



## Editorial

# Ethics, technology and adaptation: consumer behavior and sustainable food system



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With the challenges of climate change and population growth, the attention to sustainability, sustainable production and sustainable consumption has become critical in today's food production and consumption practices. A UN report predicts that if the population were to reach 9.6 billion by 2050, we require the resources of three planets to sustain our current lifestyles (UN 2019).

Although the food production in terms of calories has kept up with population growth, there are more than 820 million people today who are suffering from malnutrition and under nutrition. Many more people consume unhealthy diets, leading to obesity and numerous other health complications. Despite the need for increased food production, the industry's future is severely tested by unpredictable and extreme weather patterns endemic to climate change. Small holders and low-income communities in developing and developed countries who lack sufficient resources or knowhow to adapt to these changes will bear the brunt of these repercussions.

Sustainable food production that involves adapting to threats such as climate change is viewed as a solution to these obstacles.

Sustainable food movement has been gathering momentum in the twenty first century. Sustainable food system contributes to economic, social and environmental goals of the world (Reheul et al., 2001). Its economic aspect involves fair costs of production and consumption. The ecological sustainability includes the preservation of the natural environment, as well the quality of life of humans and animals. The social component comprises of matching the needs of society with agriculture and garnering the support of citizens and governments toward the agricultural sector (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006, p.171). The implementation of sustainable food systems thus enables the achievement of "overall development plans, reduce future economic, environmental and social costs, strengthen economic competitiveness and reduce poverty" (UN, 2019).



## Consumer Behavior

Consumer decision making process can help or hinder the attempts at achieving sustainability in food production. Since food production relies to a large extent on consumer demand, consumers act as agents in shaping local as well as global food systems. Consumer decision-making process largely relies on individual needs and wants. Factors such as convenience, habit, value for money, personal health concerns, hedonism, and individual responses to social and institutional norms play a significant role in daily consumption decisions (FSA, 2000; IGD, 2002a, 2002b; SDC, 2003).

Consumer behavior further varies according to a country's level of development and socio-economic status. Consumers in developed countries maintain lifestyles that require higher levels of consumption of natural resources compared to developing countries. Consequently, they leave a larger carbon footprint. With globalization and the rising standards of living in the developing world, more and more consumers are aspiring to reach higher standards of living, putting increasing pressure on scarce resources on our planet.

## Sustainable consumption

Sustainable consumption and production is about "promoting resource and energy efficiency, sustainable infrastructure, and providing access to basic services, green and decent jobs and a better quality of life for all" (UN, 2019). Sustainable consumption involves a decision-making process that takes into account individual needs and wants as well as consumer's social responsibility (Meulenberg, 2003). The objective of sustainable consumption is "doing more and better with less," or increasing net welfare gains from economic activities by decreasing resource utilization, thereby, minimizing the negative effects on the environment. This process involves the participation of producers as well as consumers, including increasing the awareness of consumers on sustainable consumption, "providing them with adequate information through standards and labels and engaging in sustainable public procurement, among others" (UN, 2019).

## Reflexive Consumer

Although consumer behavior is determined primarily by value and convenience, the complexity of the decision-making process and the diversity of motivations involved in consumption point to the potential for change. In sustainable consumption, an important stimulus for change can come from post-modern society's tendency

towards reflexivity, where individuals actively reevaluate existing norms. While not strictly a social activist, the reflexive consumer (Giddens, 1991) conducts his "own individualized risk assessment" (Dupuis, 2000). For reflexive consumers, deciding what they will or will not let into their bodies is an important decision. Hence reflexive consumers negotiate this process with great care and concern, there lies a potential for change towards more sustainable consumption.

## Ethical Consumer

An ethical consumer who recognizes an intimate connection between consumption and social and environmental issues has emerged in the last decade. The ethical consumer's purchase decisions respond to his or her sense of responsibility towards society and the ethical repercussions of their behavior (De Pelsmacker et al., 2003; Vermeir & Verbeke 2006). While the main focus of this type of consumption is environmental concerns, it also encompasses "animal welfare, human rights, and labor working conditions in the third world" (Tallontire et al., 2001).

Ethical behavior is closely linked with values that consumers hold. Decisions such as product choice and brand choice can be determined by consumer values (Burgess, 1992; Engel et al., 1995) and hegemonic discourses that penetrate, articulate or (re)configure the consumer. (Withanachchi 2013). Values can motivate people to act and provide them direction and urgency (Kollock et al., 1994). For instance, Vitell et al. (2001) found that consumers are more directed by "principles or values (deontology) than by consequences (teleology) when making ethical decisions" (p.154). Ethical behavior directed by values of sustainability rather than profit or convenience holds the impetus for change toward more sustainable consumption patterns.

## Alternative Frameworks

In addition to educating consumers and working towards shifting their behavior towards sustainable consumption, there needs to be alternative frameworks for conceptualizing and directing production and consumption in our society. While individual behavioral change can lead to societal change, these processes often occur over a long period of time. Such gradual change is not sufficient to meet the dire environmental and societal challenges that we confront today.

The nomenclature, consumer, as well as the current consumer – producer model is derived from an economic theory that is a product of capitalist ideology. Ethical and



sustainable consumers still remain 'consumers' within this model. The term 'consumption' itself denotes 'utilization of goods and/or services' within an economic system. Hence, consumption is regarded as a prerogative of the participants of this system, who have the capacity to buy goods. Within this system, 'natural world,' or its 'resources' that can be considered as human constructs, does not have an inherent value in and of itself. The value of our ecosystems are dependent on the economic system within which certain consumers are willing to pay for its most rare, organic or pure forms. Even the most ethical or reflexive of consumers perceive the value of natural world as linked with furthering human and/or personal goals and interests. Ethical 'consumption' thus requires transcending the limits of thinking and doing imposed on us as 'consumers' and envisioning our relationship with food systems in a new light. A reflexive model of ethical consumption can enable us to view our connection with the food system as sacred, symbiotic, life giving and life sustaining rather than a form of economic exchange.

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