

A Review of Ethical Consciousness (EC) and Organic food Choice: A Ripe opportunity to communicate with the market

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Abstract: Ethical consumption is a phenomena reflected by consumers all across the world. The issue of sustainable development and sustainable living has the idea of sustainable or ethical consumption at its core. Organic food is an important constituent of the “ethical basket”. Consumer attitude towards Organic food has been found to be generally positive but there is an attitude-behaviour gap as the adoption of Organic food is very slow in India. This study explores the crucial role of Ethical Consciousness in influencing the consumer choice. Explaining the discrepancy in consumer’s behaviour it is stated that the many individuals, especially the more rational ones negate their attitude without guilt (by denial of responsibility/denial of harm or benefit/condemning the judges or have some other priority), consequently not buying ethical products. They face some cognitive, behavioural and motivational obstacle as well. Thus, even with a positive attitude their behaviour remains latent. Based on the extant literature review the study proposes that there should be effective communication to convey the benefits (harms) of using (not using) organic products. The “responsible-ethical” trend is relatively new and requires efforts and time from all the stakeholders (consumer associations, public authorities, producers, distributors etc.) to coordinate, evolve and disseminate a more comprehensive and coherent information for the consumer. So, marketers need to connect messaging with the causes that matter most to consumers

Key Words: Ethical consumption, Organic food, attitude-behavior gap, effective communication

1. INTRODUCTION:

Ethical consumption is a phenomena reflected by consumers all across the world. The issue of ethical buying includes the reference to **environmental issues** (Ethical Consumerism Report, 2011; European Commission, 2011; IGD, 2007; Trudel and Cotte, 2008), **recycling issues** (Autio et al., 2009; Laroche, Bergeron, and Barbaro-Forleo, 2001; Straughan and Roberts, 1999; Sudbury-Riley, 2014; Thøgersen, 1999; Vicente and Reis, 2007) and **social justice and human rights issues** (Auger et al., 2003; Ethical Consumerism Report, 2011; European Commission, 2011; Golding, 2009; Trudel and Cotte, 2008) with special emphasis on worker exploitation (Brenton and Hacken, 2006; Eckhardt, Belk, and Devinney, 2010). Besides these main issues the concept of ethical consciousness also includes the issues related to **animal welfare** (Megicks, Memery and Williams, 2008) and **local community initiatives** (Carrigan et al., 2011; Grau and Garretsen Folse, 2007; Mattingly and Berman, 2006) and also any other initiative that is good for society, environment, humans and animals at large. The conscious refusal to buy/boycott products (Carrigan et al., 2004) and services because they are damaging to the environment (Papaoikonomou, Valverde, and Ryan, 2012) or because they are made by companies that lack social responsibility (Creyer and Ross, 1997; Klein, Smith, and John, 2004; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004) also comes under the purview of ethical consumerism.

The issue of sustainable development and sustainable living has the idea of **sustainable consumption** at its core. Being one of the most basic yet pervasive activity of human life- “*food consumption*” undoubtedly will have a great impact on the environment by the way it is produced, processed, packaged, consumed and discarded. **Organics** are no doubt a fair trade product as they conform to the idea of sustainability. Organics are called as ethical products as it doesn’t exploit humans, animals or environment rather benefits them in a long way by being non-interfering and healthy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

There is plenty of literature investigating the factors that motivate purchase of Organics, especially organic food and these mention the role of **ethical consciousness** as a strong influencer (Andrew Steptoe, Tessa M. Pollard, Jane Wardle, 1995; Verbeke, Michaelidou, N. and Hassan, L. M. 2008; W. and J. Roosen, 2009; Pino, G., Peluso, A. M. and Guido, G. 2012; Singh, Iglesias, & Batista, 2012; Çabuk, S., Tanrikulu, C. and Gelibolu, L. 2014, Julie Irwin, 2015). Whereas there are many studies that do not have a mention of ethical consciousness. Even though, it can be argued that many of these works talk about either environment consciousness or any other social issue, which is not whole but a part of ethical consciousness, though a direct investigation of ethical consciousness is missing (Chen, J.,

Lobo, A. and Rajendran, N. 2014; Shershneva, K., Bruschi, V., Dolgoplova, I., Canavari, M. and Teuber, R. 2015-no mention of ethical consciousness; Justin Paul, Jyoti Rana, 2012; Neena Sondhi, 2014).

3. GLOBAL CONSUMER'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS ETHICAL CONSUMERISM:

There has been a general observation by a number of researchers that over a period of time a highly aware, principled and ethically conscious consumers have emerged having a positive attitude towards ethical consumption (e.g., Strong, 1996; Shaw and Clarke, 1998; Shaw and Clarke, 1999, Hendarwan, 2002; Harrison et al., 2005). These consumers typically have shown concern for animal right issues (like using real animal fur products, use of animals in product testing) to anti-sweatshop concerns like hiring and promoting minorities and women (Roberts, 1996) and so forth. It has been found that shoppers have become highly aware and concerned about the ethical issues and are also ready to pay for what they morally believe in (Cowe and Williams, 2000; Thøgersen, 1999).

The "*basket of ethical shopping*" has items like household goods, food, cosmetics and toiletries, energy etc. and the usage and charity is growing its market share rapidly (Simms, 2003). Through various information sources and changing markets consumers are becoming more and more aware of ethical consumption (Harrison et al., 2005). The impact of boycott activity, pressure groups and other related type of consumer activism is also on rise (Auger et al., 2003; Harrison et al., 2005). There is a remarkable shift in the mindset of people from materialistic approach to a more holistic approach making people more socially and environmentally aware as well as responsible (Hemingway and Maclagan, 2004). **In fact, it is found that the scenario is changing worldwide. Fullerton et al. (1996) conclude that consumers do have moral values and they do not tolerate ethical abuses.**

4. INDIAN CONSUMER'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS ETHICAL CONSUMERISM:

Indian consumers' attitude towards ethical consciousness is complementary to the global scenario. The New Age Indian urban consumers (NAUI), form a significant consumer segment, especially youngsters. In the changed scenario they are now in a better position to make their own purchase decisions as they have good spending capacity as a result of higher disposable income which has come to them with increased mobility and global exposure due to revolutionary job opportunities in IT and BPO industry. Besides monetary power, their intellectual horizon has also widened because of global exposure and enhanced information system. The aspects of sustainability and ethical consumerism is completely understandable to them and are ready to choose products to reflect their value systems. In the present era of conscious consumerism their huge presence with their capability and willingness to pay for fair trade products, the enacted role of NAUI as a "consumer" is gaining far greater importance (Kaul S and Abhishek, 2007). This huge segment of young Indian consumers holds the attention of marketers as they are not only the trend setters but also strong influencers for family, friends and peer group. The brand loyalty of this huge segment will stay and last for long. (Dr. Gill K. 2012)

A survey by National Geographic reveals recent Greendex score (of 14 countries) reflecting that many Indian consumers are very concerned about environmental problems (42% strongly agree), feel these problems negatively impact their health (35%), feel guilty about their own environmental impact (22%), and say they are currently working very hard to reduce that impact (27%). Therefore it is more likely they are ready to behave in an environmentally sustainable way.

5. ATTITUDE-BEHAVIOR GAP:

It is clear that consumer attitude towards Organic food (OF) has been found to be generally positive. People agree and understand the benefits of the organic products and prima facie in all likelihood they are ready to buy organics. But a close observation shows that this positive attitude doesn't translate into the real purchase behavior i.e. there is an **attitude-behavior gap**. This attitude-behavior gap needs to be understood and investigated. Carrington, Neville and Whitewell (2010) observe that most of the consumer behavior research attempting to explain the attitude-intention gap is based on the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010). Many of these works find that in several cases the intention of ethical or responsible buying doesn't go as far as real behavior (François-Lecompte and Valette-Florence, 2006, Vermeir and Verbeke 2006, Pastore Reiss, 2007, Auger and Devinney, 2007, Beckman, 2007, Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2007, Valor 2008, Carrington, Neville and Whitewell, 2010, White, MacDonnel and Ellard 2012).

This discrepancy can be explained by **the theory of neutralization** given by Sykes and Matza (1957). They say that when the theory of neutralization is applied to ethical consumption (Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2007) it rationalizes that people find a number of excuses for the behavior that is not consistent with their attitude. They further bring in a dynamic vision and describes that individuals who are highly committed to the cause or their choice voluntarily reduce the neutralization effect whereas individuals less committed succumb to the effects of neutralization and are not able to reduce its effect. Sykes and Matza (1957) explain that the neutralization effect is

used for self-defense for more rationalized individuals as they are more likely to behave far from their attitudes without damaging their self- image.

6. CLOSING THE GAP:

Valor (2008) describes the reason of this gap in terms of **Cognitive obstacles** (the effort required to collect information before purchase), **Behavioral Obstacles** (human and pecuniary cost) and **Motivational Obstacles** (ethical obligation, especially trade-off between product-quality, price and ethical aspects). **Due to all these obstacles people prefer to “stowaway” and wait for others to lead the way. Even with a positive attitude their behavior remains latent.**

Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith (2007) have observed that **consumers live up to this gap without guilt** because they resort to neutralization through different techniques, viz;

- **The denial of responsibility:** The individual blames the market or other actors;
- **Denial of harm (or profit):** The individual considers that his action has no effect on others;
- **Condemn the judges:** To attack, in order to defend oneself of one's lack of action, the actors of the cause one is supposed to support;
- **Another priority:** another cause, more important in the eyes of the person explains that one makes an obstacle to the personal regulation (Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith (2007))

But further, they suggest that **proper communication can serve a solution**, especially for Denial of Responsibility and Harm/or profit where the individual is in a denial mode to agree to any kind of harm that can happen to him or the profits that he can gain by compliance. This can be done by **communicating precisely the positive effects** of alternative purchase for beneficiaries without dramatizing it too much (White, MacDonnel and Ellard 2012). **The “responsible-ethical” trend is relatively new and requires efforts and time from all the stakeholders(consumer associations, public authorities, producers, distributors etc.) to coordinate, evolve and disseminate a more comprehensive and coherent information for the consumer.**

7. EVIDENCES AND CONCLUSION:

There are further observations by some experts recently who emphasize that at present, there is a significant opportunity for food retailers and manufacturers who need to **identify high-potential segments** and the **drivers of engagement** for these consumers and, then **tailor their messages** and products **accordingly and communicate the functional benefits of the products.** (Andrew Mandzy, Director, Strategic Insights, Nielsen, 2016). **Marketers need to connect messaging with the causes that matter most to consumers** and that also align with their brand. (Grace Farraj, SVP, Public Development & Sustainability, Nielsen, 2015). **The mood of the market gives a good opportunity for Brands to establish a reputation for environmental stewardship among today’s youngest consumers to build loyalty among the power-spending Millennials of tomorrow** and to improve its market share. (Grace Farraj, SVP - Public Development & Sustainability, Nielsen, 2015).

Further, it is also true that adoption of Organic Food in India has not been as fast and inclusive as it is in other parts of the world. (Sondhi, N., 2014). So, it is essential to educate the consumers about the benefits of these products and persuade them for its adoption through relevant consuming groups.” (Sondhi, N. 2014). Thus, it can be concluded that an **effective communication is required** at this time to resolve the issues related to awareness, sustainability, ethical consumption and poor penetration of Organic Food market in India.

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