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Connected Consumers: Cognizance of Provision Networks in Mundane Consumption

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CONNECTED CONSUMERS:
COGNIZANCE OF PROVISION NETWORKS IN MUNDANE CONSUMPTION

BY

S. TODD WEAVER

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Robinson College of Business
of Georgia State University

GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY
ROBINSON COLLEGE OF BUSINESS
2011
ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation was prepared under the direction of the Hung Vu Nguyen’s Dissertation Committee. It has been approved and accepted by all members of that committee, and it has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctoral of Philosophy in Business Administration in the J. Mack Robinson College of Business of Georgia State University.

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ABSTRACT

CONNECTED CONSUMERS:
COGNIZANCE OF PROVISION NETWORKS IN MUNDANE CONSUMPTION

BY

S. TODD WEAVER

NOVEMBER 2011

Committee Chair: Dr. Pam S. Ellen

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Many types of product meanings have been investigated in the consumer behavior literature, and these layers of meaning have been shown to influence consumer behavior. However, very little research has attempted to investigate product meanings having to do with provision networks, that is, the people, places, resources and processes involved in creating products and delivering them to the consumer. In addition, researchers in several fields have argued that consumers have lost an awareness of provision networks due to their increasing size and complexity in the modern economy. This research indicates that some consumers are indeed cognizant of the systems of provision for the products they consume. The results of this study indicate that some consumers expend effort to create and ascribe provision meanings for some products, and that these meanings in turn affect the consumer’s consumption decisions and experiences. In spite of the commodifying effects of modern market systems, these consumers exhibit an appreciation for products as the outcome of a complex system of relationships among people, places, resources and processes and have thus become reconnected to the provision of what they consume.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview of Topic

Researchers have argued that modern market economies have altered the meanings associated with products and consumption (e.g. Conca, Princen and Maniates 2001; Fine 2002; Kilbourne, McDonagh and Prothero 1997). More specifically, many authors in a variety of fields (e.g. Cook et al. 2007; Fine 2002; Marx 1967; Miller 2003) have postulated that modern industrial markets have caused products to become “commodified.” Commodification occurs when products are disassociated from their provenance and viewed in purely economic terms (Sayer 2003). Borgmann (2000) describes the concept this way:

In premodern and early modern times, consumption rarely took place at a great distance from production. In most cases, in fact, the burdens of production reached and enveloped the point of consumption. The bread on the table came from an oven nearby. The water in the jug was drawn from a well the day before…. As technology progressed, more and more of these burdens were taken over by some machinery and disappeared from view. In the experience of consumption, the consumer good detached itself from the context of its production and became instantly and easily available [emphasis added] (p. 420).

These researchers argue that consumers have lost an awareness of the material and human resources involved in producing most goods, and thus the goods have become commodified, primarily holding economic (i.e., extrinsic or utilitarian) meaning. The intrinsic meaning that stems from an appreciation for the investment required to make products is missing because the product’s “system of provision” (Fine 2002) is no longer apparent to the consumer. While some products may retain associations with provision networks in the mind of the consumer, today’s more technologically advanced products and more complex chains of production and distribution have made commodification more prevalent (Borgmann 2000). As a representative example, consider means of transportation. A horse and carriage represents a technology that is fairly easy to comprehend; you have an animal that supplies power, a wooden structure that provides space
for people and cargo, and wheels fashioned out of wood and metal. In the era when this mode of transportation was prevalent, it is likely that people understood how this technology functioned and, at least at a basic level, how it was made. In addition, it is likely that the carriage would have been made and the horse bred in a nearby location familiar to the user, perhaps even by a personal acquaintance. Contrast that state of affairs with the present day automobile. The machinery is vastly more complex – even to the point of computerized control of many of its functions – and many drivers have only rudimentary knowledge of how the car functions or how it was manufactured. Furthermore, it is likely that consumers have little idea of the place where their cars are built or of the various people, places and resources that were involved in bringing the finished car to their local dealership. Thus, at purchase and thereafter, modern products typically have little association with their systems of provision in the perception of consumers.

However, in spite of the commodifying effects of modern market systems, there are indications that some consumers are showing greater concern for the provenance of the products they consume. For example, a recent report showed a 30% annual increase in sales of Fair Trade Certified groceries in the U.S. (PR Newswire 2010). According to a 2009 Cone Inc. survey, 69% of U.S. consumers claim to seek environmentally responsible products (Cone Inc. 2009). Growth in the number of farmers’ markets and community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs indicate an increasing preference for locally produced food (Brown and Miller 2008). According to the USDA (2010), the number of farmers markets in the US almost tripled in 15 years, rising from 1,775 in 1994 to 5,274 in 2009. Direct-to-consumer sales of farm produce more than doubled in ten years, to $1.2 billion in 2007 from $551 million in 1997. Greater consumer demand for organic fabrics increased sales of organic cotton textiles to $4.3 billion in 2009, a 35% increase from the prior year (Organic Trade Association 2010). TransFair USA, the
organization responsible for Fair Trade certification in the U.S., recently developed Fair Trade standards for manufacturing in the textile industry in response to consumer concern for fair labor practices in the provision of clothing (TransFair USA 2009). Consumers have professed that elements of a product’s system of provision, such as the social responsibility of the seller (e.g. Ellen, Webb and Mohr 2006), Fair Trade certification (e.g. Trudel and Cotte 2009), environmentally sustainable production (e.g. Luchs et al. 2010), and fair treatment of the employees or animals involved in production (Auger et al. 2003), significantly influence consumption decisions.

This heightened interest among some consumers may flow from a greater appreciation for products as the outcome of a complex system of relationships among people, places, resources and processes. Instead of viewing products as abstract commodities, some consumers may ascribe meanings to products that relate to the systems of provision, and they may be cognizant of these provision meanings as they buy and consume those products. In some sense, provision meanings would be the story the product would tell to the consumer to influence their consumption choices, a story that might enhance or detract from the experience of consumption.

It is important to note that these meanings would be distinct from issue-specific consumer concerns, such as environmental impact (e.g. Collins, Steg and Koning 2007; Straughan and Roberts 1999). Though such issue-specific concerns are likely to be represented in the results, the focus here will be on a more general phenomenon than advocacy or activism for a particular cause. For example, whereas a “green” consumer might focus only on the environmental impact of a product’s provision or use, consumers who perceive the complex network of provision behind products may see connections that bear upon any number of concerns, values or motivations. Product meanings of this type would also be distinct from meanings associated
with a particular brand (e.g. Keller 1993) because they would originate with systems of provision, which may be shared by several brands within a product category. Furthermore, these meanings are inherent in the product itself and are not dependent upon secondary brand associations created by the marketer. Thus, this research seeks to understand whether consumers are cognizant of a product’s system of provision when making consumption decisions, and if so, how these provision meanings attached to products influence consumption decisions and experiences.

**Research Method and Context**

The topic of provision meanings has been the subject of relatively little consumer behavior research and theory, so this study seeks a greater understanding of whether consumers are cognizant of provision meanings, and if so, how those meanings influence their decisions and experiences. An interpretive approach is appropriate for studies seeking to understand rather than explain consumer phenomena (Hudson and Ozanne 1988), and it can allow for greater insights into consumption meanings and experiences (Arnould and Thompson 2005). This approach also allows the researcher to employ a variety of data collection methods, including interviews, observation, participant observation, and content analysis, to develop a rich understanding of consumer behavior and experiences. Therefore, an interpretive approach was selected for this study in order to generate a greater understanding of the role of provision meanings in consumer behavior.

Consistent with the exploratory nature of this research, the context for this study was intentionally selected to provide ready access to the focal phenomenon. The research was conducted within a community that is committed, in part, to living more simply, protecting the natural environment, and fostering social connections both within and outside the community.
Furthermore, the community is adjacent to a working farm, and many community members purchase produce from the farm. It was believed that such a community would likely contain more consumers who are cognizant of systems of provision than might be found in the general population. Thus, as described further in Chapter 3, this research involves a naturalistic and interpretive study of the role of provision meanings in the consumption behavior and experiences of residents in a specific community.

**Contributions**

The research described in the subsequent chapters will seek to identify and explore product meanings related to provision networks and to understand whether and how these meanings influence consumption behavior and experiences. This research holds the potential to make important contributions to consumer behavior research. This study could contribute to consumer culture research (Arnould and Thompson 2005) by exploring an under-researched category of product meanings, namely, those stemming from the product’s system of provision.

In addition, the proposed research adds a broader perspective to prior research that has investigated pro-social buying in specific areas of social concern (e.g. Auger et al. 2005; Drumwright 1994; Trudel and Cotte 2009) and consumer responses to specific types of corporate social responsibility (e.g. Brown and Dacin 1997; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001) by examining whether and how consumers integrate a variety of meanings generated by systems of provision.

For marketers, understanding consumer cognizance of systems of provision may identify ways to build their brands around greater intrinsic meaning, reducing the need to compete on strictly economic terms. Product meanings concerning systems of provision have the potential to influence not only the decision to consume or not to consume but also decisions regarding product use and disposal, such as extending product lives, reusing, repurposing or more
thoughtful disposition (Cooper 2005). Expanding cognizance of provision may also facilitate “mindful” consumption (Sheth, Sethia and Srinivas 2011), which holds potential benefits for consumers, businesses, and society alike.

In fact, some of the world’s largest retailers are already beginning to “decommodify” their products by intentionally revealing or promoting different aspects of the systems of provision underlying the products. In response to customer demands for more information regarding environmental impact, Tesco, the world’s third largest retailer, recently began denoting the carbon footprint on the labels of some store-brand products (BBC News 2008). Likewise, the largest retailer, Walmart, announced plans to develop a sustainability index for the products it carries to meet consumer concerns; CEO Mike Duke noted that “they [consumers] want information about the entire lifecycle of a product so they can feel good about buying it. They want to know that the materials in the product are safe, that it was made well and that it was produced in a responsible way” (Walmart 2009). Kroger, the second-largest U.S. grocery retailer behind Walmart, launched an ad campaign promoting the geographic source and artisanal nature of its slightly higher-priced “Olathe Sweet” corn, after buying most of Olathe, Colorado’s crop (Hayden 2010). These retailers appear to be banking on greater awareness of and concern for systems of provision among at least some of their customers. Therefore, a greater understanding of how consumers attach meanings related to provision to the products they consume would be of great value to these and other marketers.
Overview of the Dissertation

Chapter 2 describes two streams of research that are relevant to this topic, consumer culture theory and commodification. It also describes how this research is different from that extant research and how this study will address important gaps in those literatures. Chapter 3 describes in greater detail the method and context featured in this study, and the details of sample selection, data collection, and data analysis are discussed. Chapter 4 presents the results of the data analysis and proposes a preliminary model for how provision meanings influence consumer behavior and consumption experiences. Finally, Chapter 5 contains a discussion of these results, including implications for marketing theory and practice, limitations on the generalizability of the findings, and suggestions for future research. Finally, the appendices contain supporting figures, tables, and references.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Consumer Culture Theory

Research in the field of consumer culture theory (CCT) generally holds that products have layers of meaning beyond the merely functional or economic (Arnould and Thompson 2005). According to this view, when consumers acquire, consume, and dispose of products, they are doing more than simply satisfying unmet needs or maximizing consumption utility. Instead of or in addition to this type of economic utility, consumer products function as signs or symbols of social and cultural meaning (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Hirschman 1985; Mick 1986). Thus, according to this stream of research, consumers employ products and brands to construct a social identity (e.g. Ahuvia 2005; Belk 1988; Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988), communicate something about themselves to others (e.g. Belk, Bahn and Mayer 1982), or participate in a family or cultural identity (e.g. Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991).

Some consumer culture research also touches on meanings pertaining to the history or provision of consumer products. For example, product meanings can include connections to a historical figure or era (Grayson and Martinec 2004) or to an ancestor (Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004). Product meanings can also involve ties to previous owners (Gregson and Crewe 2003) or connections to a cultural heritage (Askegaard, Arnould and Kjeldgaard 2005; Penaloza 1994). In terms of non-market consumption, gift-giving (Belk 1996; Ruth, Otnes and Brunel 1999) and sharing (Belk 2010; Ozanne and Ozanne, in press) have been shown to imbue products with connections to the giver or the sharer. Finally, products can hold specific meanings associated with their history in the possession of the consumer (Epp and Price 2010; Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000). However, in all these cases, the product meanings tend to be highly particularized,
that is, attributed to specific, special objects or denoting connections to specific known people or
groups. In contrast, product meanings associated with provision networks would apply to
products in general and might denote connections to people, places, resources or processes that
are specific to the consumer, not the product, and could thus be shared by many consumers.

Thus, although product meanings have been explored extensively in CCT research,
relatively little research in CCT has focused on product meanings that concern the people,
places, resources and processes involved in provision. Such meanings would not be limited to
identity creation or expression because they would be associated more with the inherent nature of
the product itself than its instrumental value in the consumer’s identity construction project.
Furthermore, the meanings pertaining to systems of provision explored in this study would not
be limited to special possessions or connoisseurship. This more general cognizance of systems
of provision would be activated in mundane consumption decisions and could exemplify a
concept of one’s self as “part of an organic unity with others and the environment” (Belk 2010,
p. 728). Finally, while prior CCT research on consumption communities (e.g. Cova and Cova
2002; Kozinets 1999; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001) may inform this research, the unit of analysis in
this study will be the individual consumer.

Thus, through empirical observation and explication of such meanings, this research
would address an important gap in consumer culture research on product meanings. The
relationship of this study to other research under the umbrella of CCT is illustrated in Figure 1.
Figure 1 categorizes CCT research on product meanings based on three distinctions: 1) whether
the product meanings are created and ascribed by groups or individuals; 2) whether the product
meanings apply to special or singularized products or to mundane, general product categories;
and 3) whether the product meanings flow from the products intrinsic qualities (the resources
used to make it, the people and machines involved in making it, the processes used to make it, etc.) or from extrinsic associations to families, groups, cultures, or the consumer’s own identity. CCT research has explored meanings in many of these categories (see Table 1), but relatively little has focused on product meanings that are created by individuals, ascribed to mundane products, and pertain to the intrinsic aspects of the product’s makeup. Specifically, very little CCT research has investigated whether consumers are cognizant of a product’s system of provision when making consumption decisions, and if so, how these provision meanings attached to products influence consumption decisions and experiences.

**Commodification**

Research on commodification (and its opposite – decommodification) is particularly relevant to this exploration of provision meanings. The concept of commodification has been explored across a number of disciplines. Although its conceptualization varies somewhat, the central premise of commodification is that goods become disassociated from their means of production. Researchers attribute commodification to the complex system of production and distribution that lies between a product’s origin and its final consumption in today’s industrialized societies (e.g. Cook et al. 2007; Marx 1967; Miller 2003; Princen 2002). Borgmann (2000) observed that modern production and consumption are commonly separated spatially and perceptually, whereas in pre-modern times consumers were connected with a product’s system of provision because it was more proximal and familiar. Figures 2 and 3 provide a visual representation of this distinction between modern and pre-modern consumption.

In Figure 2, the consumer is familiar with the product’s entire system of provision because of social, cultural or geographic proximity to the different actors and activities involved. However, in Figure 3, the majority of the system of provision is no longer apparent to the
consumer due to its perceptual and spatial distance from the consumer; therefore, the product has become commodified. Thus, for example, the consumer may know she can buy a new shirt at the department store, but she may have little familiarity with where the cotton was grown, who stitched the shirt together, and how it was transported to the retailer.

When a product’s system of provision has become obscured, it loses its meanings and associations pertaining to four important dimensions of the system of provision: 1) the resources invested in the product; 2) the people involved in making and distributing the product; 3) the geographical places in which the product was made or processed; and 4) the processes involved in creating and delivering the products to consumers (Fine 1994, 2002; Manno 2002; Princen 2002). Resources may refer to natural resources and materials as well as the physical labor necessary to produce a product. Disassociating the labor and natural resources from a product leads to commoditization and may lead consumers to think that such resources are infinite and thus of little value (Marx 1967; Princen 2002). For example, if Kroger had not taken steps to inform their customers of the source of their sweet corn, buyers of the corn may not have an appreciation for the soil, seed and fertilizer required to grow the corn and the human effort involved in weeding and harvesting it. From this perspective, buyers would have little idea of the “cost” of consuming corn in terms of these finite resources; they would only think of the cost in terms of the price they pay at the register.

The people involved in making commodified products also become obscured. Princen (2002) notes that commodified products become “distanced” (p. 128) from associations with a particular person, group, culture or society. Similarly, in today’s market system, consumers typically have no social contact with the people involved with making the products they consume (Manno 2002). In other words, the prototypical commodity exchange is completely impersonal.
in nature (Belk 2010). Continuing the commodified corn example, supermarket shoppers may have little or no awareness of the specific people involved in raising, harvesting and transporting their corn to the store shelves. In the eyes of the consumer, the corn has no connection to the people that produced it; it comes “from the store.”

The physical places connected to a commodified product’s system of provision are often unknown to consumers (Miller 2003), and commodified products are frequently standardized in such a way that they give no indication as to the place where they were made (Manno 2002). Even when products are labeled with country of origin, consumers may not be aware of the complex path the product traveled along the chain of distribution between origin and purchase (Rivoli 2009). Supermarket shoppers may not know whether their corn comes from a single town in Colorado, a cluster of industrial farms in Iowa, or a small farm not far from their home. Likewise, they probably have little awareness of the various places through which the corn travels in transit from farm to store.

Finally, consumers frequently have an incomplete awareness of the processes involved in creating and transporting the products they consume (Cohen 1997; Cook and Crang 1996; Princen 2002; Rivoli 2009). Even as consumers become more aware and attuned to certain aspects of provision processes, such as labor conditions or organic agriculture, there can still be considerable confusion and uncertainty about the chain of activities that link the people, places and resources in the system of provision (Auger et al. 2003; Bryant and Goodman 2004). Although consumers may attend to certifications and labels that are intended to reveal provision processes, they may be unaware or mistaken about what these symbols actually signify (Eden, Baer and Walker 2008) and may re-interpret or contest their meaning (Morris and Kirwan 2010). Here again, our hypothetical Kroger shopper may understand that Olathe corn comes from
Colorado, but they may have little understanding of how the corn was grown, harvested, or transported to their local store.

Thus, research on commodification implies that it is not a feature of particular products or a trait of particular consumers but instead is a natural and common outcome of modern economies. However, this study will explore whether and how consumers attribute richer provision meanings to the products they consume in spite of the commodifying influence of the market system. It is possible that the complex network of relationships underlying consumer products have been made salient for some consumers so that they consider how their consumption connects them with other people, places and resources. If so, this “decommodified” view of consumption would change the meanings associated with consumption and, potentially, the behavior and decision making of consumers.

**Actor-Network Theory**

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Latour 2005) provides a useful framework for understanding how systems of provision can become obscured in the perception of consumers, and conversely, how the system of provision can remain salient or become salient once more. ANT envisions ordered social structures, such as systems of provision or communities of neighbors, as combinations of people, objects, and the influences each exert on the other. ANT acknowledges that both humans and objects (material things or intangible ideas or concepts) can influence each other and thus have a type of agency. A key concept of ANT is that social structures only endure as long as the relationships between people and objects in a particular network are enacted and reinforced; in other words, unlike a physical structure, which can rely on material connections between component parts, social structures fall apart as soon as the organizing influence between actors is no longer exerted. Furthermore, some social structures, if
they are stable and predictable over time, can be perceived as a unitary whole instead of a complex network, a process labeled *punctualization* in ANT.

Punctualization describes how a complex network of human and material actors, like the people, places and resources involved in making a consumer product, can come to be perceived as an abstract unity if its complexity is obscured over time (Law 1992). The punctualization concept is a useful way of conceptualizing how products can become commodified if they are disassociated with their systems of provision. For example, a car may be an abstract unity for consumers who come to view it simply as a reliable means of getting from home to work and back again every day. The consumer may know how much they paid for the car, where they bought it, and perhaps how much the car is worth in its current state. However, many consumers may not grasp the complex network of people, places, resources and processes that were involved in producing the modern automobile. Thus, the car’s system of provision is obscured and removed from consideration, or punctualized, because modern market systems have distanced consumers from systems of provision. However, other consumers may have knowledge or experiences that serve to highlight the complex system of provision behind the car they drive. For example, when the car breaks down, the owner may become more cognizant of the complex machinery that enables the car to provide transportation and begin considering factors such as the country of origin of replacement parts, the quality controls of the manufacturing process, or even the car’s value as scrap metal for that car as well as future cars. In this case, the consumer is now more cognizant of the car’s system of provision, and the punctualization process has been reversed. Thus, ANT provides a useful independent framework for understanding commodification and decommodification, and it will be employed in this study to draw additional insights from informant accounts.
Summary

This chapter has reviewed two streams of research relevant to product meanings stemming from systems of provision as well as a useful interpretive framework. Consumer culture research is fundamental to this study because it has observed that products hold meanings for consumers that extend beyond the merely functional or economic. In a related vein, research on commodification indicates that many products have lost the meanings associated with systems of provision as a result of more complex technology and larger, more diverse provision networks. However, there are important gaps in these research streams that this study intends to address. First, although research on consumer culture has generated important insight into consumption meanings associated with products, very little research in this area has focused on meanings specifically pertaining to systems of provision. In addition, research on commodification has been largely conceptual, and it generally assumes that modern market systems have commodified products in the perception of consumers. Thus, very little research has focused on whether consumers are cognizant of provision networks and, if so, how this cognizance influences consumption decisions and experiences. This research has the opportunity to make important contributions to both streams of research by empirically observing whether consumers create and ascribe product meanings associated with provision networks and, if so, exploring how these meanings impact the consumption decisions and experiences of consumers.
Chapter 3: Method

Overview

This study will seek to understand whether and how product meanings pertaining to systems of provision influence consumers. A naturalistic and interpretive approach is best suited to explore this topic; an interpretive approach is appropriate when the objective is to understand a phenomenon rather than explain it and when the knowledge generated is expected to be idiographic and context-dependent (Hudson and Ozanne 1988). This approach is widely employed in consumer culture research because it provides better access to the experiential and sociocultural aspects of consumption (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Furthermore, in order to explore the layered meanings associated with products, it will be necessary not only to collect the direct responses of subjects but also to observe how products function in their daily lives and to explore how meanings are shared or contested across subjects (Mick 1986). Thus, the flexibility and range of sources allowed by the interpretive approach will be necessary to fully explore provision meanings and how they color the experience of consumption. Finally, attempting to approach this topic with quantitative methods would be problematic; given the relative paucity of research and theoretical development in this area, it would be difficult to design surveys or experiments that adequately capture meanings related to systems of provision and the impact of these meanings on consumption experiences.

Research Context

Consistent with the interpretive approach, the selection of a context for this study was purposive in nature (Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988). Contexts that facilitate or promote
values that might be conducive to the formation of provision meanings, like protecting the environment or living more simply, seemed to be ideal sites for finding consumers with a decommodified view of the products they consume. After evaluating several potential research sites, the researcher selected a physical “intentional community” that is committed to fostering social connections and stewardship of natural resources. The purpose of such intentional communities is to create built living environments that promote social relationships, personal growth, and a respect for nature among community residents (Mulder, Costanza and Erickson 2006). Such communities have grown substantially in recent years. The Foundation for Intentional Community lists over 900 North American intentional communities in its latest directory, triple from the number in 1991 (FIC 2007). Members of these communities buy a home and agree to observe the community norms and values, thus making a substantial social and financial commitment to living in harmony with others and with nature.

The focal community in this study promotes values and activities that are conducive to the formation of provision meanings. All community members are given a “Book of Commons,” which describes six core community values, including “Community” and “Sustainability.” The book also describes community guidelines that support these values, such as a prohibition on the use of synthetic pesticides in common areas and the promotion of recycling and composting. The community is adjacent to an organic farm, and many residents participate in a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program offered by the farm. The community facilitates many common consumption activities, such as shared meals, common buildings and equipment, and frequent informal sharing and swapping among residents. Therefore, it was expected that residents of this community would be more mindful of their consumption decisions in general and more likely to hold a decommodified view of the products that they consume.
At the same time, this community is far from a “fringe” subculture. The 180 residents live in 67 townhouses in the most densely-populated county of a top ten Metropolitan Statistical Area. (ARC 2010; FCC 2010) Although there is some diversity in terms of ethnicity and age, members of the community seem to be solidly middle class in terms of income and lifestyle. Home values range from $180,000 to $350,000, and most informants were employed in or retired from professional occupations. The researcher’s impression after multiple visits to the community’s homes and common areas was that the lifestyle of community members was not dramatically different from other middle class neighborhoods he has experienced. Therefore, the community chosen as the context for this study seemed likely to yield subjects who would be cognizant of the provision networks underlying their consumption. At the same time, the residents of this community are not so far removed from mainstream ways of living so as to make this research irrelevant to the study of consumer behavior more broadly.

**Sample**

After the research site was selected, contact was made with the community member responsible for answering external inquiries. After an initial meeting with this person, the researcher attended a community meal to discuss the research and gain community approval. Initial informants were recruited from these first contacts. Subsequent interviewees were recommended by informants following their interviews (i.e. snowballing); informants were asked to recommend others in the community that would have an interest in discussing the topics covered in the interview. The objective in this sequential selection was to seek variety within the community in terms of informant backgrounds and consumption practices in order to bring product meanings concerning connections to provision into clearer view. In all, 25 informants participated (see Table 2 for sample characteristics). The sample was predominantly female
(68%) but was representative of the adult population of the community (64% female) in that respect. As indicated in Table 2, the sample also included a variety of age groups, household types, and professions. Although summary data in these categories is not available for the community, the researcher’s perception is that the sample was generally representative of the community as a whole. Informants had a variety of reasons for moving to the community, but the most common motivation seemed to be a desire for closer social connections, for adults and children alike, than is typically available in other living arrangements in the area.

**Data Collection**

Interviews were the primary source of data in this research. In keeping with the exploratory nature of this research, interviews were semi-structured in order to allow the researcher the flexibility to explore novel or unexpected themes (please see Appendix A for the interview guide used in initial interviews). The interview guide was modified as the research matured, and more emphasis in later interviews was placed on consumption meanings and experiences instead of community influences. Prior to and during the interviews, informants were not made aware of the specific topic of this study; they were merely informed that the researcher was interviewing community residents to learn about sustainable consumption. The interviewer always began by asking how the informant came to live in the community. From that point, the questions asked varied depending upon the responses. In general, questions were open-ended and non-directive; informants were not prompted to discuss specific products or product categories unless those topics had come up in a previous response. Follow-up interviews were conducted with twelve informants to further explore or clarify themes that emerged from their interviews. Standard informed consent protocols were followed, and no ethical conflicts or risks to subjects arose. The recordings of the interviews were transcribed into a standardized
format to facilitate coding. In all, 841 double-spaced pages of transcriptions were coded and analyzed for this study.

In addition to interviews, other data was collected and analyzed for this study in order to give the researcher a more thorough understanding of the informants and their context. The interviewer recorded field notes for all interviews, taking note of relevant details, such as nonverbal communication cues, visual descriptions of the informants and their living spaces, and any unrecorded conversations related to the topic. In addition, the researcher spent over 12 hours participating in and observing 7 community events, and he recorded detailed field notes following these experiences. The researcher also captured more than 20 photographs of the community, community members, and community events and practices. Finally, 18 community publications were collected. While these data are not specifically cited in this study, they provided important background information that supported the credibility of the researcher’s analysis.

Data collection of all kinds continued until thematic saturation was achieved in the judgment of the research team. For the purposes of this research, thematic saturation was achieved when additional data collection no longer generated new themes or insights (Guest, Bunce and Johnson 2006). Prior research has demonstrated that 20 to 30 informants are normally sufficient to achieve saturation (Creswell 1998; McQuarrie 1993), and this study is in keeping with that guideline. Digital versions of data sources were uploaded to QSR NVivo 9 for analysis.

**Data Analysis**

This research employs aspects of both inductive and deductive analysis. On the one hand, the researcher was open to theory discovery and the modification of extant frameworks,
such as those provided by CCT and research on commodification, as themes emerged from the data. Employing at least some aspects of an inductive approach is particularly appropriate given the relative lack of research and theory-building on this topic (Goulding 2005). On the other hand, the analysis was informed by existing frameworks in order to help organize and interpret the data (see Table 3).

First, research on CCT and commodification is particularly applicable to the area of inquiry for this study and has already been discussed in Chapter 2. CCT provides the first concept that will inform this study, namely that products can be seen as bundles or layers of meanings that range from the economic or functional to the social or even mystical. In addition, research on commodification indicates that the primary sources of meaning that are obscured in commodified products are people, places, processes, and resources, so particular attention was given to these aspects of provision networks in the collection and coding of the data. Therefore, data collection and analysis focused on identifying and exploring product meanings related to systems of provision.

In addition, Actor-Network Theory (Latour 2005; Law 1992), which is independent of the particular area of inquiry in this study, was employed in the analysis of the data collected. The primary contribution of Actor-Network Theory to this study is its view of social systems of networks of human and non-human actors, each with their own form of agency in structuring relationships. In particular (as described above), the concept of punctualization offers a useful theoretical lens for thinking about the ways in which provision actor-networks can be obscured by modern market systems.

The analysis of collected data proceeded as follows. Utilizing the QSR NVivo 9 analysis software, individual interviews were coded to illuminate themes within each individual
discourse. Initial coding categories were deduced from research on commodification and CCT, and they included product meanings the researcher expected to find among consumers with a decommodified view of products (Table 4). As coding progressed, additional themes were added to this initial structure whenever an interview revealed a meaning or behavior that was not adequately described by an existing theme, and the coding structure expanded to include meanings related to the people, places, processes and resources involved in systems of provision, the motivations for considering these provision meanings, and the consumption behaviors influenced by these meanings. Initially, the focus was on coding and drawing themes from individual sources in isolation, using a hermeneutical approach (Thompson 1997) of iterating between a focus on specific parts of the data to a holistic appreciation of the entire source. The hermeneutical approach also involved a second circle of iterating perspectives, this one between the account provided by the data source and the deductive frameworks employed in this research, noting areas of tension and agreement and forming new coding categories where appropriate (Thompson 1997). The final coding structure resulting from this process is described in Table 5.

After coding individual accounts, a thorough analysis of the data set as a whole was conducted to produce the findings and conclusions contained in this study. The credibility and dependability of the findings were safeguarded throughout the analysis (see Table 6) (Hirschman 1986; Guba and Lincoln 1986). First, themes in individual interviews were compared across informants to illuminate general patterns and insights, again employing a hermeneutical circle between individual sources and the data set as a whole. In this stage, numerous data displays were generated in NVivo 9, including graphical displays of the coding of individual sources as well as matrix displays summarizing the coding of the entire data set. These data displays were used to compare the prevalence of certain themes in individual interviews, the distribution of
individual themes across the data set, and the intersection of themes in the data set. The overall thematic structure emerged via consensus of the research team; several members of the research team read through the un-coded transcripts in an effort to achieve consensus and rule out alternative explanations, thereby addressing dependability concerns. At several points during the research process, the emerging themes and coding structure were presented, and new themes or competing explanations were suggested. This report represents the final output of this iterative process of hypothesis generation and hypothesis testing. Finally Guba and Lincoln’s (1986) standards for authenticity were achieved through open and fair treatment of all informants and points of view as well as through the pursuit of ontological authenticity (i.e. a better understanding of product meanings pertaining to provision) and catalytic authenticity (i.e. an understanding that that is instructive for marketers and community members).

In order to test the credibility of the analysis contained in this research, the researcher performed member checks (Hirschman 1986) by meeting with informants after consensus was reached among the research team. All community members were invited to attend a presentation of the research findings at the community house, and many informants were present as well as other residents. Throughout the presentation, the researcher asked for questions and feedback, and he specifically requested to be notified if any of the findings seemed inaccurate or not representative of the community and its members. No objections or criticisms of the research findings were voiced at this meeting or subsequently, thus supporting the credibility of this research.
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This research seeks to understand whether consumers are cognizant of a product’s system of provision when making consumption decisions, and if so, how these provision meanings influence consumption decisions and experiences. As a result of the analysis process described in the previous chapter, a credible and dependable account of how provision meanings operate among the participants in this study was constructed. In the following sections, provision meanings will be explored and explicated. Then, these meanings will be placed in a conceptual framework in order to illustrate how they influence consumer decision making and experiences. Finally, the independent framework of Actor-Network Theory will be used to reveal further insights.

Verbatim quotes will be used to illustrate findings in the remainder of this chapter. All names used are pseudonyms in order to protect the privacy of informants. In the interest of brevity, ellipses (…) are used to remove extraneous sentences that are included in a group of sentences coded under a particular theme. In no case are the ellipses used to join sentences from different parts of the interview or to remove sentences that would change the meaning of the quote.

Provision meanings

As expected based on prior research on commodification and consumer culture, informants ascribed layers of meaning to some of the products they consume, and some of these meanings stem from the product’s system of provision. As expected based on prior research, these provision meanings fell into four broad categories: people, places, resources, and processes. Every informant mentioned product meanings of all four types, indicating that a
decommodified view of products was not generally oriented toward a particular aspect of provision. Overall, process meanings were mentioned most frequently, followed in prevalence by meanings related to resources, people, and places.

**People**

The first category of provision meanings concerns the people involved in the system of provision. Informants were frequently cognizant of different categories of people connected in some way to the provision of the products informants consume. In some cases, the product meanings flowed from specific people familiar to the consumer. For example, several informants mentioned buying eggs from a neighbor who raised chickens on a nearby farm:

… sometimes I buy [neighbor]’s organic eggs that are very expensive. Sometimes I buy the cage free eggs at the grocery store, but sometimes I’ll buy from him. It’s mostly just to support him. I don’t think the eggs taste any different, really. (Carol, 50s, government administrator)

… I guess because it feels really local, and it feels fresh, and I never did get to go see the conditions the eggs were in, but I did trust the person who was raising them so I put faith in that trust. I was also happy to support my neighbor to do that. (Diana, 20s, college professor)

Interestingly, these informants expressly state that they did not buy the eggs because of any perceived superiority of the eggs themselves. Instead, they indicate that they buy the eggs at least in part as a way of supporting their friend and neighbor. Another informant fondly remembered being able to associate the food she consumed to particular people while on a Peace Corps assignment in Africa:

And I also really liked in Malawi like the “closing of the loop” kind of thing, which I learned in permaculture. Because most, like, homes are very open. We don’t know where our things come from and we don’t know where they go after they finish. But in Malawi, I mean you can pretty much… you know where your greens come from: they come from that guy up there who has a little farm, you know? And he used pesticides, which I wasn’t a big fan of, but I still wanted to support him. (Sue, 20s, non-profit administrator)
Here again, Sue reports a desire to know and to support the people behind making the products she consumes. Meanings associated with familiar people were not limited to food:

Yeah, I do have pieces of jewelry that people have made that I appreciate. ... Yeah, every once in a while, because I know some artists and craftspeople, I’ll think, “Well, you’re paying for an artist to live their artist life! They don’t get paid as well as like…. Math tutoring will always be in demand and it will always pay, but they’re doing their artist thing.” (Ginnie, 20s, tutor and dance instructor)

In all of these cases, informants perceived a clear connection between the products they consumed and specific acquaintances, friends, or family members, and these meanings appeared to influence the informants’ consumption decisions and consumption experiences.

In other instances, the informants created meanings that referred to anonymous or hypothetical people assumed to be part of the provision network. For example, informants frequently expressed a general concern for the workers involved in the production of consumer goods:

It just seems right to me to know the person that made the thing, that grew the thing and that that person, you know, if you look at one of the costs of mass production of food, besides the environmental cost, is a human cost. The whole thing with the migrants and what's -- how that's displacing everybody and how we run the agricultural market in Mexico. Why they're coming over here and how they're treated and how they work with these meat rendering plants and stuff. That's -- it's horrible for the animals. It's horrible for the humans. And it's not that good for the consumers. (Perry, 50s, IT professional)

Although Perry has no apparent connection to migrant workers from Mexico, he associates them with the food he consumes. In some cases, these more abstract people meanings were related to Fair Trade certification, as Diana described:

[Fair Trade certification] kind of just makes me feel like I'm supporting a cause that is a company that cares about that cause. That means that the people who are producing the product over in whichever country that might be are hopefully, I can't assure that, but it's more assurance than not, that they are getting -- they're not being exploited, that they're not, that they're able to do work that they are also able to support themselves on and hopefully, ideally, hoping they're not being overworked…. (Diana, 20s, college professor)
Although many of these generalized people meanings indicate a concern for the fair treatment of workers, such meanings could also stem from knowledge about the circumstances of people involved in the system of provision:

Yeah, I’ve heard that Organic Valley is actually a cooperative of different small organic farmers rather than being one sort of, um, company the way that Horizon might be. I’ve heard not good things about Horizon, so I tend not to… I tend to steer toward Organic Valley. (Ginnie, 20s, tutor and dance instructor)

Well, you know, these farmers are not making a lot of money. They’ll make $25- or $30,000 a year if they're doing well, right, and it's hard work. And it's a service. (Perry, 50s, IT professional)

These examples indicate that people meanings are not limited to specific ethical concerns about the mistreatment of people involved in production processes; people meanings can also stem from a more general empathy for or understanding of the workers that produce consumer products. Thus, informants in this study revealed a cognizance of people involved in the provision of products, regardless of whether those people were specific and familiar or whether they were abstract and anonymous.

In addition to the distinction between meanings linked to familiar and unfamiliar people, informants also revealed an awareness of people involved with different stages of provision. Many informants mentioned an awareness of the makers of the products they consume. For example, informant Kelly discussed meanings associated with the farmers that produce food:

So my mindset is not more---not more about the food but about the people who actually have to make it possible for us to eat at all. And--and again being aware of the hard work that it is and the oppression that most of them face because of that work and because of primarily being an immigrant population. (Kelly, 30s, minister)

Another informant expressed a similar awareness of and gratitude toward the farmers responsible for growing her food, even to the point of trying to impart a similar sense of awareness to her child:
when we’re eating dinner, when we’re starting, and we don’t do it every time, but if we know where the food comes from, we think of that person. We think, okay, this came from farmer Rachel who was here before. Isn’t that amazing, talking with my six-year-old, that farmer Rachel grew this and we’re so lucky to be able to eat it. (Jane, 30s, landscape architect)

Other informants expressed a preference for products made by identifiable individuals, as opposed to those produced by large organizations or bureaucracies:

Having a face on it is really important that I know those are the people that made it. I -- in some ways I do have a higher trust in what's in it. I mean there's no doubt about that. And I just love the old honey guy that comes, buying honey from him and I know it's his work and some big corporate entity is not benefiting from my purchase is a wonderful thing. (Kristen, 40s, teacher)

Dava Life Wear. They are -- for many years they've been around. I think now they’re employee owned. A lot of the sewing is done at home, they use almost all cotton fabrics…. And a few years ago they almost went out of business and were bought by the employees. But what first drew me to them was the fact that their clothes were made -- patterns were given to people at home so you could [have] kind of a home based industry. (Martha, 50s, government administrator)

In both these instances, the people meanings ascribed to the products seem to be a primary reason for the purchase of the product, and the informants express a preference for situations in which they can link the products they consume to specific (although still not familiar) people.

Informants also revealed product meanings related to the people from whom informants bought or received products. Informant Martha used a gas station attendant as an example of her general awareness of the people associated with provision:

You know, I know the guy at the counter in the BP when I go in and what that does is that makes me care more about -- about the environment. It makes me more conscious of them as people and that has to be an important value to take in life is a sense of personhood of every -- I think that community fosters a sense of -- in your brain fosters a sense of seeing other people as people as opposed to seeing other people as them outside of me. (Martha, 50s, government administrator)

Another informant expressed a preference for a particular retailer based on the people who work there:
Yeah, especially Return to Eden. … I think the storekeepers kind of do the consulting but I’ve had some really good consultation in there in terms of going in there and looking for something like calcium or what absorbs the best or more of the what do you call these guys? Naturopath. Naturopaths. More of that knowledge. Whole Foods I wouldn’t expect them to do that but Return to Eden does. (Sharon, 50s, retired therapist)

Informants also discussed product meanings associated with people who had gifted or donated products. For example, Jane describes receiving clothes from her neighbors:

And I love…whenever…yeah, it connects me to them. To the people…and I know this came from Catherine – three doors down. Whenever I see her and she’s wearing something from my closet or I know that she got that at the swap, it’s just something that weaves us closer together I think. And I think it has a story to it and I appreciate it more. (Jane, 30s, landscape architect)

Thus, people meanings were not limited to a particular stage in the provision process. Instead, they applied to those early in the provision process, like farmers, and those very late in the provision process, such as previous owners.

In summary, the informants in this study seem to perceive or ascribe meanings to the products they consume that are related to the people involved in providing those products for consumption. The meanings could be linked to close friends or abstract others, to makers or to sellers, but in every case informants appear to be mindful of them as they consider the products they consume. Exactly how these people meanings influence consumers will be described later in Chapter 4, but first, meanings stemming from other aspects of provision must be explored.

**Places**

Physical places and spaces represented a second category of provision meanings observed in this research. Consumers participating in this study demonstrated cognizance of meanings associated with the geographical places occupied by the system of provision. As with people meanings, various types of places contributed meanings to products. For example, many place meanings were derived from concrete places known by the informant. In particular, the
organic farm adjacent to the community where this research was conducted was frequently mentioned in connection with meanings related to food:

Well, we’re lucky we have the farm right here. Well, not “lucky”, it’s by design and I feel really great about that food. Not only is it healthy and organic, but the carbon footprint is really low. We get to walk over there and get it. It’s usually picked that morning, so that was another bonus. I mean, I had worked on CSAs before and the fact that there is a CSA right here is just ideal. (Jane, 30s, landscape architect)

Here, Jane associates place meanings related to the nearby farm with the food she consumes as well as her chosen place of residence. However, the community farm was not the only familiar place mentioned in the interviews. For example, informant Kristen exhibits an awareness of another farm and the market where their produce is sold:

I don't know if you're familiar with Riverview Farms but they are north of town and the woman used -- is a major partner. Used to be part of Georgia Organics and she now runs this farm and they come to the Thursday East Atlanta farmers market which I frequent every Thursday as of like the last two years. I mean I just -- I was going to say avid but probably rabid is a better term 'cause we go every Thursday. It’s sort of a ritual. On the way home from school we'll stop and get bread, cheese and peaches and whatever else and oh, and popsicles. And so that has -- I mean I just love buying directly from them. (Kristen, 40s, teacher)

Thus, one type of place meaning evident in this study concerns familiar places that are connected with some aspect of provision.

However, place meanings were not limited to concrete, familiar places. In some instances, study participants mentioned far-away or abstract places that they had not directly experienced.

Apple juice. Buy a lot of apple juice, [my daughter] loves apple juice. And if you go to Publix and you buy their organic apple juice which probably comes from a pretty good place, it's made in the USA. I don't know exactly where in the USA but it's like $6.50 for I don't know, it's like half a gallon. I'm not sure exactly how much it is. But at Wal-Mart for like $1.50 you can get a gallon and a half of apple juice like made in Indonesia. And I don't know even know how they do that. (Leslie, 30s, health professional)
In this excerpt, Jane appears uncertain as to exactly where the apple juice comes from, but for her, organic apple juice from Publix is associated with the United States while apple juice from Wal-Mart is associated with a far-off country. In addition to meanings relating to far-away countries, some of these abstract place meanings concerned US states, as in the following quote from Kathryn:

You go to Whole Foods, love their store, it doesn’t make sense to buy a peach in Georgia that was flown in from Oregon. It just doesn’t make sense. Just because it has organic wrapped around it. Because you’re -- it might be better for you technically, because you might have less chemicals or this or that, but you’ve put way more chemicals into the environment to get that peach here. So why even have it? It doesn’t make sense. (Kathryn, 20s, non-profit administrator)

Thus, the places that inspired provision meanings for consumers ranged from nearby, familiar places to unfamiliar places thousands of miles away.

As with people meanings in the previous sections, place meanings were not limited to particular stages of provision. Place meanings included places associated with the production of products, such as the location of a farm or a factory. Informant Dan illustrated these types of meanings as he described a desire to create self-contained lettuce farms that could be placed anywhere, regardless of growing conditions:

I mean, you know, the demand for lettuce is enormous – I mean, all those sandwiches – it’s just huge. And it all comes… right now, you can’t grow it in Georgia, so it comes from California, it comes from Texas, wherever you can grow it. But it’s just too hot and muggy in Georgia. Some people do grow it in a greenhouse, you know, an air conditioned greenhouse, so that’s happening. But this could be put anywhere, and it’s a controlled environment. So we’re trying to create something where we can grow the produce where it’s eaten. (Dan, 40s, entrepreneur)

Another informant expressed a preference for products made in Europe:

Yeah. I just… well, from what I understand Europe has been a lot more careful about what they’ll do to their food, what they’ll put in their skin products, what they’ll allow in terms of just so much change to what we’re exposed to. They just tend to be a lot more conservative and cautious. And so I tend to think that… I tend to trust those companies more. … And that there is less of a culture of more and more and more - getting bigger
faster as a company. I feel like there is more of a culture of tradition and doing something well and sticking with it and holding to good practices, so... yeah. (Ginnie, 20s, tutor and dance instructor)

Thus, while Ginnie does not appear to have as much concrete knowledge about the focal production processes as does Dan, she still expresses a distinct preference for food and skin products from Europe over similar products produced in other countries.

Other place meanings concerned later stages in provision, such as storing or selling.

Many informants expressed a preference for a particular retailer, as Diana does in this excerpt:

I'll go way out of my way. And I try not to -- it's not really that far out of my way but I usually go to Sevenanda and I started to go to DeKalb farmer's market but even then you can see the organic lettuce, it's browning which is not usually if -- obviously it has to start rotting pretty soon but if it's been shipped from California it's already probably like a week, at least a week old when it's much nicer to eat lettuce like two days old or a day old. (Diana, 20s, college professor)

Other informants, like Willa, expressed a general preference for thrift store spaces:

I find just for reasons far apart from the price I really enjoy the thrift shop shopping experience. One, you're going to have a motley crew that's in there and I love people watching. And in Atlanta you got to get people watching wherever you can. It's not just given to you on a platter like some other cities. (Willa, 30s, stay-at-home parent)

As these excerpts indicate, consumers are mindful of the places involved in the provision systems underlying the products they consume, and these place meanings appear to influence their consumption behavior and consumption experiences. A third category of provision meanings, resources, is taken up in the next section.

**Resources**

This study also revealed provision meanings having to do with the resources involved in the making of products. Informants reported thinking about a variety of provision resources in their consumption decisions. One type of resource meaning concerned human resources, which are distinct from the people meanings described in the previous section. Meanings stemming
from human resources are not simply a connection or association to a person or a group of people but rather an appreciation for the effort or labor of a person. For example, one informant described how she is cognizant of the human resources invested in food and how her knowledge of those resources impacts her behavior:

Oh, I hate that because I know how much work they go to plant all that and I hate throwing away even a stalk of celery. I really hate to do it. Sometimes I probably keep things too long but I've -- I really just hate to waste food. (Layla, 50s, government administrator)

Another example comes from informant Kathryn, who talked about how human resource meanings affect her perception of food prepared by participants in a meal swap:

But yeah, I think it is different. 'Cause for one you know they took the time to make it. You knew that just like I take the time to make their meal they're taking the time to make my meal. It wasn't just thrown together last minute and it wasn't like what's in my fridge, I'll just eat that. It's really like it was prepared and that makes it nice and you know that they kind of share that same sense of sustainable eating so you know what you're getting is good. (Kathryn, 20s, non-profit administrator)

In some cases, the human resource meanings concerned a more abstract estimation of the effort of multiple people across the entire system of provision. For example, informant Martha thinks about all the human time and effort invested in marketing different brands and varieties of pasta and sauce when she shops for groceries:

…like I'm standing in front of the dry pasta or the spaghetti sauce; that is mind boggling. Why -- I just look at it and I think so much energy goes into designing these products to marketing to them and human energy and real energy, to transporting them. Then throwing them away when they're outdated, advertising them and so I just think it's kind of sad. (Martha, 50s, government administrator)

Ultimately, the meanings related to human resources generate an emotional reaction in Martha, as she appears to question whether these resources are being wisely used. Thus, all of these cases, the investment of human resources in a product is one of the layers of meaning ascribed to products, and these meanings impact the consumption of the products to which they are ascribed.
In addition to human resources, informants also discussed product meanings linked to natural resources. These meanings concern the natural resources that are contained in products or are used or impacted by the provision of products. For example, one informant demonstrated a cognizance of the natural resources invested in building new housing communities:

I mean, [our community] can’t be – and same with [another community] – it’s not even close to being sustainable, cause it wasn’t there before! Where did all that glass come from? Where did all that siding, that prefab, all the carpet – where did all that come from? Not here! … I mean, all of that stuff that they’ve got there and that they keep bringing is… it’s the same game. So if you want to be sustainable, you’d take a building that was already there, and you go and you’d live without changing it very much. You know? That would be a place to start – how about don’t build? (Dan, 40s, entrepreneur)

Other meanings pertained to the natural resources that are consumed in the making of products. For example, Peggy discusses her preference for buffalo over beef in terms of their impact on natural resources:

Cattle have a type of hoof that destroys the range. You have to keep moving them around, otherwise you get severe erosion because their hooves break up the sod. Buffalo don't do that. Buffalo for a million years lived on the plains and survived on the plains and the native grasses. They are a part of the cycle that is very self-sustaining. So there's no reason not to use buffalo because it is a sustainable meat. And it can be grown on the native grasses. (Peggy, 60s, retired scientist)

Thus, informants exhibited a consideration of and concern for the natural resources involved in systems of provision when making consumption decisions.

The resource meanings revealed in interviews were broad in scope, not only in terms of the type of resource (human and natural) but also in terms of whether the informant’s cognizance or concern was limited to specific resources or was more broad. In some cases, informants were concerned with very specific resources, such as air or water:

One category is I am absolutely sure of, I don't have any doubt about the reality of the effects of pesticide on our earth and our waterways. … You look at all those maps of the pesticides all the way into the Mississippi river and going out into the Gulf of Mexico and there's this big dead zone. Oh, so that part to me is absolutely undeniable. (Kristen, 40s, teacher)
The idea of clean air is probably on my mind more than anything. Like cars idling. … And so that has been – that’s one thing that’s sort of on my mind when I think about environmental impact. … So that negative impact of especially carbon dioxide is one thing that affects my choices. (Ginnie, 20s, tutor and dance instructor)

In other cases, the resource meanings stemmed from a more general appreciation of the totality of natural resources involved in provision:

… especially when you come to think about big things like cars. There's definitely more actually of an environmental quality because I do think "Another chunk of steel, wow."
So it's -- and so holding onto an asset like that, not only is it economical, which is the first motivation, but there is a second motivation, more so than in other things. Simply because it is such a thing that has consumed resources. (Pete, 40s, business consultant)

A more robust investigation of the motivations for considering provision meanings is reserved for a later section, but these accounts indicate that provision meanings can be brought to mind by either specific or general concern for resources.

In summary, it appears that the consumers in this study attributed meanings to the products they consume based on the resources involved in making them. The resources could be human or natural, and the resource meanings are distinct from other provision meanings explored in this study. The consideration of these meanings may be spurred by a narrow concern about a specific resource or by a general concern for the wise use of all resources. Thus, resource meanings are considered, along with people and place meanings, when consumers think about the products they consume.

**Processes**

The fourth and final category of provision meanings explored in this research concerns product meanings related to the various processes involved in systems of provision. Informants repeatedly referred to provision processes in accounts of their consumption, and they frequently used these process meanings to distinguish certain products from others. Process meanings were
generated based on all stages of the provision process, from the extraction of raw materials to the retailing of finished goods. For example, the PlayStation video game brought extraction meanings to mind for informant Ned:

    Well, from what I understand and from what I’ve read is that certain precious metals that they’ve used to make them, particular like some PlayStation stuff, but video game systems come from like these areas in Africa that people are killed for these metals, like, enslaved for these metals to mine for these things. And so they’re -- an there was one piece in particular in the PlayStation 3 I think that was really got a lot of news and then they said they were going to stop doing that…. (Ned, 20s, IT professional)

There were other product meanings relating to mining or harvesting raw materials, as in the following excerpt:

    But basically there will be nothing left. The big rain forests now are giving us our wood because people still insist on buying mahogany [furniture]. God, that's the rainforest! That's where we get our clean air. So now our society is not sustainable. (Peggy, 60s, retired scientist)

Manufacturing and agriculture meanings also featured prominently in informant accounts. Some of these meanings have to do with the way plants or animals are cared for in provision:

    Yeah, I think for a lot of reasons, CAFOs [Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations] and just the treatment of the animals and the way that there’s an industry around… I mean, here in Georgia we produce what, over a billion chickens a year. And those chickens are not happy chickens. I think that’s really wrong, from an ethical prospective. I always had that… when I was in college one of the big issues of the day were animal rights and it was going on back then. I think that factory farming is abominable and I wouldn’t want to support that system. (Jane, 30s, landscape architect)

    …and then also yeah, we want to make sure that as far as health wise it's important health wise because we think if we find something local that's made green, organic, however you want to say it. It's made without a lot of pesticides and things - that it's just better all-around so it’s a lot of that. (Ned, 20s, IT professional)

Thus, for Jane and Ned, the way food is produced is an important provision meaning that bears on their consumption choices. For other informants, products held meanings associated with manufacturing processes:
…like, look at the buttons on your shirt and just – you know all of goes into just making that button, right? I mean, we’re talking massive factories with huge coal-fired power plants and offices and trucks all over the world that are coordinating to produce that button, right? (Dan, 40s, entrepreneur)

Clothes buying, yes, I’m very much aware of what’s happened to the fabric industry here in this country, the way our clothes are made. Sweatshops and the tremendous really abuse of children in factories in other countries and of course being from Massachusetts with the what used to be the shoe industry, I think, at [our community] there hasn’t been much talk about shoes except for the vegans who go on about the leather shoes. (Martha, 50s, government administrator)

Thus, initial provision processes like extraction and manufacturing appear to be important sources of provision meanings.

Later stages in the provision process also inspired provision meanings. Several informants discussed meanings related to the transportation of the goods they consumed, as the following informants illustrate:

And all that produce flying in from Chile. I mean I picture it now flying it from France on a boat or something. I’m not doing that anymore. Not doing that anymore. … Seems like a ridiculous waste of fossil fuels. It seems like a ridiculous waste -- and certainly the price does not include what it’s really costing. If it did people wouldn’t be eating strawberries in the middle of the winter and all that, apricots and all. So it has changed my shopping in that way. (Kristen, 40s, teacher)

I try to buy local. You know, if it’s apples, I will try to get some on the eastern coast. If it’s fruit I’m going to try to buy it from Florida or South Georgia because I know that takes less fuel to bring it to me. So I pay attention to things like that. (Melanie, 50s, non-profit administrator)

Kristen and Melanie consider transportation processes in making consumption decisions and generally prefer products that do not require transportation over great distances, even though that limits the availability or selection of certain types of products. Provision meanings concerning retailing processes were also salient to the consumers interviewed for this study. Some of these meanings stemmed from an awareness of marketing techniques, such as merchandising:

One, I think that we are hugely manipulated by product placement, by colors, by the music that’s played to make us move faster through the aisles. By the way, the aisles are
designed. The fact that the cheaper basics are on the bottom shelves and eye level is products that are more processed, cost more, luxury items. I mean the -- everything that you read about marketing is just awful but the fact that bakery areas of grocery stores actually blow a scent of baking -- baking bread even if they're not baking bread. I mean how horrible is that? What kind of a trick is that to play on your mind? (Martha, 50s, government administrator)

Other retailer meanings were a function of the general business practices of particular retailers, such as Walmart:

The evil empire [referring to Walmart]. No, I don't think that. I don't like--it's not us against them. I typically don't. I refrain from that thought. I'm concerned about how they do business. And I know that they're making strides and embracing some environmental principles and yet they still push that lifestyle is about how much money you saved and not thinking about how that money saved is on the backs of some of the poorest in our world. (Kelly, 30s, minister)

But here you have so many different options that it’s easy to be like, “We’ll just go to Walmart – it’s cheap.” It’s like, I don’t want to go to Walmart. Walmart does not have practices, does not practice the beliefs that I have as far as sustainability and… yeah, you know, work and things like that – employment benefits. (Sue, 20s, non-profit administrator)

As with extraction and manufacturing, informants appeared to ascribe provision meanings related to transportation and retailing to the goods they consume, and these meanings in turn appeared to influence consumption behavior and consumption experiences.

These and other accounts indicate that provision meanings can be ascribed based on all stages of the provision process and that consumers are cognizant of these meanings when considering consumption decisions. As generally predicted by research on commodification, products can at times be perceived by consumers as the result of complex provision networks that involve people, places, resources, and processes. However, the fact that these meanings exist in the minds of consumers leads to the question of how exactly such meanings affect consumer behavior. Fortunately, the interviews in this study offer some insights into that
important question, and the following sections will attempt to explain how provision meanings operate within the framework of consumption decisions and consumption experiences.

**Effort of creating and considering provision meanings**

A cross-informant analysis of transcripts revealed several over-arching themes that provide insight into provision meanings that affect consumption decisions and experiences. One prominent theme that emerged is that the process of creating or ascribing provision meanings is effortful. Many informants mentioned the work involved in learning about aspects of a product’s provision. For example, several informants mentioned making an effort to research provision online:

I mean, I do a lot of research on the web about what are the right ecologically and environmentally sustainable things that – as compared with something else…. (Jane, 30s, landscape architect)

I have gone online to research it a little bit more and I do look at what's on the label too in terms of what the ingredients are and that sort of thing. And, you know, read articles things like that. But Seventh Generation goes way back. I actually was far more sensitive to some of the non-food issues earlier than the food issues in terms of sustainability. (Layla, 50s, government administrator)

Like that website, “Better World Shopper.” You’ve heard of it? It kind of like ranks, you know. It makes it kind of easy ‘cause you know like if you’re going to buy coffee, baby diapers, ice cream, things like that, and they just rank. Every product is different even if it comes from the same company. And I don’t even know what they look into, but it gives me some guidelines…. (Sue, 20s, non-profit administrator)

These informants discussed actively seeking information about the provision of products online. Interestingly, Sue is not sure what criteria the “Better World Shopper” website uses to create its rankings, but she trusts them nonetheless. Other informants mentioned making an effort to read books or newsletters to form provision meanings:

Have you read Goldman’s *Ecological Intelligence*? … He did, you know, *Social Intelligence* and *Emotional Intelligence*? It’s very well done. It’s all stuff we know should be done but I think the suggestions are very well articulated. And how products
should be labeled in a way that we really look at all those factors that have an effect on sustainability in general and make our choices based on that. (Laura, 50s, nurse practitioner)

So yeah, I would say books and basically any information at all. There’s a newsletter that I get every day: Markula. Dr. Markula is a physician that sends out these almost antagonistic e-mails about what is going to kill you, [laughter] that new research has brought up. So I don’t read all of them but I do tend to listen to a good deal of what he has to say. (Ginnie, 20s, tutor and dance instructor)

Still other informants, like Kristen below, referenced other intentional, effortful behaviors that resulted in the formation of provision meanings:

And I love having my hands in the dirt. And I -- we have our own little garden plot and it's lots of fun. But that little thing is challenging. I can't imagine -- I mean I have a real appreciation for what they do just because my little plot is such a struggle. (Kristen, 40s, teacher)

A full exploration of the sources of provision meanings appears later in this chapter, but these accounts indicate that provision meanings do not simply occur to consumers, nor are they inherent in the product itself. The consumer must put forth some effort to create provision meanings and ascribe them to specific products.

In addition to the effort required for consumers to attach provision meanings to products, actually taking these meanings into account during decision making often requires effort. First, informants reported that taking provision meanings into account increased the effort involved in buying decisions. For example, informant Layla described how considering provision makes her shopping trips lengthier:

Oh yeah. Takes me forever to get through the grocery store. I'm always looking for new things, too, but yeah, whether I'm buying meat or eggs or produce, you know, I'm very aware of where it was grown and how it was grown and the various certifications that exist for that particular product and you know, of course the cost. All those things factor in to whether I buy it or not. (Layla, 50s, government administrator)

Informant Dan discusses the effort involved in diligently choosing products based on only one among many desirable provision meanings:
And organic is one that I did, so this is the one that I took on. I said, “I’m going to buy only organic,” and I did it. And it’s like it’s massive. … But I tried many times to add things like no packaging – do only bulk. And it’s another huge thing! It’s like, and to balance that at the same time as doing organic and trying to get a good price…. Again, if you don’t care about the price, you can buy it all online, and you can just… and again, you don’t care about the petroleum or the embedded energy. (Dan, 40s, entrepreneur)

Informant Jane also points to effort as the reason for her decision to delegate food shopping duties to her husband:

It makes it so hard to go food shopping! (laughs) … You don’t really, you definitely want organic when you’re talking about root vegetables and strawberries and other…you know, I try to target it. But then, there’s just sort of the…I remember going, I do very clearly remember going into supermarkets right after I had worked on a farm and I was basically looking for “real food”. Everything looked plastic or so highly processed that it didn’t look like, it didn’t appear to be food either. And there was very little that didn’t fall into those 2 categories. So, that was hard. It’s still hard. (Jane, 30s, landscape architect)

In some cases, considering provision into account when making purchase decisions resulted in additional effort after purchase. Informant Perry expresses support for the local Community Sponsored Agriculture program but is reluctant to participate given the additional effort to prepare the food:

No, I don't [participate in the CSA]. Main reason is because it's more labor intensive than I'm ready for at this point. You have to make a commitment to use those vegetables and I'm just not at that point and Lisa's not really -- she, I don't know if she told you where she works it's like 12 hour days a lot of times and that's (inaudible) 12 hours. She winds up being away from the house for 14 or 15 hours. So we're not in a place for it, but I love the fact that the CSA is there…. (Perry, 50s, IT professional)

Similarly, informant Ned describes the difficulty of choosing public transportation over a car:

With transit and transportation, there is a giving up. You're giving up time; you're giving up precious minutes of your day, hours of your day, taking Marta. Like from here, a bus to a train to a bus to work is like an hour when I could drive in 20 minutes, 25 minutes. With traffic. So it's kind of like that and then getting around town. Getting around town to go see your friends, go visit my family, there's a lot of stuff like that where you feel like -- you are giving up stuff. You're giving up -- it's hard, it's not easy. But I do it because it's important, because I want to erase the carbon footprint. I want to save the planet. (Ned, 20s, IT professional)
Thus, consumers must expend effort in order to initially generate provision meanings, to consider those meanings when making consumption decisions, and at times even to consume the product after the decision is made. This point is summed up nicely by informant Sue:

So yeah, I started using the word mindful more because really it’s a choice. You can choose to be more mindful about what you eat or what you buy, and like I said it’s really easy to just go for the convenient and fast. It takes a little bit more effort to choose to eat and to purchase other things. (Sue, 20s, non-profit administrator)

**Provision meanings are considered selectively**

Another theme that emerged from the data is that provision meanings are ascribed and considered selectively. In other words, creating and considering provision meanings does not seem to be an enduring trait of certain consumers who consider the provision of all the products they consume, but rather a category-specific, or even context-specific, behavior. For example, several informants reported thinking strategically about which products warranted a consideration of provision meanings:

So there's always this kind of decisions making thing going on in my head and I guess a couple of years ago I came to the conclusion I was going to spend my money on the meats. You know, I was going to make sure that whatever meat we ate was raised and processed in such a way that it didn't cause the animal, it wasn't in unhealthy living conditions and the animal was slaughtered in a proper fashion. Humanely. (Layla, 50s, government administrator)

Layla has decided to give a single aspect of provision priority over others because of the effort and additional resources involved in considering multiple aspects of provision.

In fact, informants often cited a sense of conflict between competing values or goals that required them to make trade-offs or to prioritize different provision meanings. Prominent among these conflicts were those between values, such as environmentalism or altruism, and goals to conserve time and money. For example, informant Sue reports overlooking provision meanings ascribed to Apple computers because she cannot afford them:
Like I heard that Macs are a little bit more Earth-friendly because they’re not slave children that are putting together your computer kind of thing, but it’s like I can’t drop almost $3,000 for a laptop; I’ll go for the cheap one. So it’s hard when you get to monetary issues because I’m still a volunteer right now with AmeriCorps. (Sue, 20s, non-profit administrator)

Informant Perry prefers products that have certain place and process meanings, but he must trade-off this preference against limitations on his time:

I think with food I might tend to think of it more in terms of where it came from and how it came about and stuff like that. With products, if I can get something handmade or that would be a plus. But the truth is most of the things I get, I get, it's a time constraint. And basically I get what I need when I can get it where I can get it. And I don't -- give a lot of thought to each individual purchase. (Perry, 50s, IT professional)

Similarly, Ginnie describes how she gave up considering process meanings when she buys clothes in order to conserve time and money:

I don’t think it’s a cost-benefit analysis, ‘cause I think if I sat down and thought about it, I would talk myself into buying only organic clothes. So I think it’s knowing that that’s what I would do and then putting it in the back of my mind and going, “You know what? It’s so expensive, and it’s inconvenient, and I do like the styles that usually they have, but because I’d spent so much on it I would have to hand wash it all and take good care of it and it would drive me crazy. So it’s definitely more just convenience and cost sort of taking over there. (Ginnie, 20s, tutor and dance instructor)

Likewise, Dan discusses how limitations on time, money and attention conflict with other consumer values:

I think the next step for most people is when you’re told, “Okay, there’s DDT destroying the bird populations,” the next step for most people is like, “Oh, I hope somebody in Washington will do something about that, ‘cause I don’t have any time. I’m still working on paying the rent. I just committed myself to joining my PTA” or whatever. They’re like, “I don’t want this big, huge problem!” So most people will stop, will intentionally, it’s like – turn off the news, stop reading the paper, ‘cause it’s too much and it’s not anything I can do anything about…. (Dan, 40s, entrepreneur)

Other informants described how difficult it is to trade-off between preferences for multiple provision meanings. For example, Kathryn describes a sense of frustration, bordering
on futility, that comes from trying to look for products with the mix of provision meanings that would support all of her values:

It's all of it and that's what's hard. I think that's just so hard. When you first kind of get into it you kind of get kind of a niche maybe like issue and you're like maybe like I'm really big on no chemicals so I'm just going to get everything organic but then you don't realize about the labor laws that are going into it. But then when you, I get so complicated when you start getting to all of it and you're like I can't do anything, I'm just going to sit in my hole with my lights off because nothing is socially justice or sustainable. (Kathryn, 20s, non-profit administrator)

At other times the conflict is between multiple products with different provision meanings and different consumer benefits, as illustrated by this excerpt from informant Martha:

So when I make a decision to buy one type of ECOS laundry detergent versus soap nuts versus buying Arm & Hammer at the grocery store. You know, I try and understand, what are soap nuts. How do they work? And they sort of work but it doesn't really get all the dirt out of everything but it could work okay. Or versus ECOS. Are the claims made by ECOS laundry detergent really real or is it just the kind of advertising, like Johnson & Johnson, you know. Or the Clorox line of green products or -- I try and find out is that real. (Martha)

Other informants noted that considering provision often conflicted with cultural and social norms:

Yeah, the question is just being organized enough to get it, which sometimes one is and sometimes one isn't. You've just got to--and you can sort of, interest peters off. You need things to sort of press you really. (Alex, 30s, stay-at-home parent)

I mean there’s still a lot of… inertia and to a certain degree I think a lot of people in my generation have also come to, um… you could call it laziness or just acceptance that things just are the way they are, and we're not sure where they're gonna go, and we kinda have to keep living. And you know, you’re still going to have a family, and you’re still going to cart your kids around in your SUV, because that’s what they all fit into, and whatever. So I think that plays a part, too. I wouldn’t say that we’re all eco-activists, so… nor am I! Not that I don’t think it’s incredibly noble. But I do try to make choices that impact as little as possible. (Ginnie, 20s, tutor and dance instructor)

In other words, considering provision is countercultural at some level, making it an intentional and effortful choice that is not supported or reinforced by mainstream consumer culture.

Given these barriers to considering provision, it is not surprising to observe that the
informants in this study reported creating and considering provision meanings for only certain types of products. The interviewer did not attempt to steer the informants to consider any particular product categories, so this pattern emerged naturally. The most frequently mentioned product (as should be clear from the excerpts so far) is food. In fact, provision meanings pertaining to food were mentioned by all 25 informants in this study, and food was by far the most frequently cited type of product in individual interviews. Another frequently-mentioned category was clothing... Beyond these two categories, there was very little reference to provision meanings, although transportation, electronics, and housing were occasionally discussed. However, this proscribed range of product categories is not considered to be a limitation of this study. Rather, the fact that these particular categories seem to invite consideration of provision is of theoretical interest, and some potential explanations for this observation will be explored in Chapter 5. Furthermore, given the fact that spending on food and clothing represents over 16% of all consumer expenditures (BLS 2010), a greater understanding of consumption decisions in these categories would be very relevant to marketers and policy makers.

Furthermore, there were differences between individual informants in terms of the extent to which they created and considered provision meanings. Some informants seemed to have a deep understanding of provision networks, while others seemed to use shortcuts and heuristics to take provision meanings into account. For example, informant Layla has worked for government agencies related to agriculture, so she has a rich understanding of the provision of food:

There's a lot of different programs that certification type programs, and you're probably aware of that, that look at different aspects of how food is grown or how animals are raised and the organic standards in terms of how animals are treated are very, are pretty rigorous. And that's important to me as a consumer. And so I would look for organic meats more than I do organic, probably more than I do organic fruits and vegetables. Because I'm concerned about the way the animals are raised and the way the animals are slaughtered. That's really important to me. (Layla, 50s, government administrator)
On the other hand, Ginnie seems to rely more on more abstract provision meanings, such as the recommendation of her parents or friends:

So, at this point in my life I feel like I’ve gotten so much information from growing up with my parents and from that experience that I tend to just kind of make my decisions by feel. I kind of go like, “Well, Seventh Generation – that’s a company I’ve heard good things about them.” And even though I’m aware that they might have been bought out by now by some big company, some big corporation that might not be working the way they were five years ago or whatever. (Ginnie, 20s tutor and dance instructor)

Thus, although most informants exhibited a decommodified view of products, there was variety in terms of the richness of the provision meanings they created and ascribed to products. As with the observed selectivity in terms of product categories, it is possible that this variability in the depth of provision meanings is due, in part, to the effort required to be cognizant of provision networks. Thus next section turns to the question of why consumers are motivated to expend the effort to consider provision meanings.

Motivations for creating and considering provision meanings

Because creating and considering provision meanings are effortful processes, not automatic responses, there must be some motivation for consumers to expend this effort. In fact, informants revealed a wide range of motivations for taking provision into account in their consumption behavior. The following discussion of motives is in order of prevalence, with the more frequently-mentioned motives (summed across all informants) appearing first.

Environmentalism

The most common motivation for taking provision meanings into account was a care for natural resources or features impacted by provision. All 25 informants cited this motivation for creating provision meanings for products. For the purposes of coding, this motivation was
termed “environmentalism.” Given that environmentalism was one of the core values of the community that provided the context of this study, it is not surprising that it would serve to motivate informants to ascribe provision meanings and consider them in their consumption decisions. The environmental motivation was apparent in many accounts of food consumption, as exemplified in the following excerpts:

And I never was really big on so much the health aspects of organic but I've been interested in the environmental impacts of organics. The many of the practices, the organic standards put in place, actually are can be better for the soil and for water and the planet. (Layla, 50s, government administrator)

I would say that I probably pay a little more attention to is it good for the Earth, has it traveled a long distance. Like to be a member of [the CSA] is expensive, but the footprint is small; I can walk over and get it. (Carol, 50s, government administrator)

Layla and Carol appear to consider the process and resource meanings of the food they consume in terms of whether the production processes are harmful to the natural environment. The environmentalism motivation also came up in discussions about the process meanings of clothing:

Certain in terms of my clothing. I think about, for instance, a lot of clothing is made out of cotton. Is it organic cotton or is it -- how do they -- what materials are used to make my clothing, my towels, my sheets, things like that. And I do think about the fibers that are used and are they sustainably grown? (Layla, 50s, government administrator)

At other times, informants described a more general environmental concern that influenced their decisions in multiple areas. When asked why she considered the environment when making consumption decisions, informant Laura responded

I have always been… I was a Girl Scout, okay? I love the out of doors, I love camping, I love nature. I think the mentors that I had camping and doing that kind of thing were really good as far as just raising my awareness of… that was a really valuable asset that we needed to protect. I always felt connected in that way, I think. And even before I was in the Girl Scouts, I was the kid that was out in the woods, and I was the one that was out in the garden, and I was the one…. I mean, I had a tree that I talked to! I mean, you know, I felt very connected to that kind of thing. (Laura, 50s, nurse practitioner)
Altruism

Care for or consideration of people or animals involved in provision, which was labeled “altruism” in this study, was another common motivation for being mindful of provision meanings. Many informants exhibited a preference for food products with provision meanings indicating that the animals and/or humans involved in the provision network were not mistreated:

I always had that…when I was in college one of the big issues of the day were animal rights and it was going on back then. I think that factory farming is abominable and I wouldn’t want to support that system. So, I want to go see some of these happy chickens they say are “green”. You know, I want to know how happy are they? And let’s go take a look. (Jane, 30s, landscape architect)

Informants also discussed a preference for items that were designated “Fair Trade” because these products held process and people meanings connoting the just treatment of workers:

[Fair Trade certification] means that … the people who make my lifestyle possible, or I feel make my lifestyle possible, are at least being compensated in a way that’s livable for them. So, a step up from I assume the wages that a bigger corporation would be paying the growers of…. That there’s some regulation over it, someone is saying this is something that will sustain a life and a family, and this is what they should be paid. (Ginnie, 20s, tutor and dance instructor)

This altruistic motive was also illustrated in an avoidance of clothing made with “sweatshop” labor:

…then you know maybe it influences companies, too, when they see that when you think about the sweatshops and all those sorts of things, and you may have more power when you realize there are other options rather than buying this from say like Old Navy. (Willa)

In these and other accounts, informants expressed altruistic motives for ascribing and considering provision meanings in their consumption decisions.

Stewardship

Many informants expressed a motivation that is described here as “stewardship.” For the purposes of this study, this motivation indicates an appreciation or respect for the resources
invested in making a product and a desire to use these resources wisely. For example, informant Perry describes the general perception that humans are failing in a duty of stewardship:

We're really -- we're acting more as parasites than as stewards. And I'm not religious but I mean one of the things that even in the Christian religion, I think, that God instructed people to be good stewards of the Earth. But I think that the takeaway for a lot of people was just to go forth and use it. (Perry, 50s, IT professional)

Likewise, informant Diana describes being motivated by stewardship in her clothing purchases:

It's like, that's the feeling of trying to be conscious of all the resources involved in consuming something like a sweater. I mean there's a lot that goes into making a sweater. You've got to get the wool and then spin it. And I mean a lot of that's done by machines but it's a big process. And then the process of it being made and then transported and sold and I don't even know all the steps, but there's a lot of steps, I know that much. And so I just feel like, not that I want to put people out of work who do that work but somehow, and I don't know what that link is but somehow it just doesn’t feel right to take more than I need… (Diana, 20s, college professor)

One informant mentioned a mantra from her childhood that nicely encapsulates the stewardship motivation that influences her consumption choices:

And the value of that was being taught to us was … “use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without.” Which is the Boston thing my family did. (Martha, 50s, government administrator)

Thus Martha and other informants in this study reported a stewardship motive for considering provision meanings in their consumption decisions.

Experience or well-being

In some cases, informants were motivated to consider provision meanings by a perception that certain systems of provision provided a better or more desirable consumption experience. The enhancement in experience could flow from higher product performance on key attributes, like the taste of food:

I don't think it tastes better, it does taste better. I don't -- that nutrition stuff, I don't know if it's - some people claim organically this is more nutritious than non-organic. I don't know but I do know that food, fresh right out of the ground is more nutritious than
something that's been shipped for two or three days. But yeah, it just tastes better and it seems like the normal thing to do to get food out of your yard. (Mary, 30s, journalist)

In other cases, the provision system provided psychic benefits. For example, informant Dan discussed a desire to make consumption decisions that left him with a clear conscience:

…but it takes you a lot of steps to get back to where I think a lot of us want to be, which is where you can wake up in the morning and not destroy the planet and go to bed at night and think, "I had a great day. I was productive, you know, I’m engaged, I’m not denying all the good things that Western culture has to offer, and at the same time I'm not destroying and conquering and enslaving and taking advantage of people…. (Dan, 40s, entrepreneur)

As indicated in these excerpts, informants appeared to consider some provision meanings in order to improve their consumption experience, either by enhancing the direct benefits of the product or by promoting a more general sense of well-being.

**Social Connection**

Another motivation for thinking about provision meanings was a desire to feel a social connection to people involved in the provision of a product. Many informants mentioned this motivation for creating and ascribing provision meanings to the products they consume. In some cases, informants had a general sense of a loss of relationships in modern market systems that they hoped to counteract by connecting themselves to particular provision systems in their purchase decisions:

I think there is something about developing relationships between people that the market economy doesn't seem to care about so much. So if--you know, I would feel better about buying some olive oil from my [hypothetical] local olive oil producer. (Isaac, 40s, physicist)

In other cases, informants discussed a desire for or enjoyment of specific relationships with people involved in provision. Informant Kristen fondly recounts the feeling of relationship she has with the makers of some of the food items she purchases:
I used the last of the honey this morning. I was like, oh, honey guy. I wonder how he's doing. Oh, wonder if he'll have more of that kind of honey. So I do think of them. And the other day, a couple of weeks ago I was, man, can't wait till the market starts again. I wonder how the bread guy is doing and the popsicle guy. Can't wait to start. Sort of again the evidence of the social connection. (Kristen, 40s, teacher)

For these and other informants, the people meanings associated were ascribed and considered in order to create or maintain social connections.

Health and safety

A perception that certain systems of provision provide healthier or safer products also served as a motivation to be mindful of provision meanings. This motivation was most frequently mentioned in connection with food. Some informants expressed a preference for foods that had not undergone extensive processing:

And I mean even if it doesn’t cause like a third eye to pop out of our forehead, it’s not doing us any good to be ingesting all of these chemicals, even if they’re naturally derived, like they’re not in the form that they were meant to be in. Yeah, so I’m – I don’t like packaged food, processed food, microwaveable food – I’m just not into that at all. [laughs] (Sue, 20s, non-profit administrator)

Other informants, like Kristen, are motivated to seek out food that is certified as organic because of a concern for health:

I've got quibbles with the FDA process and what the term organic means and all that stuff, it's not perfect by any means. And yet I know I can trust it enough to have an idea of what it means and know that it's genuinely well followed. When I pick up something that says Mexico or Chile or Peru, I think I have no idea what was put on that. And I don't want to know what was put on it because I'm not eating it. (Kristen, 40s, teacher)

Product safety was also a concern among informants, particularly with cleaning products:

So I [make] all-purpose cleaner and [my husband] hates it because I use it for absolutely everything. Cleaning the toilets, cleaning all surfaces, just everything. … and it's with essential oils and things that I can readily identify and Murphy's soap and things that I just, ingredients that I can read and understand and knowing that that's what -- because a lot of with my youngest son with his allergies, they also had to deal with a lot of the particles that were in the air. (Willa, 30s, stay-at-home parent)
Thus, for some informants, provision meanings were instrumental in choosing products that promoted or protected their own health and safety.

**Political action**

Many informants reported considering provision meanings for political reasons. In other words, they felt that they could help change social institutions or structures by choosing certain systems of provision over others. These informants felt that they could “vote with their dollars” in their consumption decisions and support what they perceived to be preferable systems of provision. For example, informant Ginnie considers the process and resource meanings of meat in order to support the humane treatment of animals:

> Although it’s partly my personal health reasons and partly to just contribute to that kind of production of meat, to sort of vote for that with my money. That’s the way things should be done, I feel. More humane and things like that. (Ginnie, 20s, tutor and dance instructor)

Likewise, Willa chooses food with provision meanings that are in keeping with her hoped-for future of agriculture in this country:

> And so it's important for me whenever it's organic and affordable to buy it. One because I think at the end of the day there may be a chemical, a pesticide less on it. But the way that the food is grown and the philosophy that goes around the preservation of the land and some of the innovative ways that organic farmers probably have to operate, I want more of that. I want more of that for this entire nation. And so when you vote with your pocketbook, then you have more of a chance that this will actually become a sustainable option for the whole country. (Willa, 30s, stay-at-home parent)

Informant Dan presents the negative of Willa’s case, indicating that he believes consumers that buy conventionally-grown produce are expressing approval of the provision processes involved:

> …when we spend a dollar on an organic farmer, you’re sending a message – do more of that, whereas when you spend a dollar on the other you’re not thinking, but you are telling them, “Okay, make me more cheap GMO, you know, pesticide, fertilizer – do whatever you have to do to get it cheap. I don’t care. I don’t want to know.” And that’s
where your dollar… that's who you’re hiring to grow your food. (Dan, 40s, entrepreneur)

In other cases informants reported boycotting certain products because of the political meanings associated with people or places in the provision network, as illustrated by Brad:

I don’t buy Coors beer – I’m not much of a beer drinker anyway – but I wouldn’t buy that because the founder or Coors beer is a big right-winger, contributes to a lot of right-wing causes. I don’t buy products from Israel because of the occupation. So those kind of things factor in. (Brad, 70s, retired college professor)

As demonstrated in these excerpts, political action appears to be an important motivation for cognizance of provision meanings.

In summary, informants in this study reported a variety of motivations for expending effort to create or consider provision meanings. This finding suggests that provision meanings are not restricted to narrow causes or particular value systems. Instead, consumers with different motivations and priorities might create and ascribe similar provision meanings and use them to make consumption decisions. Having observed that some consumers can be motivated to expend effort to create provision meanings, the next section explores the process by which these meanings are created.

**Sources of provision meanings**

Another theme that emerged in this study is that the creation of provision meanings was not a solitary or rote process. A variety of actors are involved in the creation of provision meanings, including the consumer’s context or experiences; his/her family, friends or acquaintances; books, movies and other forms of media; and marketers. In some cases, informants described provision meanings that were a natural result of their own life experiences. For example, informant Kathryn describes visiting a part of the provision system for flowers:
… I went with a trip through school to Oaxaca [Mexico] and we visited some of the flower plants. ... I mean flowers don't naturally grow and they have these massive greenhouses that I mean - bad. It was not a good thing for the environment and you go in them and you thought you were probably in Hawaii because they were growing all these tropical plants in Mexico and then shipping them to the United States because that's what everybody wanted. (Kathryn, 20s, non-profit administrator)

Another informant had work experiences with some of the intended beneficiaries of Fair Trade certification:

Yeah, I worked for the certifying agency in Central America, Fair Trade Certifying agency. I visited the cooperatives and I worked with them on some training plans so that they could get the training that they needed and did assessments of their coffee. (Melanie, 50s, non-profit administrator)

Provision meanings could also be generated from the consumer’s context or surroundings.

Numerous informants mentioned that the organic farm adjacent to the community fostered a greater awareness of food provision networks:

You know, I might buy more locally – food, locally, because of the CSA. Just because of, um, whether I’m buying from the CSA or not, the idea of buying locally is stimulated by walking around this farm. It’s absolutely amazing that you can get your vegetables from right – there! So when I see something local, locally grown, or drive by a farmer’s market, then I’m more apt to want that. … Because it makes it more concrete; the idea of locally grown sounds nice, but that direct connection to your food, realizing that that’s what that could mean, that it’s 20 minutes away, or an hour away, somehow feels more connected when I can look out my door and see food being grown right there. (Ginnie, 20s, tutor and dance instructor)

Alternatively, informant Alex reports that witnessing an undesirable provision network led him to seek out an alternative:

I probably first really started buying it [organic food] after I lived in Indonesia. I was there for two years and just the pollution I saw and the sense of lack of control about what's going into food there. That was--that was the early '90s. I sort of came back to Australia after that and thought, I really want to get good food into me…. (Alex, 30s, stay-at-home parent)

Thus, many of the provision meanings discussed in this study stemmed from the personal experiences of the informants themselves.
Friends and family members were a second source of provision meanings mentioned by informants in this study. Many informants mentioned learning about aspects of provision from family members, as Mary illustrates in the following excerpt:

I mean we had chicken eggs. I didn't understand about buying eggs from the store but we always bought meat from the store and again that's because my grandparents remember actually having to kill a chicken and dress it every time you wanted meat and they're like, forget it. Let's just go to the store. We weren't thinking about chicken antibiotics or anything crazy like that. They said, you know, we've worked all our lives and we have $10 to go buy a chicken. I am not boiling a cauldron of water, scalding the chicken, pulling out the entrails. (Mary, 30s, journalist)

Other informants, like Brad, reported seeking guidance from friends and neighbors in order to form provision meanings:

Well, if there was something I needed, then I might try to find out which product is greener, something like that. Might put an e-mail out asking a question like that and get feedback from the community on which one was better from an environmental point of view. (Brad, 70s, retired college professor)

Likewise, Jane reports helping her friends and neighbors form provision meanings:

I do that all the time, too. I just sent out an e-mail on the list saying, “Spring is here, time to mulch your gardens. Don’t buy cypress mulch.” And one of the groups that we work with just designated the cypress mulch as endangered and…kind of like that, landscapes that are endangered because they are clear cutting…anyway, but even though we are a very conscious community, if you don’t have that information…like last year, many of my neighbors had cypress mulch in their yards, and that’s dyed, too. Ugh…but if you’re not tuned into it, well maybe it comes that color. So that kind of thing goes out all the time on e-mail and in conversations. (Jane, 30s, landscape architect)

Given the tight-knit nature of the community in which the informants had chosen to live, it is not surprising that social influences were important in the formation of provision meanings.

In addition to their own experiences and their peers, informants frequently cited books, movies, and websites as sources of provision meanings. Among these sources, Barbara Kingsolver’s book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* was mentioned by numerous informants as a source of meanings related to food provision:
But I just never really considered where my food came from. And I didn't realize -- I had heard of GMO, sort of in passing and I've heard of like, I don't know. I just had heard of like organic, like organic's better but I didn't really understand why and I didn't understand why local food was better. Just I knew that it was better but I didn't know why. And then that book [Kingsolver] sort of really made it clear why. And once I understood the why there was just like no turning back…. (Diana, 20s, college professor)

Another popular media source was the documentary *Food, Inc.*, which was the source of food provision meanings for several informants:

… I'm glad I saw that *Food Incorporated*. I mean I grew up on a farm. We had -- and then when we moved to the Appalachians we had our own horse, we had sheep, we had cow, a cow or two for milk, pigs, a pig or two. But, you know, you knew what they were fed, you knew that they were cared for, and this idea that you might have a hamburger that may have come from dear knows how many different animals and dear knows what they were injected with or fed. It's really a crime to do even every three months. (Sharon, 50s, retired therapist)

Web sites were another popular source of provision meanings. Informant Kelly describes one such site that informed her provision meanings concerning clothing:

How like the fibers from, you know, a worn out clothing or pair of shoes could be repurposed somehow. I'd like to know more about that network. I know it exists but I read somewhere that we throw out 68 pounds of clothing every year but we only purchase 10 pounds of recycled clothing, like on average, mainly consignment. And then kind of what happens to our clothes as we pass them on, where they end up. It's pretty fascinating. I think it's Earth--is it Earth 911 that posted that article? It's a couple of years old but it's worth reading. It's fascinating. I bet if you go to Earth 911 or Google "recycled clothing" that article will come up. (Kelly, 30s, minister)

Finally, some informants described provision meanings that were created by labels or marketing communications. In addition to the organic and fair trade certifications mentioned in previous sections, several informants reported looking at product labels to generate provision meanings. For example, Layla developed a preference for Seventh Generation products in part from reading the labels on their products:

I've bought Seventh Generation products for years, their soaps, their paper products and all that. I really don't have to worry. If I buy Seventh Generation I'm pretty comfortable
that it's done right. … I have gone online to research it a little bit more and I do look at what's on the label, too, in terms of what the ingredients are and that sort of thing. (Layla, 50s, government administrator)

Informants also mentioned public relations communications such as news reports and documentaries as a source of provision meanings. For example, Diana’s provision meanings for Bob’s Red Mill products were generated in part by a profile on a news program:

And I trust -- I saw them [Bob’s Red Mill] once on Sunday Morning and they seem like a very good company. After I saw that on Sunday Morning, that profile on them, I have -- apparently he gave all his employees like a huge amount of money like for their hard work and that's a really nice guy. I will continue to support that company so I always feel good. Like I try to buy like my flour from them or that sort of thing. (Diana, 20s, college professor)

Thus, the marketing efforts of companies via advertising, labeling, and public relations appears to be an important factor in the formation of provision meanings.

In summary, the interviews in this study suggest that the creation of provision meanings is not a simple or routine process but one influenced by a variety of factors, including the personal experiences of the consumer, his/her friends and family members, books, movies and other media, and marketing communications. All of these sources are instrumental in the creation and maintenance of provision meanings, which in turn are sometimes considered by informants in making consumption decisions. The next section explores this next step in the process by identifying the types of consumption decisions that are influenced by provision meanings.

**Provision meanings and consumption behavior**

Informants in this research reported that when provision meanings are created and considered, they influence a variety of consumption behaviors, ranging from the decision whether to buy any product to the decision of how to dispose of a product. The following
sections will explore each of the types of consumption behaviors that can be influenced by provision meanings. By far the most frequently mentioned behavior influenced by provision meanings was deciding what to buy; sections coded under this theme accounted for more than half the total codes for all consumption behaviors. Deciding whether to buy was the second most frequently mentioned, followed by giving away, throwing away or recycling, deciding how much to buy, and repairing or repurposing.

What to buy

Once a decision to buy a particular kind of product is made, there can be a deliberation over which particular product to buy. Informants in this study frequently reported considering provision meanings when deciding what to buy. For example, place meanings were important to Kathryn when choosing wine:

I feel like I'm a Georgia winery advocate, like to ask at restaurant, do you have any Georgia wines? Why don't you have Georgia wines? Especially ones that are touting organic and local and then you look at their wine list and it's like Argentina and Italy and that's not local nor is it organic, so it doesn't make sense. (Kathryn, 20s, non-profit administrator)

Provision process meanings, like organic food production, can also influence the choice of which product to buy:

I can get some at the local grocery store which is just right up here, Publix. They do carry organic, right now recently they introduced organic chicken and you can get little patties, little chicken patties that are organic. You can get some organic beef and then they have kind of a step down is not organic but sustainable and let's see, trying to think of a -- White Oak Pastures is I think has the grass fed beef. (Layla, 50s, government administrator)

Ned considers people meanings when deciding where to purchase clothing:

Sweatshops, yeah. All that stuff. That's like the beginning I can remember thinking that's unjust. Like I'm not going to buy Gap stuff or I'm not going to buy whatever. Because it's not made here, it's made by unionized workers …p. (Ned, 20s, IT professional)
Resource meanings can also factor into decisions about what to buy. Informant Melanie prefers to buy used clothes from a thrift store in order to conserve resources:

I figure if I buy from a thrift store then I'm not generating more corporate profits for unnecessary stuff. And not generating transportation and marketing, packaging costs. All of that is done for new clothes. It's not taking natural resources to make something new so I really like the reuse concept, the part of it. I'm very serious about the reduce, reuse, recycle. I'm very serious about the reuse part of the formula and the reduce part.

(Melanie, 50s, non-profit administrator)

Based on these and many similar statements from informants, it appears that provision meanings have a bearing on consumer choice between competing products.

One interesting sub-theme related to buying decisions concerned a perceived conundrum presented by prices. Several informants noted that the low prices of some consumer goods did not appear to make sense given the complexity of their provision networks. This cognitive dissonance typically led these informants to suspect that the “true cost” of these items was being borne by someone or something else. In some cases, informants thought prices for mass market products did not accurately reflect the true cost in terms of natural resources:

Well, I think most of the food in Publix is not fairly priced because there are all sorts of social costs that are not figured into it. I mean, if the people who make all that food had to pay for all the damage they’re doing to the environment, the resources – water and stuff – that they’re using up, then you know their food would be much more expensive than organic food. But they’re all heavily subsidized by the taxpayers. You know, with the farm subsidies every year, you know, the corn growers, the soy growers – they get huge subsidies. That’s why you find corn syrup in half the things in Publix. But if they weren’t getting those subsidies, and they really had to pay the full cost of producing their corn, then the price of those products would be much higher.

(Brad, 70s, retired college professor)

For other informants, like Peggy, prices do not accurately account for the human labor invested in products:

Nothing reflects the true cost at all. We've always had pretty inhumane working conditions overseas that produce quite a lot of our products.

(Peggy, 60s, retired scientist)
Still other informants had a more abstract sense of the costs that aren’t reflected in prices for some products:

And part of it is because we’re doing most mass production but it doesn’t reflect the true cost. It’s sort of like we’re getting these things more cheaply but we’re not factoring in the cost of the environment, we’re not factoring what it does to us as human beings as a society. (Perry, 50s, IT professional)

I think that, and maybe this is just information I’ve been fed by whatever media I’m consuming but I think that there is a price that it takes to make a gallon of apple juice. And that price is being paid by me and the environment and the people who are producing it. And so you know the lower the price per apple juice, it doesn't change, you know, depending on which apple juice you have. And so when I buy $1.50 apple juice I’m passing on some of that cost that I should be paying to the planet at large. (Leslie, 30s, health professional)

As will described later, this sense of disconnect between prices and provision sometimes contributed to negative consumption experiences when, for reasons of convenience or budget, informants purchased low-priced items from undesirable systems of provision. However, the remainder of this section will explore the other consumer decisions that are impacted by provision meanings, beginning with the decision whether to buy.

**Whether to buy**

As with decisions between competing products, provision meanings appeared to be a consideration when informants decided whether or not to buy a particular type of product.

Kathryn describes the dilemma she faced when she was trying to plan a sustainable wedding:

Like when we went to go register, that was tough. First, it took us months and months to decide if we were going to register. And then when we were there every piece of thing we registered for we had to talk about. It was like this big thing, like do we really need this, how are we going to use it …. And I think the people like that were there just probably thought we were crazy because at the end of the day we probably had like 30 things on the list and they’re probably used to people who have like pages and pages. (Kathryn, 20s, non-profit administrator)

Informant Kelly fondly remembers her time in graduate school when she did not own a car:
In fact, I got to the point where I was trying to figure out how long I could go without even getting in a car, let alone driving my own car. And my husband had the family car that he drove to school every day. And that was great. (Kelly, 30s, minister)

The community in which the interviews took place offered some common resources that enabled informants to do without buying certain products, like tools and lawn equipment:

Well, um, living here, there’s certain things I would have to buy in another neighborhoods, that don’t have to buy here. Like I don’t need a lawnmower. For one thing, we have very small yards. And second we have community lawnmowers out there that everybody can use. So I don’t need to buy a lawnmower, I don’t need to buy tools. (Brad, 70s, retired college professor)

As will be discussed further in the next section, there was also a great deal of swapping and sharing that took place in the community that enabled some informants to avoid buying something new:

I was like, hell, yeah, I'll take a big soft chair. It is nice. I don't know why she -- and I know she's a real tidy person. I know it's real clean. So yeah, why should I spend? I get no pleasure out of buying something that I know was made in China, that they chopped down trees somewhere to make the frame for a couch …. Why not get something that’s kind of already there? (Mary, 30s, journalist)

Thus, when it comes to buying products, there appears to be situations when provision meanings, such as an awareness of the resources invested in making a product or the place where it was made, influenced informants not to buy certain types of products.

**Giving away, throwing away, and recycling**

The interviews conducted for this study provide evidence that consumers consider provision meanings when deciding how to dispose of belongings they no longer want to keep. The meanings issuing from systems of provision appeared to also make systems of disposal more salient to consumers, and the same meanings and motivations that influenced choices of whether or what to buy in turn influenced the choice of disposal system. For example, informant Jane
describes how meanings related to the human resources invested in her food make it difficult to choose to compost it, much less throw it away:

Something I have a really hard time doing is throwing away vegetables, knowing how much time and energy went into growing that...it's much more difficult when it's from the farm. If a piece of lettuce falls on the floor - it almost made it! (laughing) So I will definitely, I will absolutely eat it. But, it's just one of those things where I'm very reluctant to just compost it. (Jane, 30s, landscape architect)

Likewise, Willa expresses concern about the sustainability of throwing things away instead of repurposing or recycling:

…but when it comes to my day-to-day decisions I decide to say it's more about just so many things are considered disposable and really they're building up somewhere and we're hurting the earth. That's really probably first thing that kind of comes to my head and I try to stop whatever, whether it's you know, compost, recycling, or just helping the kids to figure out just don't throw something away, there may be we can use it some way even if it's to create a new game or something. (Willa, 30s, stay-at-home parent)

As mentioned previously, swapping or giving away was considered to be a preferred disposal method among informants, as expressed by Alex and Jane in the following excerpts:

I mean, any given time I've got stuff here that the kids have grown out of that I'm thinking, okay, this will fit her. Or if not, she doesn't want it then him or something like that. So when I see them, oh, look, you want this? And that way. That's one way of disposal is just giving it away. (Alex, 30s, stay-at-home parent)

It’s called a “bitch and swap” and “naked ladies party”. Basically, everybody just strips down and keeps trying on clothes. Yeah, it’s a fabulous thing. … I have a box in my closet right now, and when I decide I’m done with this, or this just doesn’t look right on me, or whatever...wrong color. I put it in the box. And then when it’s time for the swap I just bring the box. And that’s pretty much what all the folks that take part [do]…. (Jane, 30s, landscape architect)

Finally, all of the informants in this study mentioned recycling as a more desirable alternative to throwing something away:

I find a home for it if I can't use it I'm a frequent contributor to Goodwill and to the Habitat Resale Store and places like that and I place -- recycle light bulbs and recycle -- we have our recycling bins out here for all our recyclables and I also think about when I purchase something what's the ultimate disposition of this product. Am I going to be able to recycle it? (Layla, 50s, government administrator)
Like Layla, Kathryn considered the recyclability of products before purchasing items for her wedding reception:

And now there's so many companies that are going and putting all their wine in boxes 'cause it's cheaper to ship and then you can recycle. Like it's so much easier on the environment to recycle cardboard than it is to recycle glass. And so that's -- we're going to box wine. It'll be good box wine but it'll be box wine and same with like you get a -- instead of getting a bunch of bottles, which are going to be hard to recycle, you get kegs. And everybody likes a kegger so that'll work. (Kathryn, 20s, non-profit administrator)

These accounts indicate that informants were mindful of what happens to products after they are disposed, perhaps in part due to the provision meanings ascribed to them. As a result, they sought out alternative means of disposing items like recycling or giving away.

**How much to buy or consume**

Provision meanings also appear to influence consumption decisions about how much to buy or consume. For example, provision meanings relating to resources compel Jane to try to consume less and live more simply:

Yeah, I think for me, like $e=mc^2$. Like, taking more resources out of the earth, unless you are cycling it back...you know, recycling the clothes or recycling other materials, it's just more extraction and more production and I don't really buy into it. I don't want to buy into the notion that we need to keep growing in order to be prosperous. I think that sustainable level is not about unlimited growth. So, I don't know...I think that we want to live a simple lifestyle. I think we do, but part of that is just not...being conscious of...being really conscious of all of our purchases and recognizing that that is just more stuff. (Jane, 30s, landscape architect)

Process and people meanings are salient to Kelley in determining how much she buys at retailers like Target:

I'm just as complicit when I shop at Target. I'm just careful about how much I consume. How much I participate in the system. It's harder now than ever before. And just reading--just saying that something's made in the USA doesn't necessarily mean it was done ethically or with fair trade in mind. (Kelly, 30s, minister)
Other informants mentioned buying products with the intention to share them with others in order to reduce the overall consumption of resources:

We bought, we made an agreement with a neighbor this summer and bought a pool. Like one of those little above ground three feet or something, 3x15 maybe. And but we don't have room for a pool so we put it on their property and shared it. Which was nice because then we didn't have to buy two pools, you know. (Leslie, 30s, health administrator)

These accounts illustrate that provision meanings influence not only the type of products consumed but also the quantity consumed in certain product categories.

**Repairing or repurposing**

In some cases, an informant’s consideration of provision meanings factored into decisions to repair or repurpose products that no longer function as intended. For example, several informants reported repairing items in an effort to conserve the resources invested in making them:

I get my shoes repaired even thought I could more cheaply buy -- actually it's those black shoes right there. I've had those for 15 years and I just keep getting them repaired. I mean they look all right. Sure, so why not. Just repair them instead of buying a new pair. (Mary, 30s, journalist)

Oh, yeah. We are the queen of reusing and repairing stuff. My husband had his tennis shoes resoled in Nicaragua. If you can believe that. He had two pairs of tennis shoes and they can fix anything there so and one pair had good soles and worn out tops and the other pair had worn out tops and no sole, good tops and no soles. So he had them cut the old soles off and sew them onto a pair that had the good tops. And he said they had never had anybody do that before. (Melanie, 50s, non-profit administrator)

Other informants mentioned repurposing items to keep them in an attempt to make their consumption more environmentally sustainable by reducing the demand for new resources or by reducing the flow of products to landfills:

I am the only person I know who reuses calendars. The 4 calendars I have on my walls right now are from 1982, 1993 and 1999, all of which years are compatible with 2010 (i.e., start on the same day of the week and are not leap years). At the end of this year,
they will go back into my calendar file and await the next non-leap year that starts on a Friday, and be replaced by calendars from non-leap years which begin on Saturday, like 2011. (Brad, 70s, retired college professor)

But what we have tried to do is one, with the kids, like I'll say okay, look through the house and let's get some of the things that we consider junk in the house and bring them to the table. Then you have to think, what are other ways we could use this? And I think that it not only stirs up their creativity but it makes them look at junk differently. Like this isn't just junk. This could be maybe repurposed in other ways …. (Willa, 30s, stay-at-home parent)

Informant Mary recounts how she helped a neighbor demonstrate the possibility of repair to his son:

He said this ukulele is broken. It's not a fine instrument but it's not a piece of crap either he said. And I would like for my son to see something repaired rather than thrown away. Can we come to the wood shop and get it fixed? And, yeah, sure so I met him in the wood shop and got some wood glue. We have a big clamp and he was very specific. He wanted his kid to see something repaired and not thrown away. So we just glued it back together and now it works again. (Mary, 30s, journalist)

The informants in this study considered the resources invested in products when deciding whether to dispose of a worn or broken product or to extend its life by repairing or repurposing. These resource meanings are also influential in the final category of consumer behavior explored in this study: disposal behavior.

In summary, the data collected for this study indicates that informants not only created and ascribed rich provision meanings to the products that they consume but also that these provision meanings seemed to influence a variety of consumption decisions. From the decision to buy something or go without to the decision of how to dispose of something at the end of its useful life, these consumers appeared to consider the people, places, resources and/or processes involved in provision.
Provision meanings and consumption experiences

A final cross-informant theme that emerged from the interviews was that provision meanings are connected to consumption experiences. In other words, not only do provision meanings have a bearing on decisions such as what to buy, they also influence perceptions of the experience of consuming the product. Many informants linked at least one consumption experience to a provision meaning. Generally, informants associated positive consumption experiences with certain provision meanings and negative experiences with other provision meanings. These positive and negative experiences are distinct from satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the quality or functionality of products; rather, they are described as a higher-level feeling or emotion. For example, informant Isaac describes how consuming cheese made by a friend on a local farm:

…there's a goat co-op and actually we haven't bought stuff from them but Kaila--Kaila has brought stuff for various events and oh, man, like that--it just feels so great to know that Kaila made that goat cheese out of goats that live really close. (Isaac, 40s, physicist)

Likewise, several informants described the positive experience of consuming food from the neighboring organic farm, as illustrated in the excerpts below:

Just awareness and by that I mean living in a place that has a farm, where I know the farmer, I watch the -- all the produce being grown, I see the team efforts happening, I love hearing the tractor out there. So that connection with that food actually being grown and knowing the person and just -- these are incredible people that are farming this land and knowing them and that connection with the farmer is just been priceless. Just the most important thing. (Kristen, 40s, teacher)

Oh, yeah, definitely. And when I'm getting the food from the garden and interacting with people and buying fair trade stuff I feel a lot better. I feel a boost of inspiration that I can do that. … Well, it's more consistent with my values and I feel more integrated and holistic in my ability to support the things that I believe in. (Melanie, 50s, non-profit administrator)
These positive experiences appear to be distinct from any direct health or taste benefits offered by the food itself. Instead, the positive experience is a more general, abstract satisfaction with the aesthetic and social context of consuming food from the local farm.

For other informants, there is a sense of moral satisfaction in consuming products that have certain provision meanings. For example, Ned describes the positive feeling he gets from living out his values in planning a sustainable wedding:

All the choices we're making so that it's more something we want and it's more green and we're having the Trees Atlanta LEED certified building and stuff like that and it builds everywhere, it just starts to flood this whole like green sustainable movement, carbon footprint, footprint erasing movement. It's just spreading into all aspects of our life. It feels good. Feel like I'm doing something instead of just talking about doing something. (Ned, 20s, IT professional)

Similarly, Ginnie seems to get a sense of satisfaction – and even superiority - by making environmentally-friendly consumption decisions:

I feel like I'm doing my civic duty, like an upstanding citizen, someone who thinks about their choices. And it's partly doing my part, partly some sense of being better educated than the mass populace, to be… I mean, I'm being brutally honest! (Ginnie, 20s, tutor and dance instructor)

Finally, informant Willa describes how she derives a sense of satisfaction from giving used products a chance to continue to fulfill their purpose:

I actually get really enthusiastic about things that I know have had a life and then now I'm taking it on and I give it a life. … Been tried and true, they're probably well done, that's why they're still there and still in good shape for you to get. And then you give them, you know, their next chapter. (Willa, 30s, stay-at-home parent)

In addition to positive experiences, some provision meanings can result in negative experiences. Several informants described a sense of guilt or shame when purchasing a product with negative provision meanings. For example, informants mentioned negative experiences
from shopping at large discount retailers, like Walmart and Target, due to limitations on time or money:

And so to shop at Wal-Mart is like beneath the beneath. So when you go there do not tell anybody. I don't. (Sharon, 50s, retired therapist)

And so when I buy $1.50 apple juice I'm passing on some of that cost that I should be paying to the planet at large. … I was just talking to my friend about this but I feel that. I energetically and I know that this is so kooky and so not me, but it's true that I feel it. I go to Wal-Mart and I can leave Wal-Mart and I feel drained. And maybe it's because I psychologically know that that's happening and maybe it's not even true, maybe it's just some BS that somebody fed me and I -- but whatever. I leave the farmer's market and I feel like happy even though they're both really stressful places to shop…. (Leslie, 30s, health professional)

… and now I find myself going to Target and just buying whatever is on sale and I sometimes think about that and go, “Ugh!” You know? What, what am I really doing? Is this really sustainable? But also is it social justice because what are the labor practices here? How are they treating their workers and is it something that's maybe taking away jobs from people who really need it? Yeah. (Kathryn, 20s, non-profit administrator)

Other informants mentioned a sense of conflict when buying clothes from undesirable provision systems in order to satisfy the dress requirements for their professional jobs:

… if I was a farmer, sure, I'd buy all my clothes at the thrift store. But for teaching purposes I feel like I have to look kind of professional. So I always feel that tension, that's probably the area of my consumption where I feel the most tension or I just have to suck it up and try to buy as little as I have to buy but in that way 'cause you see the "made in Vietnam" and you feel guilty. Like by small children. (Diana, 20s, college professor)

I think, at ELC there hasn't been much talk about shoes except for the vegans who go on about the leather shoes. And they are so proud, they parade their -- it's so funny. They'll parade their acceptable shoes around and I hide my feet under the table. I have leather shoes for work. (Martha, 50s, government administrator)

Although Diana and Martha have practical reasons for purchasing the clothes they wear to work, the provision meanings associated with these clothes give them feelings of guilt. Likewise, Kathryn describes a sense of guilt when she does not take provision meanings into account when she buys products:

It just seeps into every part of your life and I think part of the reason for wanting to live sustainable is because of social justice or why you want -- I mean everything can almost
be tied into it. And -- but it's sometimes it's difficult. It's easy to kind of fall away from it, kind of forget to think about social justice before purchasing items. And then when you do you feel so guilty. (Kathryn, 20s, non-profit administrator)

Similarly, several informants mentioned negative feelings about purchases in a product category where they have not expended the effort to create or ascribe provision meanings. Electronics was one category that was mentioned in this context, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

I do deliberate a lot on all of those things, but it’s mostly the food. I’m not as tuned into where clothes come from and electronics, I just assume are all bad (laughing). … Yeah, no…the phone…I figure they’re all evil. (laughing) I particularly find this phone evil. (Jane, 30s, landscape architect)

My husband probably, this is likely some choices that he makes that are just purely about what it is that he wants. He's very into electronics and so you know, I mean for --did you see our TV? Take a look at it, it's like 60 inches, it's embarrassing. No, we have the biggest TV in the community by far. And there's another one on another floor. (Leslie, 30s, health professional)

Thus, provision meanings appear to play an important role in producing consumption experiences, both positive and negative.

Another interesting finding concerning consumption experiences was that the emotions associated with these experiences, whether positive or negative, could be quite strong. This observation is notable given the mundane nature of the products and meanings involved. For example, Pete reports a strong positive emotional response to buying food from the local farm:

There's probably more than anything is just that there's huge emotional pay off going every week and just getting it because it's like look at all this great stuff and there are days you come in with this huge basket and it's just beautiful stuff and then -- the fact that it's so beautiful is emotionally rewarding. Look at this lettuce! (Pete, 40s, business consultant)

Informants Sue and Kristen also reports a strong emotional connection to the local farm:

I get super excited thinking about that CSA. I don’t get real excited thinking about going to Publix! (Sue, 20s, non-profit administrator)
…living in a place that has a farm, where I know the farmer, I watch the -- all the produce being grown, I see the team efforts happening, I love hearing the tractor out there. So that connection with that food actually being grown and knowing the person and just -- these are incredible people that are farming this land and knowing them and that connection with the farmer is just been priceless. Just the most important thing. (Kristen, 40s, teacher)

These informants report strong emotional reactions to produce, a product that is relatively inexpensive, perishable, and not frequently associated with consumer attachment or involvement.

Informants also indicated that provision meanings could spur strong negative emotions. For example, informant Diana very upset about large agricultural companies controlling access to patented seeds, as portrayed in the movie Food, Inc.:

And what they've done to the small farmers, like in terms of the seed saving and they're going after these small farms and shutting them down like that is just makes me want to cry honestly. Like it's really horrible. I feel really passionate about making moves to at least build the momentum or help contribute to that momentum building so that they can't take over. (Diana, 20s, college professor)

Although Diana did not discuss any personal connection to the farmers portrayed in Food, Inc. or to any other farmers affected by seed patents, she reports strong negative emotions and a desire to support small farmers. Likewise, informant Leslie describes her attitude toward shopping at Walmart in strong negative terms:

And with a child sometimes it's just easier to go to the Wal-Mart superstore and that place is just full of evilness. I mean I used to at least not be aware it was full of evilness and I shopped there anyway but now I'm at least looking for the organic, the one organic item that they hide in the back. ... It's so packed with evilness, you don't even know. (Leslie, 30s, health professional)

Here again, it is notable that provision meanings in mundane consumption contexts can stir such strong emotional reactions.
In summary, the informant accounts collected for this study appear to link provision meanings to consumption experiences, both positive and negative. Informants drew a distinction between the experience of consuming things with desirable provision meanings, consuming items with negative provision meanings, and consuming things with little or no provision meanings. Thus, it appears that product meanings associated with the people, places, resources and processes involved in provision can influence not only decisions like what to buy or how to dispose, but they can also influence the consumers feelings and emotions at the time of consumption.

**Summary and Model**

As described above, the analysis of the data collected for this research has revealed several within- and across-informant themes. First, this study confirms that some consumers are cognizant of provision meanings for certain types of products, and this research explores the ways in which these meanings are connected to people, places, resources and processes involved in systems of provision. In addition, cross-informant themes have been drawn from common ideas across the data set regarding how these provision meanings affected the informants in this study. Based on these themes, it is possible to begin constructing a conceptual model of how provision meanings operate on consumer behavior and experiences (see Figure 4).

For some products, consumers are motivated to expend effort to decommodify products by creating provision meanings and ascribing them to these products. The sources of these provision meanings include the consumer’s context and experiences as well as his/her peers, media sources, and marketers. Provision meanings for these products, in turn, influence the consumer’s decisions and experiences. However, for commodified products, the consumer lacks the motivation to expend the effort to form provision meanings, and this lack of provision
meanings leads to decisions and experiences that are different from those for products with rich provision meanings.

**Insights from Actor-Network Theory**

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) provides a useful independent framework for understanding the relationship between systems of provision and consumer behavior. Through the lens of ANT, systems of provision can be envisioned as networks of people, places, resources and processes. In these networks, the actors influence each other in such a way that a product is successfully produced and presented to the consumer for purchase and consumption. These networks can be complex (i.e. involving very many resources, people, places and processes) or more simple. In either case, if provision networks are stable and predictable over time, they can become punctualized in the eyes of consumers, such that the products they produce are no longer ascribed provision meanings. Thus, products for which provision networks have been obscured in this way have become commodified. For commodified products, the system of provision is separated from the consumer by the veil of punctualization, and the actors in the provision network have little influence on the behavior and experiences of the consumer (as for Product 2 in Figure 3).

In contrast, other products retain or attain rich provision meanings in the perception of the consumer. In this case, provision networks are appreciated in greater detail by consumers, thereby creating networks of meaning in the minds of consumers. However, this change does not happen spontaneously; the consumer must expend effort to create and ascribe these provision meanings, and other actors influence this process. In fact, one can envision a separate “consumption network” that includes the consumer, his/her peers, experiences and contexts, marketers, and other influences on the creation of provision meanings. Once provision meanings
have been created, products are not seen as a commodity, removed from its context and beginnings. Instead, the product now represents a network of provision meanings in “mental space” that corresponds to the physical and social networks that define the system of provision. Having thus been decommodified, the product now connects the consumer to the system of provision, allowing it to influence their consumption decisions and experiences. In addition, the provision network can now influence others in the consumer’s network through the consumer. For example, Ned is hopeful that he can influence others in his social network to consider provision:

If we get to the core of us feeling bad or understanding that people will suffer, are suffering, animals are suffering, I think that'll help to change even more but as long as we're thinking about it and I think that's important and like I said before, [Kathryn] and I are examples. We're living examples and I think that's right now is the best, most positive way that we can inform others is just be examples for this type of lifestyle. (Ned, 20s, IT professional)

Just as Cova (1997) explores the ability of products to link consumers to each other, in this case the decommodified product serves to connect the consumer and his/her network to the provision network.

However, like all links in an actor-network, the link between consumer and provision is fragile and must be reinforced in order to remain. For example, Ginnie describes how the local farm reinforces provision meanings relating to food, allowing them to continue to influence her consumption behavior:

Because it makes it more concrete; the idea of locally grown sounds nice, but that direct connection to your food, realizing that that’s what that could mean, that it’s 20 minutes away, or an hour away, somehow feels more connected when I can look out my door and see food being grown right there. (Ginnie, 20s, tutor and dance instructor)
In contrast, since leaving her job at a store that sells organic cotton products, the influence of provision meanings for clothing has decayed:

At that time I knew all these facts about pesticide use and how cotton uses an enormous amount of pesticides because you have to kill the whole plant in order to get to the cotton. And then, just about a year after not living there anymore and not working there anymore I don’t go out of my way to buy organic cotton clothing…. (Ginnie, 20s, tutor and dance instructor)

Ginnie does not appear to have forgotten the provision meanings she created when she worked at the organic cotton store, but having removed herself from that context, with material objects such as labels and human actors like the owner influencing her to consider the provision meanings of cotton clothing, those meanings no longer influence her. Having once been decommodified, the provision meanings of cotton clothing have now receded into the background for Ginnie, and cotton clothing has become commodified once more.

In addition to linking consumer networks to provision networks, this study hints that decommodified products may also link consumer networks to disposal networks. As described previously, one of the consumer behaviors impacted by provision meanings is disposal. Provision meanings seemed to influence consumers to understand and choose alternative disposal methods, such as recycling, donating, composting, and repurposing. Thus, the decommodified product could be seen as the hub that connects provision networks with consumption networks and disposal networks, creating a larger “resource network” that includes production, use, and disposal (Figure 5).

In summary, ANT provides a theoretical framework that illuminates and organizes some of the findings of this study. Although it is tempting to view consumers as autonomous agents, to view products as inert objects devoid of agency, and to view provision systems as static and self-contained, ANT questions these views. The central construct of networks of people and
objects, held together by fragile relationships, is particularly appropriate in the context of provision meanings and their influence on consumers. Systems of provision can easily be envisioned as complex networks of people, places, resources and processes that exist materially as well as socially. However, these material and social networks can easily become punctualized and cease to be considered in consumption decisions. In contrast, when the consumer, in interaction with his/her own social network, is cognizant of provision meanings for a product, the product forms a link between consumer and provision, and it potentially connects both to networks of disposal. As long as these relationships among networks are reenacted and reinforced, the product becomes the crux that holds together a larger network of resource flows.
Chapter 5: Discussion

This research has important implications for marketing theory, practice, and policy. The empirical observation and exploration of provision meanings, how they are formed, and how they influence consumption addresses a gap in the consumer behavior literature, and the initial conceptual framework derived from this study provides a basis for future research. In the following sections, the findings of this study are highlighted and positioned relative to existing research, and future research questions are generated.

Provision Meanings

One of the primary objectives of this research was to empirically observe and explore the provision meanings consumers create and ascribe to products. Research on commodification suggests that these types of meanings are increasingly rare due to the size and complexity of modern systems of provision, but there has been very little empirical consumer research on this topic (Eden, Baer and Walker 2008). Research in CCT has observed the different layers of meaning that can be ascribed to products (Arnould and Thompson 2005), but very little research in CCT concerns meanings that denote the people, places, resources and processes involved in provision. Thus, the finding that the informants in this study do create and ascribe meanings to products that correspond to the people, places, resources and processes in a product’s system of provision is a significant contribution to research on CCT and commodification. These meanings are unlike others previously studied in CCT, as they are not necessarily tied to a specific brand or a cherished possession; instead, they apply more broadly to mundane products that come from a specific system of provision. In addition, these provision meanings are less likely to be created and ascribed in order to communicate something about the consumer’s
identity, culture, or group membership, but rather they refer to the inherent connections the product has with the people, places, resources and processes that created the product.

For marketers, the existence of provision meanings provides another avenue for positioning and differentiation in addition to the economic aspects of price and functionality. By involving certain people, places, resources or processes in the provision of their products, and by communicating these meanings to consumers, marketers may be able to win new customers that are concerned with provision and perhaps even convince other consumers that they should be so concerned. In addition, some informants in this study reported being very loyal to products that had been ascribed with preferable provision meanings. For example, informant Diana discussed her loyalty to a particular company:

I'm very loyal to Dr. Bonner's soaps. … And then after watching [a documentary about the company] it made me more loyal to it because they're just like a really good family company and everything's fair trade, organic, and it's a good [idea] if you're doing this kind of research probably to watch it. (Diana, 20s, college professor)

In fact, some marketers have already begun to pursue this decommodification approach, including Kroger (see Appendix D for a picture the researcher took in a local store), SC Johnson (see Appendix E for an internet advertisement), and eBay (see Appendix F for an internet advertisement).

For policy makers, the finding that at least some consumers are cognizant of provision meanings for some products opens up the possibility that consumers may become more aware of the impact of their consumption on the people, places and resources involved in making the products they consume. If more products could become decommodified in this way, it is possible that consumers may make more responsible decisions after considering the externalities that result from their consumption. In other words, provision meanings could be one avenue for
addressing “social dilemmas,” in which rational, individual consumption decisions lead to reduced welfare for society as a whole (Wiener and Doescher 1991).

Although this research provides early support for the existence and importance of provision meanings, there are many questions that need to be answered with future research. For example, this research focused on the categories of meaning suggested by research on commodification: people, places, resources, processes. However, it is possible that there are other types of provision meanings or perhaps even better typologies than the one employed in this research. In addition, it is possible that some types of provision meaning, such as people meanings, may be more common in general or may be more associated with certain product categories. Finally, it would be interesting to explore whether provision meanings can be forced or primed in purchase contexts where consumers are not cognizant of provision meanings. Future research exploring these questions would thus make a valuable addition to knowledge about provision meanings.

**The Formation of Provision Meanings**

This study also contributes a grounded theory of the formation of provision meanings. In addition to describing provision meanings, the participants in this study provided evidence as to how they were created and associated with particular products. Although other research in CCT has described the meaning generation process for personal, social and cultural meanings (e.g. Belk, Bahn and Mayer 1982; Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004; Schau, Gilly and Wolfinbarger 2009), the meaning formation process for provision meanings seems to be distinct. First, it appears to be more effortful than other types of provision meaning; rather than simply appropriating meanings that have been constructed over time by a society or family, consumers generally reported working at creating and ascribing provision meanings, either by doing
research, engaging in dialogue, or remembering past experiences. Second, the meaning creation process can be spurred by a variety of motivations which are not expressly linked to the identity creation, maintenance, or communication motives typical of other meanings in CCT (e.g. Ahuvia 2005; Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004). Finally, as suggested by research on commodification (Fine 2002), provision meanings seem to be selectively created and ascribed to certain products and their systems of provision. Unlike other product meanings in CCT, which seem more related to the people using or consuming particular products, provision meanings have more to do with the history and intrinsic features of the product itself.

The findings regarding the formation of provision meanings have important implications for marketers and policy makers. For example, because the creation and ascription of provision meanings is an effortful process, marketers could potentially facilitate the process by providing customers more information or easier-to-understand information about the provision of products. This would appear to be one motivation behind Walmart’s effort to create a single sustainability index that takes multiple aspects of provision into account (Walmart 2009). Marketers might also choose simpler systems of provision to produce products so that they would be more comprehensible to consumers concerned with provision. This research might also suggest an opportunity for marketers to think in terms of building meanings and associations for specific products and their systems of provision (i.e. a “vertical” perspective – Fine 2002) as opposed to building brand meaning across product categories (a horizontal perspective). Likewise, policy makers could promote the formation of provision meanings through regulation of labeling and advertising and perhaps even public service communications. By helping create these provision meanings, and by pointing out the societal interest in certain systems of provision (e.g.
environmentally friendly or socially just provision), policy makers could help consumers make individual decisions that take the best interest society at large into account.

This study also suggests interesting future research opportunities relating to the formation of provision meanings. The observation that effort is involved in the creation and consideration of provision meanings suggests ties to the growing research on resource depletion (e.g. Johnson 2008) and leads to the question of whether consumers strategically choose to create provision meanings for select categories as a way of conserving cognitive resources. It is also possible that other consumers in other contexts may hold provision meanings about different product categories than the ones discussed by informants in this study. For example, research suggests that consumers are more likely to engage in deep information processing for purchases that are particularly relevant and meaningful to them (e.g. Celsi and Olson 1988), so other consumers who are very involved in sporting goods, for example, might be likely to create and ascribe provision meanings to these products. Another possibility is related to research on product contagion (e.g. Morales and Fitzsimons 2007). Future research could explore whether consumers are more likely to form provision meanings for products that they put on or take into their bodies, like clothing and food. Finally, it would be interesting to investigate whether certain consumers are more likely than others to form provision meanings. It is possible that one or more individual difference characteristics, either previously-identified (e.g. environmental concern) or currently unexplained (e.g. stewardship) might predict the formation of provision meanings.

**The Outcomes of Provision Meanings**

The third contribution of this study is that it provides evidence of a connection between provision meanings and consumption behavior and experiences. The informants in this study
reported making consumption decisions, including whether to buy, what to buy, how much to consume, and how to dispose, based in part on provision meanings. This meaning-behavior link is a current that runs through most CCT research (Arnould and Thompson 2005), but the influence of provision meanings in particular has received relatively little attention in this literature. Likewise, the link between product meanings and behavior is largely assumed, but not empirically observed, in most research on commodification (e.g. Borgmann 2000; Miller 2003; Prothero and Fitchett 2000). The findings in this study also point to a link between provision meanings and consumption experiences. Although consumer experiences have frequently been explored in CCT (e.g. Havlena and Holbrook 1986; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), this study contributes to research in this area by illustrating how consumption experiences can be influenced, both positively and negatively, by provision meanings. The informants in this study appeared to connect their experience in consuming certain products to the people, places, resources and processes involved in the product’s provision system. Thus, this study identifies and explores an important influence on consumer behavior and experience that has received relatively little attention in the past.

The connection between provision meanings and consumer behavior and experience is of obvious import to marketers, who are increasingly called upon to provide “bottom line” evidence of the effectiveness of their marketing campaigns (Rust et al. 2004). The findings of this study suggest that marketers can influence what or how much consumers buy by creating or modifying the provision meanings that are ascribed to the products that they sell. The observation that provision meanings can influence consumer experiences is similarly valuable to marketers, who can use consumer experiences to differentiate themselves from their competitors and enhance customer loyalty (Meyer and Schwager 2007). Marketers could potentially employ provision
meanings as a means of providing positive customer experiences in order to gain new customers or keep current customers loyal. Thus, the findings of this study concerning the outcomes of provision meanings are of practical importance to marketing practitioners.

The finding that provision meanings influence not only buying decisions but also disposal decisions is of potential interest to policy makers. Researchers have proposed that a key requisite for sustainable production and consumption is “life cycle thinking” (Cooper 2005), and provision meanings appear to be able to re-connect consumers to the provision and disposal systems linked to the products they consume. As illustrated in Figure 5, products ascribed with provision meaning can become the hub of a resource network that comprises the complete product life cycle, and policy makers can try to promote consumer preference for products with socially and environmentally desirable cycles of production, purchase, use and disposal.

The results of this study pertaining to consumer behavior and experience also point to interesting avenues for future research. For example, the interpretive approach used in this study could not determine the relative importance of provision meanings in consumption decisions. A quantitative study could investigate the relative weight given to provision meanings in consumer decision making. Furthermore, the findings reported here indicate that provision meanings can sometimes be overridden by competing concerns, such as the conservation of time or money. Future research could thus identify the boundary conditions that limit the influence of provision meanings on consumer behavior. It is also possible that consumers willingly ignore or suppress provision meanings in order to maintain greater autonomy (Morris and Kirwan 2010), something informant Ginnie hints at in this previously-quoted excerpt:

I don’t think it’s a cost-benefit analysis, ‘cause I think if I sat down and thought about it, I would talk myself into buying only organic clothes. So I think it’s knowing that that’s what I would do and then putting it in the back of my mind and going, “You know what? It’s so expensive, and it’s inconvenient…..” (Ginnie, 20s, tutor and dance instructor)
Future research could seek to further explore this type of defensive or coping behavior, either qualitatively or quantitatively. Alternatively, since the positive experiences in this study were associated with decommodified products, it would be interesting to explore whether people who have a greater cognizance of provision systems, in general, experience greater enjoyment of consumption and higher levels of subjective well-being.

**Limitations**

Although this study makes important contributions to theory and practice, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. An important limitation of most interpretive studies concerns the generalizability of their findings (Hudson and Ozanne 1988). The interviews in this study were conducted in a single community over a period of 9 months, so the reader must be cautious in generalizing the findings of this study to other contexts. It is also important to note that the informants could not be described as “average” or “mainstream” consumers in the U.S.; they had demonstrated a commitment to living in a more environmentally sustainable way by moving to this particular community. However, at the same time, these consumers were far from ascetic radicals; most owned cars, worked in or retired from professional occupations, and had homes that were filled with possessions that were neither Spartan nor excessive in the judgment of the interviewer. Thus, while the findings of this study cannot be assumed to apply to other contexts, it also cannot be assumed that they do not. The reader must simply be aware of the context and use judgment and discernment in generalizing the findings of this study (Guba and Lincoln 1986).

Another potential limitation for this study concerns the causality implied by the conceptual framework constructed from the grounded analysis (Figure 4). Although this study
proceeded over a matter of months, and although a thorough understanding of this particular context was gained, the researcher was not able to observe the entire process illustrated in the conceptual network unfold. Thus, although the accounts of the informants suggested this causal chain, it falls to future research to more fully support the causal links in the proposed framework.

Finally, researcher or informant bias is nearly always a threat to the validity of a study’s conclusions. In this study, the researcher followed accepted procedures for reducing this threat as much as possible. Researcher bias was made less likely by seeking consensus among the research team and performing member checks with informants (Hirschman 1986). Informant bias was guarded against by the non-directive nature of the questioning during interviews. Furthermore, the informants were not told the specific topic of the study; they were told that the researchers intended to “explore the motivations and thought processes of consumers that make a decision to live more sustainably” (see Appendix C for the consent form used in this study). Although the possibility of bias cannot be eliminated, adequate measures were taken in this study to protect the validity of its findings.

**Conclusion**

This research has identified and explored product meanings related to systems of provision, and it has described how these meanings influence consumption behavior and experiences. It has addressed important gaps in research on consumer behavior broadly and on consumer culture and commodification specifically. Although conceptual research on commodification proposes that modern market systems have detached products from their systems of provision in the perception of consumers, this study provides an empirical account of consumers whose cognizance of provision networks serves to “decommodify” products and change how they interact with those products. Furthermore, although research on consumer
culture has generated important insight into consumption meanings related to social or group identity, this study identifies distinct product meanings associated with systems of provision that are terminal to the product itself and are thus not limited to instrumental use in the consumer’s identity project. Thus, this study contributes to both streams of research by empirically observing product meanings associated with provision networks and exploring how these meanings impact the consumption decisions and experiences of consumers.

The findings of this study are also relevant to marketers and policy makers. For marketers, this research suggests an opportunity to differentiate and position their products and brands based on provision meanings. As described in Chapter 4, product meanings concerning systems of provision have the potential to influence consumption decisions such as what to buy and how much to buy. Some marketers appear to have already seized upon this strategy and are attempting to facilitate the creation of provision meanings among their customers.

Product meanings also appear to influence decisions that are of particular interest to policy makers interested in making consumption more sustainable, such as how and when to dispose of used products. Thus, expanding cognizance of provision holds the potential to facilitate more “mindful” consumption (Sheth, Sethia and Srinivas 2011) and make consumption levels more economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable. In addition, it is important to note that the creation of provision meanings is not bound to a particular cause or motivation (like environmentalism), so they hold the potential to have a broader impact in promoting sustainable behaviors.

Researchers have argued that consumers have lost an awareness of the material and human resources involved in producing most goods due to the size and complexity of the provision networks for modern products (Fine 2002; Borgmann 2000). However, this research
indicates that some consumers are indeed cognizant of the systems of provision for the products they consume. The results of this study indicate that some consumers expend effort to create and ascribe provision meanings for some products, and that these meanings in turn affect the consumer’s consumption decisions and experiences. In spite of the commodifying effects of modern market systems, these consumers exhibit an appreciation for products as the outcome of a complex system of relationships among people, places, resources and processes and have thus become reconnected to the provision of what they consume. By providing empirical evidence of this phenomenon, this study has advanced the study of consumer behavior, and the insights it provides hold the potential to lead to developments in marketing theory and practice that are beneficial to consumers, marketers, and society.
## Tables

**Table 1: Categories of CCT Research with representative examples**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Special</th>
<th>Mundane</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual</strong></td>
<td>Extrinsic:</td>
<td>Extrinsic:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intrinsic:</td>
<td>Intrinsic:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Holt (1998)</td>
<td>THIS STUDY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group</strong></td>
<td>Extrinsic:</td>
<td>Extrinsic:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Intrinsic:</td>
<td>Intrinsic:</td>
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</table>
**Table 2: Informants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Approximate Age</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Family Status</th>
<th>Time in Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>30s</td>
<td>Stay-at-home parent (attorney)</td>
<td>Married w/ children</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>70s</td>
<td>Retired government administrator</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brad</td>
<td>70s</td>
<td>Retired college professor</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Government administrator</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>40s</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>Married w/ children</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>College professor</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginnie</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Tutor and dance instructor</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Physicist (currently unemployed)</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Landscape architect</td>
<td>Married w/ children</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathryn</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Non-profit administrator</td>
<td>Cohabitating</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Minister</td>
<td>Married w/ children</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristen</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Married w/ children</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Nurse practitioner</td>
<td>Cohabitating</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layla</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Government administrator</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>9 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Health professional</td>
<td>Married w/ children</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Government administrator</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>9 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanie</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Non-profit administrator</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ned</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>IT Professional</td>
<td>Cohabitating</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peggy</td>
<td>60s</td>
<td>Retired scientist</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perry</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>IT Professional</td>
<td>Cohabitating</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pete</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Business consultant</td>
<td>Married w/ children</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Retired therapist</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Non-profit administrator</td>
<td>Cohabitating</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willa</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Stay-at-home parent (teacher)</td>
<td>Married w/ children</td>
<td>9 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE:** All names are pseudonyms in order to protect informant privacy.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Framework</th>
<th>Contribution</th>
<th>Key sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commodification</td>
<td>Product meanings associated with people, places and resources frequently obscured</td>
<td>Borgmann 2000; Fine 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Culture Theory</td>
<td>Products have layers of meanings beyond functional and economic</td>
<td>Arnould and Thompson 2005; Belk 1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor-Network Theory</td>
<td>Social systems can be perceived as networks of human and non-human actors</td>
<td>Latour 2005; Law 1992</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4: Initial Coding Structure for Provision Meanings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environmental impact</td>
<td>Product meanings pertaining to the environmental impact of making a product.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human labor</td>
<td>Product meanings pertaining to the labor content (not personal connections) contained in a product.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on others</td>
<td>Product meanings pertaining to how the making of the product impacts other people (e.g. employees).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingredients</td>
<td>Product meanings pertaining to the materials used to create a product.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social link</td>
<td>Product meanings pertaining to a social connection with the product’s maker or seller.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social responsibility of maker</td>
<td>Product meanings pertaining to the ethicality of the producer (not limited to provision practices).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 5: Coding Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Challenge or effort of considering provision</strong></td>
<td>The perceived difficulty of generating provision meanings for products or taking them into account in consumption behaviors.</td>
<td>I think that's just so hard. When you first kind of get into it you kind of get kind of a niche maybe like issue and you're like maybe like I'm really big on no chemicals so I'm just going to get everything organic but then you don't realize about the labor laws that are going into it. But then when you, I get so complicated when you start getting to all of it and you're like I can't do anything, I'm just going to sit in my hole with my lights off because nothing is socially justice or sustainable. (Kathryn)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consumption behavior: how much to buy</strong></td>
<td>Considering provision meanings in choosing how much of a product to buy or consume.</td>
<td>I'm just as complicit when I shop at Target. I'm just careful about how much I consume. How much I participate in the system. It's harder now than ever before. And just reading--just saying that something's made in the USA doesn't necessarily mean it was done ethically or with fair trade in mind. (Kelly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consumption behavior: recycling, disposing, giving away</strong></td>
<td>Considering provision meanings when deciding to recycle, give away, or throw away.</td>
<td>…but when it comes to my day-to-day decisions I decide to say it's more about just so many things are considered disposable and really they're building up somewhere and we're hurting the earth. That's really probably first thing that kind of comes to my head and I try to stop whatever, whether it's you know, compost, recycling, or just helping the kids to figure out just don't throw something away, there may be we can use it some way even if it's to create a new game or something. (Willa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption behavior:</td>
<td>Considering provision meanings when deciding to repair or repurpose a</td>
<td>Yeah, I know I can get a pair of shoes cheaper than getting my pair of shoes repaired but I get my shoes repaired and it's not about the money. It's something about staying out of the cycle. Just -- I don't want to create more demand for more crap from China. Might as well just fix what I have. And that's true. I get my shoes repaired even thought I could more cheaply buy -- actually it's those black shoes right there. I've had those for 15 years and I just keep getting them repaired. I mean they look all right. Sure, so why not. Just repair them instead of buying a new pair. (Mary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>repair or repurpose</td>
<td>product instead of disposing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption behavior:</td>
<td>Considering provision meanings in deciding which of several products to</td>
<td>I feel like I'm a Georgia winery advocate, like to ask at restaurant, do you have any Georgia wines? Why don't you have Georgia wines? Especially ones that are touting organic and local and then you look at their wine list and it's like Argentina and Italy and that's not local nor is it organic so it doesn't make sense. (Kathryn)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>what to buy</td>
<td>buy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption behavior:</td>
<td>Considering provision meanings in decisions whether or not to consume a</td>
<td>In fact, I got to the point where I was trying to figure out how long I could go without even getting in a car, let along driving my own car. And my husband had the family car that he drove to school every day. And that was great. (Kelly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whether to buy</td>
<td>product.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consumption experiences</strong></td>
<td>Enjoyment of products that goes beyond the immediate, instrumental utility of the product.</td>
<td>There's probably more than anything is just that there's huge emotional pay off going every week and just getting it because it's like look at all this great stuff and there are days you come in with this huge basket and it's just beautiful stuff and then -- the fact that it's so beautiful is emotionally rewarding. Look at his lettuce. And then of course a lot of the stuff, probably the thing that I had no clue is how good organic fresh tomatoes were. I mean now it's just hard to eat anything that's -- I mean I eat it but it's nothing like the tomatoes off our farm. So there's a greater appreciation for a lot of stuff and then there's this huge psychological boost if you will, just having the farm out there.... (Pete)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Decommodification process</strong></td>
<td>Process by which provision meanings were created or made salient.</td>
<td>… I went with a trip through school to Oaxaca and we visited some of the flower plants. ... I mean flowers don't naturally grow and they have these massive greenhouses that I mean - bad. It was not a good thing for the environment and you go in them and you thought you were probably in Hawaii because they were growing all these tropical plants in Mexico and then shipping them to the United States because that's what everybody wanted. (Kathryn)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation: altruism</td>
<td>When consideration of provision is motivated by care for or consideration of people or animals involved in provision.</td>
<td>[Fair Trade certification] means that the um... that the people who make my lifestyle possible, or I feel make my lifestyle possible, are at least being compensated in a way that’s livable for them. So, a step up from I assume the wages that a bigger corporation would be paying the growers of.... That there’s some regulation over it, someone is saying this is something that will sustain a life and a family, and this is what they should be paid. (Ginnie)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation: consumption</td>
<td>When consideration of provision is motivated by a desire to change social institutions or structures.</td>
<td>I usually buy organic beef, and that’s for health reasons as well. Although it’s partly my personal health reasons and partly to just contribute to that kind of production of meat, to sort of vote for that with my money. That’s the way things should be done, I feel. More humane and things like that. (Ginnie)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as political action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation: environmentalism</td>
<td>When consideration of provision is motivated by care for natural resources or features impacted by provision.</td>
<td>And I never was really big on so much the health aspects of organic but I've been interested in the environmental impacts of organics. The many of the practices, the organic standards put in place, actually are can be better for the soil and for water and the planet. (Layla)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation: experience</td>
<td>When consideration of provision is motivated by a perception that certain systems of provision provide a better consumption experience.</td>
<td>I don't think it tastes better, it does taste better. I don't -- that nutrition stuff, I don't know if it's - some people claim organically this is more nutritious than non-organic. I don't know but I do know that food, fresh right out of the ground is more nutritious than something that's been shipped for two or three days. But yeah, it just tastes better and it seems like the normal thing to do to get food out of your yard. (Mary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or well-being</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation: health or</td>
<td>When consideration of provision is motivated by a perception that certain</td>
<td>I've got quibbles with the FDA process and what the term organic means and all that stuff, it's not perfect by any means. And yet I know I can trust it enough to have an idea of what it means and know that it's genuinely well followed. When I pick up something that says Mexico or Chile or Peru, I think I have no idea what was put on that. And I don't want to know what was put on it because I'm not eating it. (Kristen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>safety</td>
<td>systems of provision provide healthier or safer products.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation: pragmatism</td>
<td>When consideration of provision is motivated by practicality, expediency</td>
<td>I think with food I might tend to think of it more in terms of where it came from and how it came about and stuff like that. With products, if I can get something handmade or that would be a plus. But the truth is most of the things I get, I get, it's a time constraint. And basically I get what I need when I can get it where I can get it. And I don't -- give a lot of thought to each individual purchase.... And there's one on sale at Target so here I go and then oh, shit, there's a -- Target just did something. They donated a bunch of money to some right wing candidate in Minnesota so I'm not supposed to shop at Target. So I don't shop at Target for a couple of months and then eventually I'm thinking well, maybe -- maybe just this once. (Perry)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>or convenience.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation: social</td>
<td>When consideration of provision is motivated by a desire to feel a social</td>
<td>I think there is something about developing relationships between people that the market economy doesn't seem to care about so much. So if--you know, I would feel better about buying some olive oil from my local olive oil producer. (Isaac)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>connection</td>
<td>connection to people involved in the provision of a product.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation: stewardship</td>
<td>When consideration of provision is motivated by an appreciation or respect for the resources invested in making a product and a desire to use these resources wisely.</td>
<td>We're really -- we're acting more as parasites than as stewards. And I'm not religious but I mean one of the things that even in the Christian religion I think that God instructed people to be good stewards of the Earth. But I think that the takeaway for a lot of people was just to go forth and use it. (Perry)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provision: People</td>
<td>Product meanings stemming from the people involved in the system of provision.</td>
<td>And I also really liked in Malawi like the “closing of the loop” kind of thing, which I learned in permaculture. Because most, like, homes are very open. We don’t know where our things come from and we don’t know where they go after they finish. But in Malawi, I mean you can pretty much… you know where your greens come from: they come from that guy up there who has a little farm, you know? And he used pesticides, which I wasn’t a big fan of, but I still wanted to support him. (Sue)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provision: Places</td>
<td>Product meanings stemming from the physical places and spaces involved in the system of provision.</td>
<td>[I] buy a lot of apple juice, [my daughter] loves apple juice. And if you go to Publix and you buy their organic apple juice which probably comes from a pretty good place, it's made in the USA. I don't know exactly where in the USA but it's like $6.50 for I don't know, it's like half a gallon. I'm not sure exactly how much it is. But at Wal-Mart for like $1.50 you can get a gallon and a half of apple juice like made in Indonesia. And I don't know even know how they do that. Like I don't understand. But they’ve got to be a lot of people that are getting short changed in the process like, I don't know. You can just smell the evilness coming off of -- do you know what I mean. (Leslie)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Provision: Processes</strong></td>
<td>Product meanings stemming from the processes involved in the system of provision, such as extraction, manufacturing and transportation.</td>
<td>Yeah, I think for a lot of reasons, CAFOs [Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations] and just the treatment of the animals and the way that there’s an industry around… I mean, here in Georgia we produce what, over a billion chickens a year. And those chickens are not happy chickens. I think that’s really wrong, from an ethical prospective. I always had that… when I was in college one of the big issues of the day were animal rights and it was going on back then. I think that factory farming is abominable and I wouldn’t want to support that system. (Jane)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Provision: Resources</strong></td>
<td>Product meanings stemming from the human or natural resources that are utilized in the system of provision.</td>
<td>I mean, ELC can’t be – and same with Earth Haven – it’s not even close to being sustainable, cause it wasn’t there before! Where did all that glass come from? Where did all that siding, that prefab, all the carpet – where did all that come from? Not here! And it wasn’t woven by little Indians chewing on…. So anyway, the same with Earth Haven. They’re all like hippies; they’re super… you know, way more sustainable in the modern lingo than we are. And yet, still - all the… they got all the rubber and, you know? Rubber wasn’t grown in Asheville. I mean, all of that stuff that they’ve got there and that they keep bringing is… it’s the same game. So if you want to be sustainable, you’d take a building that was already there, and you go and you’d live without changing it very much. You know? That would be a place to start – how about don’t build? (Dan)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 6: Criteria for Interpretive Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Analogue in Positivist Research</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Steps taken in this study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td>Internal validity</td>
<td>Interpretation is sensible to informants</td>
<td>Member checks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependability</td>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Other researchers would see similar themes</td>
<td>Research team consensus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Openness to informants’ perspectives and interests</td>
<td>Allowing for inductive theory modification or building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontological authenticity</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Research generates an improved understanding of the world</td>
<td>Hermeneutical circle between informant accounts and research frameworks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalytic authenticity</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Research generates actionable knowledge</td>
<td>Sharing findings with informants, academics and practitioners</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Hirschman 1986; Guba and Lincoln 1986
Figures

Figure 1: Relationship to CCT Literature
Figure 2: Pre-modern Consumption
Figure 3: Modern Consumption

Consumer’s Realm of Familiarity

- Distributor
- Manufacturer
- Retailer
- Raw Materials

Consumer
Figure 4: Conceptual Model
Figure 5: Resource network
Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide
This guide serves as a framework for conducting interviews. Specific questions will vary, but the topics to be explored are the following:

- **Informant’s motivation to become a member of the community**
  - Tell me about your decision to join this community.
  - Tell me about the adjustment process involved in moving to this community.

- **How membership in the community influences informant’s consumption choices**
  - How has membership in this community influenced what you buy or don’t buy?
  - How does the community influence how you dispose of items you want to discard?
  - Can you tell me about a time when you sought help or advice from other community members when shopping for products?
  - Are there products that you used to own that you now share with the community?

- **How informant makes choices about what or whether to consume**
  - Please tell me about a recent shopping experience. How did you choose among alternatives?
  - In general, how do you evaluate products when you are shopping?
  - What kinds of information do you look for when deciding which products to buy?
  - How do you determine when it is time to replace a durable product, like a piece of clothing?
  - Have you always thought about products in this way, or have your shopping habits changed over time? Explain.
Appendix B: IRB Letter

The Georgia State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved the above referenced study and enclosed Informed Consent Document(s) in accordance with the Department of Health and Human Services. The approval period is listed above.

Federal regulations require researchers to follow specific procedures in a timely manner. For the protection of all concerned, the IRB calls your attention to the following obligations that you have as Principal Investigator of this study.

1. When the study is completed, a Study Closure Report must be submitted to the IRB.
2. For any research that is conducted beyond the one-year approval period, you must submit a Renewal Application 30 days prior to the approval period expiration. As a courtesy, an email reminder is sent to the Principal Investigator approximately two months prior to the expiration of the study. However, failure to receive an email reminder does not negate your responsibility to submit a Renewal Application. In addition, failure to return the Renewal Application by its due date must result in an automatic termination of this study. Reinstatement can only be granted following resubmission of the study to the IRB.

3. Any adverse event or problem occurring as a result of participation in this study must be reported immediately to the IRB using the Adverse Event Form.

4. Principal investigators are responsible for ensuring that informed consent is obtained and that no human subject will be involved in the research prior to obtaining informed consent. Ensure that each person signing the written informed consent form (ICF) is given a copy of the ICF. The ICF used must be the one reviewed and approved by the IRB; the approval dates of the IRB review are stamped on each page of the ICF. Copy and use the stamped ICF for the coming year. Maintain a single copy of the approved ICF in your files for this study.

All of the above referenced forms are available online at https://irbwise.gsu.edu. Please do not hesitate to contact Susan Vogtner in the Office of Research Integrity (404-413-3513) if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Cynthia A. Hoffner, IRB Vice-Chair

Federal Wide Assurance Number: 0000129
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Georgia State University
Department of Marketing
Robinson College of Business
Informed Consent

Title: Sustainable Consumption Study

Principal Research Group
Principal Investigator: Dr. Pam Ellen, Department of Marketing, Georgia State University
Student Principal Investigator: Todd Weaver, Department of Marketing, Georgia State University

I. Introduction/Background/Purpose:
Protecting the environment is a growing concern in our society. This research will explore the motivations and thought processes of consumers that make a decision to live more sustainably. You have been invited to participate because you live in a community dedicated to sustainable living. We anticipate interviewing a total of 40 people for this study. Participation will require approximately 2 hours of your time between today and August 2011.

II. Procedures:
You will be interviewed for one to two hours. The interview can be conducted in your home, in a common area in your community, or another nearby site of your choosing. During the interview, you will be asked to reflect on questions like the following: Why did you join this community? How does the community influence your consumption? How does the way products are made influence your consumption? The interview will be semi-structured and conversational. If you consent, the interview will be audio recorded to promote accuracy.

III. Potential Problems and Risks:
In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life.

IV. Benefits:
There will be no direct benefits to you. However, the interview will usually revolve around topics that are interesting to you. Furthermore, after the interview, the researcher may be able to share findings from this and other studies that might be interesting or helpful to you. Finally, your participation will contribute to knowledge about sustainable consumption.

V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:
Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to refuse to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or discontinue participation at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. In case you withdraw from the study at any time, all information collected from you will be permanently deleted from our records.

Consent Form Approved by Georgia State University IRB June 25, 2011 - June 24, 2012
VI. Confidentiality:

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. The members of the research team will have access to the information you provide. Information may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly (GSU Institutional Review Board and/or the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)). The information you provide will be stored in a locked cabinet and/or password- and firewall-protected computers in the Student Principal Investigator’s home office. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and reported in group form. You will not be identified personally.

VIII. Contact Persons:

If you have any questions about this research at any time, feel free to contact Dr. Pam Ellen (Phone: 404-413-7663, Email: pellen@gsu.edu). If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact Susan Vogtner in the Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or svogtner1@gsu.edu.

IX. Copy of Consent Form to Subject:

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research and be audio recorded, please sign below.

Participant ______________________________ Date ______________

Investigator ______________________________ Date ______________

If you are willing to volunteer for this research but do not wish to be audio recorded, please sign below.

Participant ______________________________ Date ______________

Investigator ______________________________ Date ______________

Consent Form Approved by Georgia State University IRB June 25, 2011 - June 24, 2012
Appendix D: Kroger In-store Advertisement

Hardy Farms has been a family farm since 1935. In 1990, they started selling peanuts “right off the wagon” locally. Starting with very meager operations and a desire, they sold around 10,000 lbs. Today, Hardy Farms has grown into one of the top suppliers of Green and Boiled peanuts in the country, producing over 3 million lbs annually in a state of the art processing facility. Because Hardy Farms are the growers and producers, they can assure that you receive the highest quality and best tasting peanuts in the world. This dedication to quality has made their peanuts the most popular throughout the southeast.
Appendix E: SC Johnson Internet Advertisement
Appendix F: eBay Internet Advertisement
References


Cone Inc. (2009), 2009 Cone consumer environmental survey. Boston: Cone Inc.


Sayer, Andrew (2003), “(De)commodification, consumer culture, and moral economy,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 21, 341-357.


