

## MOVE TOWARDS ETHICAL CONSUMPTION- A REFLECTION OF MORAL RESPONSIBILITY OR DISTINCTION?

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**DOI: 10.5958/2249-7137.2023.00080.0**

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### ABSTRACT

*Food habits have been understood as a site of social distinction for a long period of time. There have been numerous trends/fads associated with food over the years which have had significant impact on the food choices of people. Ethical consumption is one such trend which has provided consumers an avenue for expressing an alternative style of life, identity, cultural values and class distinction. The study employed qualitative methods to investigate the motives and concerns of ethical food consumers from two organic restaurants and two organic food stores in Chandigarh. The paper focuses on whether people indulge in ethical consumption as morally conscious beings or they use it as a marker of social status and distinction. The impact of Covid - 19 on the consumption of ethical products was also observed. The results reveal the primary motive for consuming ethical food products is health and food safety concerns which has further increased after covid-19. The concern for environment and welfare of animals ranked low for the consumers while opting for ethical products which shows that moral responsibility was not of paramount importance. Dining and shopping at organic restaurants and grocery stores was more a marker of distinction and sophistication.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Ethical Consumption, Organic Food, Fair Trade, Distinction, Moral Responsibility.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Ethical consumption is the buzzword in the contemporary times with sales for organic, fair trade, local and sustainably sourced products showing exponential growth (Starr, M. A, 2009, *Ethical Food Market Size, Trends and Global Forecast to 2032*, n.d.) With increasing popularity of ethical products it becomes imperative to explore the driving factors of this consumption and how consumers understand ethical consumption. The move towards ethical consumption has been driven by many factors like increased awareness for health, moral dimension which includes concern for animal rights and environment, the symbolism of class and distinction associated with an alternate diet and incessant promotion by popular media. Consumption practices have been closely connected to the concept of identity. Acc. to Giddens(1991) consumption is a tool for constructing identity whereas Bourdieu(1984) sees consumption as a reflection of an already formed identity. Rising incomes have led to a significant increase in purchasing power, enabling consumers to experiment and indulge in innovative alternate diets. The present study attempts to investigate the primary motives and concerns of ethical food consumers in Chandigarh. It would also seek to uncover whether the consumers engage in ethical

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consumption for status and distinction or they do so as morally responsible citizens who think about the impact of their food choices on the environment and society as whole.

## **Methodology**

Qualitative approach was used as the research method for the present study. It was considered to be more relevant as it allowed the researcher to gain in depth understanding which would not have been possible with more structured quantitative approach. For data collection, the tools of semi-structured interviews and observation were employed. Purposive sampling was used to select the respondents.

## **Data Collection and Sample**

The data was collected from two organic restaurants and two organic supermarkets in Chandigarh. The sample consisted of 40 respondents, 20 each from restaurants and organic supermarkets. All the patrons arriving at these four locations were approached and asked for consent. The willing ones were interviewed by the researcher. The researcher spent significant amount of time at these locations after taking interviews to observe the behavior of respondents and gain more in-depth understanding.

## **Literature Review**

The available literature on ethical consumption discusses the factor behind choosing ethical products and the barriers faced in purchasing ethical products. A study by Zahaf and Ferjani (2016) to understand the driving factors of alternate food consumption in two countries Canada and Tunisia, reveal that the major reasons people opt for alternate consumption are health, quality of food products, environment and support for local economy. The reasons that discourage people to choose ethical products were identified as the expensiveness of the products, limited availability, lack of trust and information about ethical consumption. Singer, Mason(2006) in their book *The Way We Eat, Why our Food Choices Matter* thoroughly touch all aspects of ethical consumption analyzing how people make choices regarding food and how the choices we make impact the environment, animals and labour involved in producing our food. The families opting for ethical food products assert a strong moral ground that involves compassion for animals and sustainable environment behind their choices. The families eating the conventional food products ranked price and convenience as driving factors behind their choice as organic products cost more and are not available at every nearby supermarket. A third group termed 'The Conscientious Eater' who balances ethics with taste, cost, convenience and other considerations is someone who eats meat or fish or eggs, only when it satisfies certain ethical standards. The impact of marketing on the food choices was significant as people rely on labels on the products to understand what they are consuming and whether they are making an ethically sound choice or not. Pham et al. (2018) investigated the factors impeding or enhancing the consumers intention for buying organic products and concluded that food safety concerns, health consciousness and media advertising promoted ethical consumption. Concern for environment and food taste were of little value to people while they made their choice. Consumers reported high price, inadequate availability, poor labeling and extra time required to source products as potential barriers in consuming organic products. Ethical consumption apart from being a value oriented economy also associates with markers of status differentiation and distinction indirectly making it a part of capitalist consumer culture. Szmigin and Carrigan (2014) identify distinction process as one of the dimensions of ethical consumption. Consumers

are required to distinguish themselves through the purchase of ethical products and rejection of others. It is observed that such activities take place in situations of high social visibility giving consumers a chance to display differentiation and distinction. Similar observations have been made by Beagan, Chapman and Power( 2016) while exploring the food shopping practices of families of varying incomes. The study reveals how eating in accordance to dominant discourses of ethical consumption carries symbolic capital and eventually becomes a mean to display high social status. Shopping practices of both high and low income families included attention on cost, quality, convenience, nutrition and ethics. Ethical principles were almost always compromised due to cost and accessibility. The low income families displayed strong commitment to ethical consumption despite high cost of products and found alternate ways to stay true to the commitment like cost sharing arrangements or watching for sales on organic products or growing some produce in their kitchen gardens and buying local whenever possible. Distrust among high income shoppers was observed regarding ethical eating. The alternate way of eating was seen by them as just another way to increase profit by corporate and while those who did opt for ethical products did it more so for health reasons than for ethics. The class distinction associated with ethical consumption seems to be diminishing as it becomes increasingly available to people across varying income groups. The incredulity of moral food discourses looks like the new marker of class distinction. Social contexts have a significant impact on ethical consumption. A study by Liebe, Andorfer, Gwartney, Meyerhoff (2014) on ethical consumption practices of German and American students shows that people are more likely to engage in purchasing ethical products in situations when there is less anonymity and high social control. In scenarios when the actions of individuals are under direct scrutiny by others, there is higher probability of engaging in socially desirable behavior to gain social rewards and avoid social sanctions. Similar observation have been made by Starr(2009) where individuals are more likely to engage in ethical consumption if others around them also engage in similar behavior and the practice becomes more of a social norm that invokes rewards or sanctions.

## **Results and Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to understand the motives and concerns of ethical food consumers in Chandigarh. The key themes that arose out of data analysis were; primary motive of consumption, barriers in consumption , ethical consumption as a marker of distinction, ethical consumption as a moral responsibility, awareness regarding ethical consumption.

### **Primary Motive for Consumption**

The increasing popularity for consumption of ethical food products can be attributed to a variety of reasons that includes concerns for food safety, health consciousness, concern for environment and animal welfare, better taste, class distinction, neophilia etc. In the present study majority of respondents cited health as the primary motive for consuming ethical food products. They expressed concern regarding the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers in the conventionally grown crops, fruits and vegetables. Almost all the participants believed organic products to be better for health. On the question of what kind of organic products they bought most frequently majority of them responded with fruits and vegetables as these are consumed raw or with minimal cooking. A large number of respondents also reported an increase in their intake of organic food products after the covid-19 pandemic due to concerns of contamination and scare of

unknown viruses. Many of them started a kitchen garden in their houses, so that they rely on the market for fewer products.

## **Barriers in Consumption**

In India, the consumption of ethical products has shown an upward surge with consumers now making a conscious effort to purchase organic and locally sourced and sustainably produced products (Express Computer, 2022) Even though there is consumer willingness to engage in ethical consumption, there are certain barriers faced by consumers in doing so. The majority of participants in the present study reported higher price to be the major deterrent in purchasing ethical products. The participants revealed that due to the higher price of organic products they limit the consumption to fewer products like fruits and vegetables. Majority of them reported that they would buy conventional products if they found the organic/fair trade counterparts more expensive. The other most cited reason given by participants was lack of trust on claims of ethical products and labeling. Many of them reported that every other brand these days sold products with organic labeling and they felt it has just become an advertising gimmick and lacked the proper quality checks.

## **Ethical Consumption as Marker of Distinction**

Food habits have been understood as a site of social distinction for a long period of time. Ethical consumption is one such trend which has provided consumers an avenue for expressing an alternative style of life, identity, cultural values and class distinction (Kennedy et al., 2018). Veblen in his “theory of leisure class” emphasized the role of consumption in denoting membership to a certain class and in formation of identities with the objective of differentiation and distinction. Schenk et al. (2021) in their study reveal that consumers engage in fair trade consumption to denote a more prestigious and distinctive lifestyle. In the present study, a small number of respondents affirmed that ethical consumption raises one’s social status and felt that consuming organic products is a luxury that people with higher incomes can indulge in. The majority of participants denied the connection between ethical consumption and higher social status and felt people indulged in ethical consumption more for health and food safety reasons. Although with closer observation, the researcher could understand that a good number of participants in the organic restaurants were there because these were premium outlets and quite popular. Upon interaction with some of the participants, some of the reasons they gave for dining at these places were nice ambience, tasty food and not very crowded. Very few of them mentioned the use of organic and fresh produce, cold pressed oils, and locally sourced ingredients. The same could be observed with the majority of participants in the grocery store who could be seen posting pictures of their shopping spree and tagging the stores in their social media post. Upon inquiring whether they do the same while shopping from a conventional vendor or sabzi mandi, they denied doing so as these organic stores were more aesthetically pleasing.

## **Ethical Consumption as a Moral Responsibility**

The plurality of values that we as humans embody, significantly enrich our life but also present us with challenging situations when we face a conflict in our values. Such conflicts are regularly encountered by us as consumers and eaters. The main essence of ethical consumption is the conscious and deliberate decision making due to personal and moral beliefs (Matten & Moon, 2004) The findings of this study show that moral dimension does not rank high for the

participants of this study as the primary concern and motive for their ethical consumption is health and not environment or welfare of animals. Although majority of participants agreed to ethical consumption being a moral responsibility then quite contradictorily a significant number of participants said they do not think about the impact of their food choices on environment. While majority of the participants consumed organic products, only a very few of them were open to the idea of working on a community organic farm once a week. These findings suggest that even though the participants were concerned for their health and considered ethical consumption as a moral responsibility, their concerns did not translate into required actions.

### Awareness Regarding Ethical Consumption

During the present research, it was observed that for majority of people ethical consumption meant just the consumption of organic products and very few of them were aware of terms like fair trade and sustainable sourcing. Majority of the participants were unaware of the source of their ethical food products and their sustainability value. They bought products relying on the claims made on the packaging of the products.

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