

## Chapter 5

# Exploring Ethical Consumption for Equity and Inclusiveness: Bridging Thoughts and Action of Consumers

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter is directed at examining this gap in everyday practices and is a step towards bridging thoughts and action of consumers towards sustainable social change. Utilizing a qualitative approach, purchasing practices of consumers with strong beliefs about ethical consumption are critically assessed to examine how individuals think and act with respect to their purchasing decisions. The findings of this chapter suggest that transparency and communication of the ethical investment of consumers in purchasing and consuming ethical products needs to be more pronounced for thoughts to reflect in ethical conscious practices.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Production for economic growth and profit is the force driving global economic production across the world. As the economy has opened with liberalization, export and global transactions are giving rise to global production networks around the world. However, the economy functions from within a socio-cultural and political system spanning across, regions, countries, cultures, and traditions. As stated by Berndt and Boeckler (2009:536), “markets do not simply fall out of thin air but are continually produced and constructed socially with the help of actors who are interlinked in dense and extensive webs of

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social relations” In this paper, attention will be given to the consumption aspect of the global economic processes as well as to how it functions as a cardinal structure upon which the whole system operates.

Specifically focusing upon the organization of consumption is of significance as it becomes the major determinant of global manufacturing patterns that sustain and are responsible for such thriving production processes across the world. In the present age of high mass consumption, consumption beliefs, attitudes and practices have profound implications for quality of life for present and future generations (Kilbourne et al. 1997, Harrison et al. 2005). Its ever-growing importance can even be seen by the rise in alternative market movements in the 1970s such as Fairtrade that rely on significantly on ethical consumerism where profits are not made at the expense of marginalized producers. However, despite this relevance there is lack of evidence as to how consumption patterns empirically sustain such practices, especially at the level of individual consumers in everyday life settings.

By leveraging consumer ethics, the authors aim to open the debate for a more inclusive and socially informed approach towards ethically conscious consumption and practices. The objectives of the chapter center on examining how consumers construct an appropriate ethic regarding shopping behavior, what role does personal identity play in ethical consumerism and what are some of the challenges and negotiations in the process.

## **BACKGROUND**

Ethical consumption literature has a long and consistent history in outlining the necessity of including ethics-based principles and morality in business decisions and economic arrangements. It has strongly presented itself to counter the inequities and power imbalances in market systems. Historically, the debate gained momentum and strength with the spread of global capitalism. As economic globalization spread across the world coupled with modern means of communication, it increasingly brought in focus the inequalities in these systems of exchange and the need to reform capitalism to allow for its flourishing and continued expansion to different parts of the world. The rapid industrialization and mass production with its drive for profits led to the relevance and introduction of conversations around consumerism with a rising movement towards it during the industrial revolution (Berend, 2015; Cowan et al., 2009).

With such developments, understanding consumption practices and what drives them became imperative for steering production and creating new markets for consumers. Transformations of lifestyles, changes in attitudes, choices in buying behavior became significant for the survival, continuity and spread of capitalism (Lim, 2017, Yani de Soriano and Slater, 2009). It is now well accepted that understanding consumer behavior is a critical point of navigation in business practices and strategies. As the literature and findings on consumption practices developed further, the application of this knowledge expanded to focus beyond economic enterprises and specifically on how businesses impact consumers for their own ends. The renewed focus on consumers as the vulnerable and marginalized group against powerful players of the industry allowed ethical consumption debates to build a movement for ethics in businesses. Yet, a pressing point in this literature remains with bridging the thoughts and actions of consumers. While there may be awareness and consciousness of ethical issues (Carrigan et al. 2004; Low and Davenport 2007), it seldom translates into action for consumers (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Carrigan et al. 2011; d’ Astous and Legendre 2009; Papaoikonomou et al. 2012). It is startling to find that the solution to such a persistent issue does not lie in providing more information to consumers as the latter has not been successful in changing consumer practices and behavior (Moser and Dilling, 2007).

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