

# Recognizing consumerism as an “illness of an empty soul”: A catholic morality perspective

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## Abstract

Catholic personalist authors have been always concerned about consumerism, which is considered a radical dissatisfaction that compulsively tries to fill the emptiness of the inner self. It is a form of idolatry where malls are modern cathedrals. What are the antecedents and consequences of this moral approach, inducing consumers' engagement in anti-consumption behaviors? This conceptual paper updates the literature review about this research topic, acknowledging the thoughts written in encyclical letters of three Popes of Catholic Church: John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis. This paper also proposes a new model of ethical decision-making model that aims to describe the implications of recognizing consumerism as a moral/spiritual issue according to the Catholic Church teaching. This paper provides useful insights into the influence of Catholic teaching on the adoption of anti-consumption behaviors.

## KEYWORDS

anti-consumption, Catholic morality, consumerism, ethical decision-making model, Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis, Pope John Paul II, voluntary simplicity

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the critical vision of consumerism released by the Catholic Church impelling Catholic consumers to be more sensitive to moral issues in the buying decision context. In a long-term basis, this recognition will culminate with an increasing propensity to engage in moral and altruistic behaviors and the adoption of anticonsumption behaviors (e.g., the voluntary simplicity lifestyle) and their underlying values.

Yani-de-Soriano and Slater (2009) clarified the three definitions or meanings of the word “consumerism”. The original definition refers to manipulative advertising and marketing practices to entice consumers to buy and consume more (Packard, 1957). The second definition refers to consumer movements to protect their rights against the excesses of marketing (Kotler, 1971), nonethical practices of firms regarding political, labor, or environmental issues (*ethical consumerism*) or using political participation instruments (*political consumerism*). The third definition refers to consumerism as a consumer ideology, which suggests that happiness and wellbeing can be achieved through

consumption (Murphy, 2000). Aligning with Murphys' definition, this paper will use the term *consumerism* referring to a way of life centered on the (over)-consumption of goods and services, leading to harmful psychological and spiritual consequences.

This paper adds a fourth (spiritual) perspective rooted in Catholic Social Thought and inspired by Pope Francis' words who in *Evangelii Gaudium* describes consumerism as the “illness of an empty soul, that brings desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience” (Schlag, 2018, p.49). The acquisition of goods only provides short-term emotional and hedonic benefits. As soon as these benefits vanish, they are quickly replaced by a sensation of emptiness and dissatisfaction, which only disappear with the next buyer in an endless cycle. According to Catholic moral teaching, the source of enduring happiness and wellbeing is rooted in the “being” rather than “having”.

However, pathological behaviors such as compulsive buying will be excluded from the analysis as they configure extreme situations that must be analyzed separately.

Whereas marketing as a distinct discipline might have emerged in the early 1900s, aspects of marketing were part of most religious traditions from their earliest days (Kotler & Levy, 1969). However, the study of the fusion of profane with sacred realms increased in the 90s (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989; Cutler, 1991; Kuzma, Kuzma, & Kuzma, 2009). Two processes occurred in contemporary society: the secularization of religion and the sacralization of the secular. Examples of the last phenomenon are the influence of religious norms in consumption decision-making (Engelland, 2014), the recognition of consumerism a moral issue (Himes, 2007) or the influence of religious motives in adopting an anticonsumption lifestyle (Karanika & Hogg, 2016; Nepomuceno & Laroche, 2016). On the other hand, the influence of religion on consumer behavior has been studied by the optics of other religions such as Buddhism (Choudhury, 2019), Hinduism (Sardana, Gupta, & Sharma, 2018), or Islamism (Shaikh & Sharma, 2015).

The literature provides examples of the integration of Catholic narratives and social thoughts (Abela, 2007) in several research topics: ethical issues in marketing (Arli, 2017; Klein & Laczniak, 2009); marketing strategy development (Laczniak & Klein, 2010; Laczniak, Klein, & Murphy, 2013); nonprofit advertising (Hopkins, Shanahan, & Raymond, 2014); entrepreneurship education (Naughton & Cornwall, 2006; Toledano & Karanda, 2017); or the influence of religion on sustainability stewardship (Leary, Minton, & Mittelstaedt, 2016). However, Drenten and McManus (2016), who made a systematic review of the intersection between marketing and religion between 1981 and 2014, revealed that more research is needed to better understand the relationship between religion and macromarketing. More recently, Kurenlahti and Salonen (2018) claimed for a holistic and multidimensional approach to consumerism from the religious perspective. Moreover, Mathras, Cohen, Mandel and Mick (2016) developed a conceptual framework, which postulated that “the role of strict (vs. lenient or no) religious consumption values will moderate the effects of exhibiting self-control in a primary task (e.g., avoiding temptation) on self-control during a secondary task (e.g., food indulgence, impulsive purchases), as a result of self-regulatory strength and a focus on chronic, long-term goals”.

## 1.1 | Research gap and contribute to the field

Therefore, the discussion of the role of religion and morality in marketing related issues, (such as consumerism’s negative implications or anti-consumption behaviors), still is a topic largely unexplored by researchers. This conceptual paper aims to explore this gap in the literature by analyzing the influence of the Catholic Church’s position against consumerism disseminated by the encyclical letters of three Popes of Catholic Church (John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis). Therefore, this paper adds a moral/spiritual perspective to the ethical decision-making model (EDMM), which aims to describe the antecedents and consequences of recognizing consumerism as a harmful ideology according to Catholic teaching.

What are the sources of immoral behavior in consumption according to Catholic and Personalist thinkers? Wells (1998) states that “beneath it all [the sense of emptiness of depletion] is the same compulsion to be in a state of constant inward evaluation taking an

inventory of needs and wishes, and then reaching out for a product “to satisfy the felt emptiness and to project who we are”.

The critique of consumerism is a very popular subject among Catholic and Personalist authors. For Gay (1997, p. 220), consumerism “implies foolishness, superficiality, triviality, and the destruction of personal and social relationships by means of selfishness, individualism, possessiveness, and covetousness”. For Kavanaugh (1991, pp. 23, 26) consumerism is a Commodity Form of Life: “... we consume ideas, junk food, news, the latest unneeded plastic gadget or ... persons... anything has the potential for being sold...we are only insofar as we possess”. Later, Beabout and Echeverria (2002, p. 370) defined consumerism as “the primacy of things by emphasizing having rather than being”. Both for philosophers, theologians and social critics, consumerism implies a preoccupation with the consumption of goods and services. As claimed by Tablan (2016), the concept of consumerism may also be applied to personalized customer service. This author argues that human interaction in the emotional labor in personalized service runs the risk of alienating us from our authentic selves and from each other (Tablan, 2013).

This research topic is justified by the increasing importance of some niche market segments of consumers that adopt lifestyles that seek refuge in spirituality and religion. They are very much concerned with the morality of marketing, advertising, and management practices of brands and firms, and also with issues related to environmental and earth resources (Caruana, 2007). There is an increasing number of adherents to some alternative shopping styles, such as *frugality*, defined as the “degree to which consumers are both restrained in acquiring and in resourcefully using economic goods” (Lastovicka, Bettencourt, Hughner, & Kuntze, 1999, p.88). Alternatively, *voluntary simplicity* or *downshifting* is seen as the degree to which an individual selects a lifestyle intended to maximize his/her control over daily activities and to minimize his/her consumption and dependency (Cowles & Crosby, 1986; Craig-Lees & Hill, 2002; Lastovicka et al., 1999; Leonard-Barton, 1981; Shaw & Newholm, 2002). According to Brown and Vergragt (2016), millennials engaged in this cultural transition because they realize that less consumerism is a path to more wellbeing, in particular in a context of economic crisis (Alonso, Rodríguez, & Rojo, 2015). Five basic values underlie these lifestyles: material simplicity, self-determination, ecological awareness (recognition of the interdependency of people and resources), desire for institutions and technology at the human scale and the desire for developing the inner life (personal growth). This paper adds a new value—the Catholic morality perspective about the spirituality of the inner life.

## 2 | THE CATHOLIC MORALITY APPROACH TO CONSUMERISM AND ANTI-CONSUMPTION ACCORDING TO POPES JOHN II, BENEDICT XVI AND FRANCIS THOUGHTS

### 2.1 | Pope John Paul II in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*

In the Pope John Paul II words, in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (no. 28), “the modern self is left with a *radical dissatisfaction* ...what is wrong is a

style of life that is presumed to be better when it is directed toward „having“ rather than „being“, and which wants to have more, not to be more but to spend life in enjoyment (of things) as an end in itself“. The critics go from a personal sphere to an all society one: „... the self is liberated from history, tradition, society, nature, and God, but this freedom has been purchased at the price of emptiness, and sensing the emptiness, consumption is offered as a means to fill the emptiness of the modern self“ (Beabout & Echeverria, 2002, p.346).

*Catholic morality* or moral theology is the “study of the implications of faith for the way people live—both for the sorts of persons we become (virtue) and for the actions we ought (or ought not) to perform” (Nairn, 2001, par.4).

### 2.1.1 | Why should the catholic consumers behave according to the catholic moral doctrine?

Beabout and Echeverria (2002) examined this question pointing out some guidelines stressed by the Catholic Personalist thinkers, including John Paul II. What is the teaching of *the Catechism of the Catholic Church*? As written in no. 1729 “The beatitude of heaven sets the standards for discernment in the use of earthly goods in keeping with the law of God“. That means: concupiscence (“... an intense desire to acquire, consume, and/or possess material goods... This concupiscent desire requires taming and discipline, however, for without asking ourselves about what and how much to consume, and why this desire may spawn greed, avarice, and envy” as stated by Beabout and Echeverria (2002, p. 356) and covetousness must be minimized with temperance, self-mastery, and self-possession, that is asceticism. As such, one chooses freely according to goodness and truth, showing the capacity of making self-determining choices with what could be called authentic freedom, although the market is a factor that conditions one’s moral and religious attitude.

Engelland and Engelland (2016) also argued that consumerism explores four weaknesses: a) the confusion about what we really need aggravates the human weakness for pleasure; b) the criterion of ease or convenience aggravates the human weakness for ease; c) the desire to outdo others in consumption; d) the supremacy of the transitory over the enduring aggravates the human weakness for superficial enjoyment. According to the same authors, Plato also suggested four cardinal virtues as the way to bring order and happiness to human life: moderation (which differs from austerity/poverty or from asceticism), courage (to change one’s lifestyle and face the criticisms), justice (in the relationship with others), and prudence (choosing the enduring over the transitory). Before that, Thompson (2010) had already demonstrated that the consumeristic lifestyle is restrained in the Chinese culture through the adoption of Confucian virtues such as trustworthiness, truth-telling, meeting obligations, and reciprocity.

## 2.2 | Pope Francis in *Laudato Si*

On 2015, in *Laudato Si* (no. 162), Pope Francis stressed that “men and women of our postmodern world run the risk of rampant individualism,

and many problems of society are connected with today’s self-centered culture of instant gratification“. Moreover, according to Schlag (2018, p.49) consumerism “takes consumption beyond its reasonable and moral limits by buying new things just out of the urge of acquisitiveness, replacing gadgets, machines, and other items that still serve their purposes well only for the kick of possessing something new“. In contrast, “Catholic spirituality proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little“.

According to Pope Francis in *Laudato si* (no.203), “since the market tends to promote extreme consumerism in an effort to sell its products, people can easily get caught up in a whirlwind of needless buying and spending. Compulsive consumerism is one example of how the techno-economic paradigm affects individuals“. Recently, Schlag (2018) highlighted the message from Pope Francis that businesses should produce goods that are truly good, services that truly serve, and produce wealth that truly creates value. These three goods of business need to be ordered in such a way that they be shared in common with multiple stakeholders. Francis also introduced the concept of “integral ecology,” which claims that we should protect the environment and exercise our stewardship over the natural resources of creation that integrates the different aspects of life in society.

## 2.3 | The role of the marketing and the vocation of the business leader according to Pope Benedict XVI’s

Consumer society is a complex system of technology, culture, institutions, markets, and dominant business models. It was driven by the ideology of neoliberalism and infinite growth. It has evolved through sophisticated exploitation of the fundamental human quest for a meaningful life and wellbeing where consumption is the centerpiece of social practices, leisure time, cultural rituals, and celebration (Brown & Vergragt, 2016). Therefore, consumers may face a moral dilemma because consumption moderation may also have negative long-term economic consequences such as the downsizing of the number of jobs (unemployment) or the reduction of per capita disposable income (poverty).

At this point, it is necessary to clarify some definitions (Lacznia, Santos, & Klein, 2016, p.4). The “common good” can be defined as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily. Good goods and services “should meet authentic human needs ... [that] have clear social value” whereas bad goods and services that are “detrimental to human wellbeing“. However, for these authors, it is often not the product itself (a knife can be used to cook or to kill), but rather the audience to whom that product is directed, how it is market-positioned for its functionality, the way it is promoted and distributed, and whether it is fairly priced that establishes its inherent “rightness” or “goodness.” All these added dimensions are the realm of the *marketing* function, which has an essential role in the provisioning of goods and services. However, marketers should integrate the Catholic social thought into the

conduct of ethical marketing, especially in the oversight of necessary products.

As one may think, marketing is not the problem. As Kavanaugh (1991, p. 58) states: "Productivity, marketability, consumption, technique, and scientific method are not evil themselves. They are beneficial to the well-being of humanity.... It is only when the relation of persons to production is reversed, when instrumentalities become the measure of the persons that the Commodity Form of Life rules and ruins us".

Moreover, as claimed by Engelland and Engelland (2016, p.300) the concerns about consumerism are compatible with 'being pro-business' since "companies provide many goods and services that solve genuine problems and improve the human estate" and "producers have an obligation to deliver a genuine good to consumers". On other hand (p.301) "consumer behavior, then, can be evaluated in terms of whether or not it is successful in promoting individual happiness".

Furthermore, Lacznik et al. (2016) discussed a document titled, *Vocation of the Business Leader*, published by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, based on some reflections of Pope Benedict XVI's social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. Business leaders are urged to: a) use their skills to address genuine human needs via "good" products and services, (b) organize productive and meaningful work, and (c) to create wealth and prosperity in a sustainable and "just" manner (Santos & Lacznik, 2009a).

The marketing researchers are increasingly aware of this call for 'goodness'. "Brands that do good" is precisely the title of a special issue of *Journal of Brand Management* released in 2018 (Naidoo & Abratt, 2018; Roper, Lim, & Iglesias, 2018). Furthermore, Santos and Lacznik (2009b) developed a framework called *integrative justice model* (IJM) which helps corporations to organize the steps to provide products that lift up disadvantaged/impoverished consumers (Hill & Capella, 2014), as well as develop sustainable economic communities.

### 3 | CONSUMERISM PERCEIVED AS A MORAL ISSUE: THE MODEL OF THE CATHOLIC MORALITY ACTIVATION

Several researchers have conducted empirical research on the ethical predisposition of the consumer by using scenarios representing some ethical/nonethical situations (Fullerton, Kerch, & Dodge, 1996; Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Rallapalli, Vitell, Wiebe, & Barnes, 1994; Vitell & Muncy, 1992). Whilst Al-Khatib, Vitell, and Rawwas (1997), Ferrell and Gresham (1985), Ferrell, Gresham, and Fraedrich (1989), Hunt and Vitell (1986), (1992), Muncy and Vitell (1992) and Vitell, Rallapalli, and Singhapakdi (1993) proposed normative and descriptive models of "consumer ethics".

For this purpose, ethics, morality or personal norms are concepts that are viewed as interchangeable: *consumer ethics* is "a system of moral principles that covers activities that are considered importantly right or wrong" (Fullerton et al., 1996) and *individual consumer morality* is defined as "the moral norms and mechanisms (moral

approaches) that guide an individual's decision-making and behavior in the stages of product communication, obtainment, use, and disposal" (Grix, Lawson, & Todd, 2004). The role of the moral dimension in consumer behavior is explored by Nielsen and McGregor (2013), who analyzed three moral norm-related concepts –what constitutes a moral situation, morally irresponsible behavior, and morally risky behavior.

For example, Robertson and Crittenden (2003) developed a moral philosophy model, which considers religion as one of the societal moderators explaining the dominant moral philosophy and, ultimately, the individual behavior. The activation of Catholic morality approach is more likely to occur when the consumer perceives in marketing mix, specific cues that are incongruent with normative principles or, with some explicit institutional recommendations, such as those emanating from the Catholic Church. That may be designated as "salient moral issues" (e.g., the prohibition of use of condoms or contraceptives; the opposition to the opening of big retailers on Sunday; or the promotion of the "Passion of Christ" film). Probably the influence of religious morality is even stronger for consumers of other religions like Judaism (Hirschman, 1981), Islam or Hinduism (Iyer, 1999), as they have stricter rules or precepts (e.g., the restrictions in eating certain kinds of meat or in the consumption of alcoholic beverages).

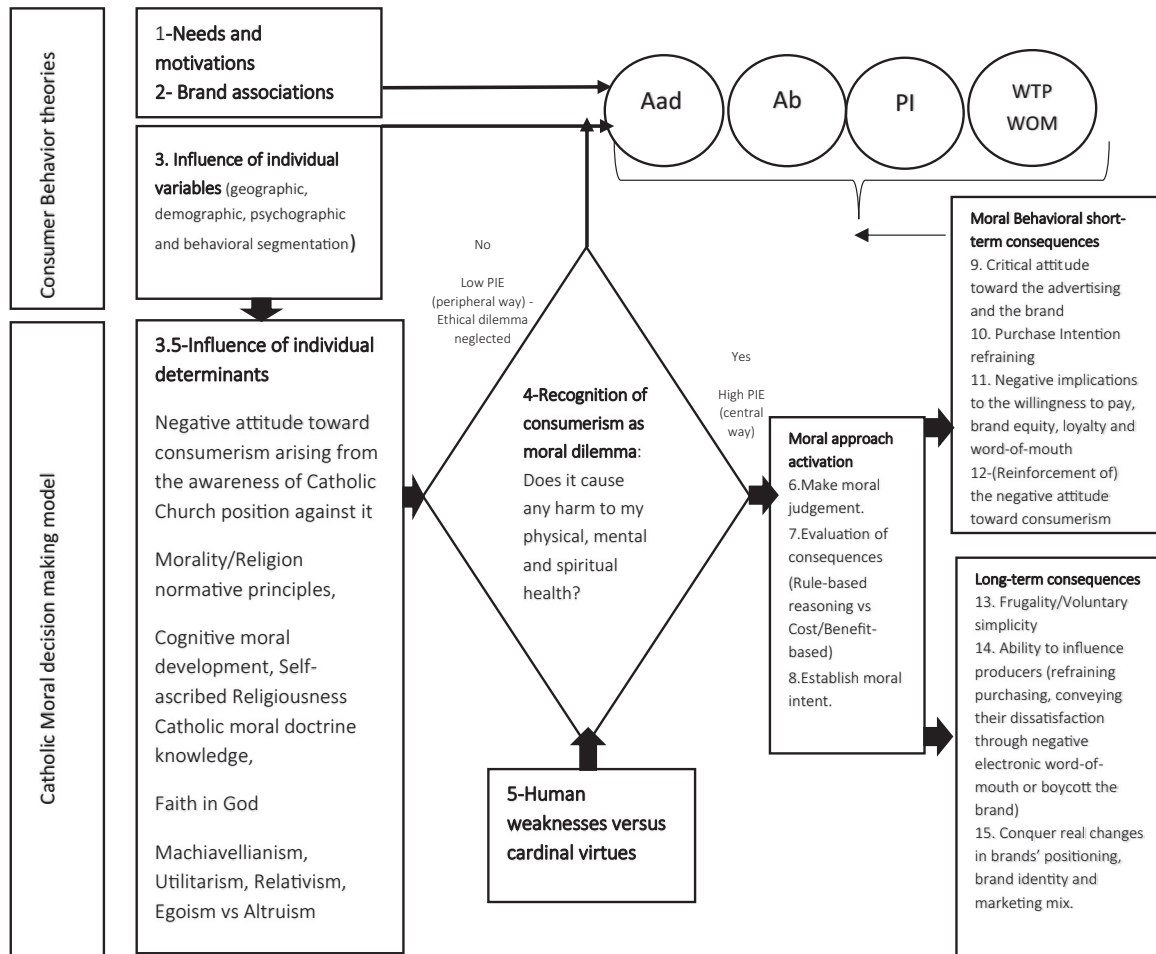
However, there is a wide range of latent moral implications present in all buying decisions even if we do not recognize them in general media. So, questions such as: "Is this product/service free from moral issues caused by environment contamination, earth resources wasting problems or human being exploitation?" Or "does this product cause any harm to my physical, mental, or spiritual health?" should also be relevant among researchers and are, in fact, discussed by social Catholic theologians.

#### 3.1 | The proposed ethical decision-making model

This paper proposes an ethical decision-making model (EDMM; see Figure 1) to deal with consumerism as a moral dilemma. This model describes the antecedents and consequences of the recognition of consumerism as a moral dilemma as a direct consequence of recommendations of Catholic Church leaders. The model does not apply to other sources of motivations explaining the arising of a negative attitude toward consumerism.

This paper proposed a theoretical framework model which basically receives the contributions from the following models: a) the traditional consumer behavior model proposed by Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell (1973); b) the model suggested by Granitz (2003, p.104), which in turn is inspired by the approach of Sirsi, Ward, and Reingen (1996); c) the Bateman, Fraedrich, and Iyer, (2003, p.589) model, which integrates the Janus-Headed Model (Brady, 1985, 1988, 1990); d) The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Petty and Cacioppo (1979), (1981).

The process begins when a moral issue is elicited during the decision-making process in buying/using context, namely during the problem recognition, information searching, and advertising



**FIGURE 1** An ethical decision-making model to deal with consumerism as a moral dilemma

processing stages (see Table 1). The recognition of the moral issue is a critical step in this process. The moral intensity of the problem is measured by the construct *Perceived Importance of an Ethical Issue-PIE* (Robin, Reidenbach, & Forrest, 1996) and is related with the relative degree of amorality.

The activation of the Catholic Teaching norms depends on two conditions: a) consumers must be aware of negative consequences of consumerism taught by Popes' encyclicals and other Catholic authors; b) Catholic consumers must agree with those thoughts and have the willingness to cope with those religious guidelines. Moreover, the activation of moral norms is moderated by the influence of demographic and psychographic dimensions such as: age (Bommer, Gratto, Gravander, & Tuttle, 1987; Rawwas & Singhapakdi, 1998), gender (Segal & Podoshen, 2013), parental education/moral literacy (Bennett, 1993), income (Chaplin, Hill, & John, 2014; Engelland & Engelland, 2016; Fullerton et al., 1996), culture/geographic location (Ger & Belk, 1996; Rawwas, 2001), personality (Malinowski, 2015), locus of control (Lefcourt, 1982; Rotter, 1966), values (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Germelmann, & Groeppel-klein, 2004; Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Todd & Lawson, 2002), materialism (Fitzmaurice, 2008; Muncy & Eastman, 1998; Richins & Rudmin, 1994), or the social variables like altruism (De Peyrelongue, Masclef,

& Guillard, 2017), influence of peers and significant others (Ford & Richardson, 1994; Granitz, 2003), social acceptability (Fitzmaurice & Comegys, 2006).

Emerging theories of ethical decision-making also recognize some personal characteristics or individual factors as important determinants of various aspects of an individual's moral decision-making process (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985, Hunt & Vitell, 1986, 1992). For example, the *cognitive moral development* is an individual variable that accommodates the thesis designated by philosophers as *ethical relativism*, a theory defended by Harman (1975), which is also related with the concept of *particularism* studied by Schroth (2003). According to this theory, the ethical principles or judgments are relative to the individual or culture (LaFollete, 1991; Rawwas, 2001; Robertson & Crittenden, 2003; Robin & Reidenbach, 1993). Related with spirituality, the cognitive religiosity or *self-ascribed religiousness* is defined as the degree to which the members of a religion accept the major beliefs of their religion (Hayes, 1995; Malinowski, 2016; Sood & Nasu, 1995; Wilkes, Burnett, & Howell, 1986).

Furthermore, as suggested by Engelland and Engelland (2016), the model should also acknowledge the influence of *weaknesses of human nature* (pleasure, ease or convenience, desire to outdo others, and superficial enjoyment) and anti-consumerism *cardinal virtues*

**TABLE 1** Antecedents and consequences of the recognition of consumerism as a moral dilemma—a new ethical decision making model (CMD- EDMM)

A-Recognition of consumerism as a moral dilemma
1-Needs and motivations
2-Brand/product associations (brand reputation)
3-Influence of individual determinants
3.1- Geographic variables
3.2- Demographic (Gender, Age, income, Socioeconomic Status)
3.3- Psychographics: Locus of control (origin), Salience, Personal and social norms, Previous experience (age), Involvement toward product, Advertising message involvement, Personality, Materialistic Values,
3.4- Social and cultural determinants (Significant others)
3.5- Negative attitude toward consumerism arising from the awareness of Catholic Church position against it; Morality/Religion norms (Normative principles, Machiavellianism, Utilitarianism, Relativism, Egoism vs Altruism, Cognitive moral development, Self-ascribed Religiousness, Catholic moral doctrine knowledge, Faith in God)
4-Perceived Importance of the Ethical Issue:
4.1- Low PIE (peripheral way)- Ethical dilemma neglected/Ethical dilemma used as heuristics;
4.2- High PIE (central way)- Moral approach activation
5-Human weaknesses versus cardinal virtues.
B- Moral approach activation (individual level)
6. Make moral judgment.
7. Evaluation of consequences
7.1- Rule-based reasoning vs Cost/Benefit-based reasoning
8. Establish moral intent.
C. Moral Behavioral short-term consequences
9. Critical attitude toward the advertising and the brand
10. Purchase Intention refraining
11. Negative implications to the willingness to pay, brand equity, loyalty and word-of-mouth
12. Reinforcement of the negative attitude toward consumerism
E. Long-term consequences
13. Frugality/Voluntary simplicity
14. Ability to influence producers (refraining purchasing, conveying their dissatisfaction through negative electronic word-of-mouth or boycott the brand)
15. Conquer real changes in brands' positioning, brand identity and marketing mix.

(moderation, courage, justice, and prudence). Those virtues should combat human weaknesses in the problem recognition stage.

The *effect of experience*, according to Kiesler, Collins, and Miller (1969) quoted by Dodge, Edwards, and Fullerton (1996), is a limitation in measuring ethical attitudes, because participants with less experience tend toward no commitment rather than a definitive position on the acceptance or unacceptance of a potential unethical situation. On the other hand, individuals with greater experience are

much more likely to take a definitive position thus increasing the influence of personal norms on behavior (Thøgersen, 2002).

Grix et al. (2004) proposed *origin* as an important measurement dimension, which differentiates the moral approaches held by the individual itself (internal) or imposed by others (external). This determinant may also correspond to the concept of *locus of control*, defined as a “personality variable manifested by the extent to which individuals believe events are contingent upon their own behavior or characteristics” (Granitz 2003, p.106). Then, it is interesting to confirm the hypothesis suggested by Lefcourt (1982) and Trevino and Youngblood (1990), according to which individuals with an internal locus of control are more likely to act ethically.

This potential behavioral deviation to the Catholic moral doctrine depends always of sensitivity (degree of religiosity), the moral development level related to the information available about the Catholic moral doctrine and the knowledge stored in previous experiences. If the consumer has a high cognition moral development, which means that he/she will analyze the dilemma under an ethical relativism philosophy, then probably he/she will perceive a lower moral involvement. On the other hand, a “quasi-fundamentalist Catholic consumer” will be less indulgent with the unmoral behavior.

Considering all this individual determinants, new propositions may arise:

*Catholic consumers are more likely to adopt anti-consumerism behavior if they fulfill the following conditions simultaneously:*

*P1) more ability to comprehend and apply moral standards (like postconventional individuals), i.e. high cognitive moral development;*

*P2) high level of self-ascribed Catholic religiousness, that is the accept the Catholic Church moral guidelines because they believe on them;*

*P3) high level of Catholic doctrine knowledge;*

*P4) internal locus of control, which means a certain degree of consciousness and rationality about the reasons why acting morally;*

*P5) struggle for the dominance of anti-consumerism cardinal virtues (moderation, courage, justice and prudence) over weaknesses of human nature (pleasure, ease or convenience, desire to outdo others and superficial enjoyment).*

### 3.2 | Moral approach activation stage and its consequences

At this stage, if the consumer moral involvement is high, then the likelihood of activating the elaboration of the moral approach is also high. Then consumer develops a conscious and extensive process, designated by *central way*, which takes into account the deontological norms and the teleological reasoning. The individual identifies the perceived behavior alternatives and their perceived consequences defined in terms of probability and desirability.

After that, the consumer evaluates the moral dilemma and makes a moral judgment, establishing the moral intent and partaking in the associated behavior. The decision-making process is influenced by the interaction of the *rule-based* reasoning style with the *cost/benefit-based* style as suggested by Bateman et al. (2003). On the other hand,

if the moral involvement is low, the consumer may neglect the importance of the moral issue, following the *peripheral way*, which eventually may consider the moral judgment as additional information, weighting it in the normal decision-making process.

The moral activation leads to short-term consequences such as a critical attitude toward the advertising and the brand, the refraining of the purchase intention and other negative implications in terms of willingness to pay, brand equity, loyalty, and word-of-mouth.

In the end, consumers may adopt a negative attitude toward consumerism or a more radical lifestyle (frugality/voluntary simplicity).

This anti-consumption activism may urge consumers to try to influence producers using their wallet as a weapon (refraining purchasing, conveying their dissatisfaction through negative electronic word-of-mouth or boycott the brand). Ultimately, these actions could produce changes in the brand positioning, brand identity and marketing mix. Thus, two more propositions are suggested:

*P6- Catholic consumers who are more likely to recognize consumerism as a moral dilemma will engage with a moral intent that will refrain the purchase intention, willingness to pay, loyalty and word-of-mouth.*

*P7- Consumers may adopt a radical lifestyle (frugality/voluntary simplicity) and ultimately influence brand managers to introduce changes in the marketing mix.*

#### 4 | CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This conceptual paper provides new research avenues for the study of the consumer decision process according to the catholic moral restraints and points out new insights into the religious motivations to adopt anti-consumption behaviors such as “frugality” and “voluntary simplicity”.

Further research is needed to confirm the propositions formulated in this paper to validate the proposed theoretical framework. For example, qualitative studies (focus groups) with consumers with different degrees of self-ascribed religiosity would allow a deeper understanding of the moral activation mechanisms. Researchers may also design an experiment simulating the exposure to Catholic Church teaching guidelines and compare the responses between different groups of consumers (Catholic vs. secular/agnostic consumers). It would be interesting to assess the combined effect of religion with other traditional drivers of anti-consumption (environmentalism, economic crises, etc.).

Brand managers should wish to accommodate this sensitivity to moral issues, by monitoring and evaluating their strategic and marketing mix decisions, adopting a transparent, responsible and ethic corporate behavior. Firms will face serious difficulties if they neglect the interest of consumers in moral issues, or if they fail to understand the moral/religious dimension of their decision-making processes. It may result in misinterpretations of market trends, erroneous product developments, unsuitable communications and finally financial distress. Consumers may seek a different shopping style and try to minimize the dependency of the consumption of some type of products.

Considering the pedagogic and sociological implications, this paper is a call for action inviting the (Catholic) universities and schools to offer educational programs that discuss the consumerism and increase the awareness of the Popes thoughts about this complex problematic.

Furthermore, as claimed by Blühdorn (2017), in a postcapitalism, postgrowth, and postconsumerism world, the exhaustion of the sustainability paradigm may finally reopen the intellectual and political space for the big push beyond the established socioeconomic order. Blühdorn (2017)'s thoughts about the “new narratives of hope” inspire new research avenues and provides a wider perspective of consumerism integrating also the role of politics and challenging the society to evolve to more sustainable lifestyle. Finally, author refreshes the thought of Pope Francis (*Laudato Si*, no.35) who stated: “the degree of human intervention, often in the service of business interests and consumerism, is actually making our earth less rich and beautiful, ever more limited and gray, even as technological advances and consumer goods continue to abound limitlessly”.

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