that might communicate their identity (Cherrier, 2006), but unlike other communities (such as Goths) they do not use specific types of garments to signal their membership of the ethical community. On a wider level, this may be related to criticisms of efforts to employ specific garments as symbols of ethicality. Critics suggest these symbols only lead to a prefabricated identity (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). One such case is the Adbusters running shoe that was strongly criticized for reproducing the capitalist spirit that it supposedly condemned (Heath and Potter, 2006). Furthermore, some of the participants seem to enjoy defining themselves as neo hippies (''*a neo-hippy group of our times*''). However, this does not necessarily relate to their standard of dress and grooming. Instead, it refers to the ethos of the hippie movement and its independence from the mainstream consumer culture. In this sense, Pentina and Amos (2011) explain that the anti-consumerist Freegans describe themselves as ''modern day hippies''. Indeed, in order to ''blend in'' researchers consciously avoided the use of well-known clothes brands during the fieldwork.

Conclusions and future research

This study contributes to the existing knowledge on ethical consumer behaviour by showing that participants construct their consumer identity by defining their in-group (those consumers with whom they identify) and their out-groups (those consumers from whom they disassociate themselves). It also contributes to an emerging global picture of ethical consumption and thereby provides a reference point for future research on internationally different approaches to consumer activism. The results of this study suggest that the basis for the distinction between groups is not the membership of the cooperative. Rather, it is the adherence to ethical concerns and ideals and the willingness and commitment to take action consistent with these ideals. This implies that for the participants, the existence and expansion of the RCC has a political and social significance and that it is seen as a form of collective political consumerism. In this sense, this study proposes that the meaning of the behaviour (social, political and ideological dimension) becomes more important than the action itself (participation in the RCC).

So what makes a consumer ethical? As mentioned earlier, definitions of ethical consumers are mostly research rather than consumer driven. Previously, Cherrier (2005) questioned the established definitions of the ethical consumer in light of the multiple ethical concerns and many fragmented consumer behaviours that can

potentially count as ethically valid. In some cases, these behaviours are even seen as competing or conflicting (Heath and Potter, 2006).

By adopting an emic perspective (ethical consumers' perspective) in trying to define the ethical consumer, this study adds new considerations to the existing definition. In particular, it points out that merely carrying out an ethical act (i.e. participating in the cooperative and purchasing products) is not ethically valid if it is not done for the ''right reasons''. Therefore, the construction of the ethical consumer identity is based on the meaning of the actions undertaken. These meanings are constructed and negotiated within the subjectively formed in-group. Thus, the identity construction process is itself dynamic and re-negotiated.

Furthermore, this process is not only based on the positive stereotyping of the in-group and the negative stereotyping of the out-group. Participants form homogeneous perceptions of how the out-group negatively stereotypes them. This reinforces their identity as a minority group through feelings of perceived marginalization. Stereotyping facilitates the construction and reinforcement of themselves as ethical consumers, as it further distances the in-group from the out-groups.

The findings of this study shed further light on the psychological processes by which a consumer's identity is produced. It suggests that personal and social identification are entangled and constructed through constant social comparison of the in-group and the out-groups. Hence, as Jenkins (2008: 16) proposed, ''the theorization of identification must therefore accommodate the individual and the collective in equal measure'' in order to understand and contextualize the identity construction process.

Participants communicate the constructed ethical identity verbally and non-verbally, through narratives, practices and objects. They say that they adopt simple, non-materialistic lifestyles and reject the symbols of mainstream consumer culture, such as well-known brand names and fashion trends. They do so because they feel that ethical consumption should question consumption choices and overconsumption. They accept that living in a consumer society may lead to inconsistencies (Szmigin et al., 2009). They communicate their consumer identity by consciously avoiding specific products/brands/symbols that they see as embodying the values of the consumer society, and they express a sense of pride in doing so. As products such as clothing and shoes are publicly consumed (Bearden and Etzel, 1982), they are used as examples in the participants' narratives to demonstrate the group they identify themselves with. Hence, consumption is employed as a form of resistance and expression of identity. This finding is similar to other counterculture consumer movements, such as the voluntary simplifiers and anti-consumers.

It is interesting to note that although ''mainstream'' consumers ascribe positive meanings to symbols of mainstream consumption (fashion brands), these same brands have negative connotations for counterculture consumers. In McCracken's (1989) meaning transfer model, the meanings of consumption and consumption objects are socially embedded. They originate from the culturally

constituted world and move to consumer goods via advertising, the fashion system, celebrities, word of mouth, reference groups and the media. However, in line with the meaning cycle model by Thompson and Haytko (1997), consumer narratives and attached meanings are contextualized in their social spheres, personal and social histories, lifestyles and reference standards. In Thompson and Haytko's study, the interpretation of fashion varies among consumers as it relates to certain social typifications. These vary for each consumer and depend on the cultural viewpoint adopted or rejected by each individual consumer. In this study, the evidence on the simplicity of style that forms part of the quest for simpler lifestyles should be understood in the context of the specific consumer culture involved. It is likely that the participants in this study identify the same meanings that the media and fashion labels (external context) assign to consumption and to their products (Kleine and Kernan, 1991). However, in light of their critical stance on these issues and because of the participant's interactions with like-minded individuals (external context), a negative connotative meaning is ascribed to these symbols. As is also evident in Cherrier (2009), the participants in this study oppose the dominant market system, the multinationals and mass consumerism. They reject symbols of the aforementioned in order to communicate their constructed identities. However, this also raises another question: If certain ethical consumer behaviours become mainstream, will they become meaningless to the counterculture consumer groups that currently support them? Will this be because they cease to contribute to their ethical identity construction process? Low and Davenport (2005: 505) discuss the challenges of the Fair Trade movement becoming mainstream, arguing that Fair Trade may become a simple ''marketing adjective'' void of real meaning. Similarly, Özçağlar-Toulouse et al. (2010) discuss the conflicting views on the mainstreaming of Fair Trade. They suggest that the emergence of multinational firms in the Fair Trade sector may result in ''fair'' becoming a means for profitability, rather than an end goal in itself.

Drawing on the idea initially proposed by Belk (1988), the results of this study emphasize the dynamic relationship between consumer behaviour and identity. As already mentioned, much research has been focused on identity expression through ethical consumer behaviours (Shaw and Shiu, 2003), but little research has explored identity construction through the enactment of ethical behaviours. This should be taken into account in future studies.

According to our findings, individuals express who they are through consumer choices and behaviours. They attach meanings to their behaviours, which leads them to re-construct their identities. In the construction of social identity, both behaviour and its attached meanings are equally important and they are shared by the members of the in-group. In other words, the ethical behaviours, once enacted, produce meanings for the individual and permit the legitimization of the ethical self (Varul, 2009). In this study, this legitimization takes place in an ethical consumer community, a formalized group of consumers that collectively construct moral frameworks of reference. This may lead to the construction of more solid ethical identities and help overcome the ambiguity of ethical behaviours found in other

studies. This includes the ethical consumers in the study of Szmigin et al. (2009: 228) who discuss the contradictory nature of their behaviour that generates feelings of hypocrisy. In the group context, individuals get to discuss their inconsistencies and to take comfort in the fact that they are not alone in recognizing the complexities involved in making the ''right'' ethical choices.

Based on the findings of this study, two further proposals are made. Firstly, it is important to move the focus of research from identity expression to identity construction. Modern consumers make purchase decisions to show the social group they identify with, but at the same time they are gradually constructing their identity. It is important to understand this process in light of the current trend among companies to create identity-building relationships with their consumers, for example through brand communities (Cova and Pace, 2006). However, these companies' appreciation of the social and psychological processes that underlie consumers' identity construction and communication is questionable. For example: What is the content of this identity? How is it constructed through the creation of in-groups and out-groups? As Madrigal (2001) argues, the social identity derives from category or group membership, so the sense of oneness with any type of consumer community, ethical or not, is a promising area for research. Also, future studies should take into account that consumer behaviour, ethical or otherwise, is dynamic and subject to changes (Papaoikonomou et al., 2012), as is identity construction. Thus, as Hsieh and Wu (2011) discuss in their study of identity construction of gay consumers, researchers and marketers should not only focus on the stereotypical identities attached to certain subcultures. Instead, they should also explore ''neglected consumption practices used to dispose of or rebuild identity that are reflective of changing identity formation over time'' (Hsieh and Wu, 2011: 391).

Furthermore, this may be equally relevant for the marketing literature. Consumer identities are not only constructed on the fixed characteristics of consumers that have been the focus of previous marketing studies on SIA, such as gender or ethnicity. Indeed, consumer identities are constructed on fluid and subjective concepts, ideas and ethics. Therefore, it is important to explore identity construction and maintenance and identity re-construction from the consumer's perspective.

Secondly, this approach may be useful in order to understand the segmentation of ethical consumers and the identification of the numerous and heterogeneous ethically oriented consumer groups (Low and Davenport, 2007). Golding (2009: 168), using the example of Fair Trade products, argues that a ''FT marketing strategy must establish a connection with the consumer, it must appellate the self''. However, the challenges should be considered of making ethical consumer practices, objects and groups mainstream. From the perspective of identity construction, if certain products and behaviours become mainstream, they might appeal to a greater market. However, they might lose significance if they cannot be used to mark the difference between the mainstream out-groups and the alternative in-group.

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1. Interestingly, many of the participants were involved in education; some were teachers in secondary school, others were PhD students or researchers, whereas others were PhD holders, many in the natural sciences.

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