

An Empirical Investigation of Ethical Food Choices: A Qualitative Research Approach [†]

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Abstract: Why do customers incorporate concerns about social and environmental issues into the decision-making process? How ethical are food choices in the modern world? Answers to these questions have often revolved around how informed consumers might be and whether they have the appropriate skills to act on concerns they might have. Today, ethical food consumption is a growing market where consumers' behavior shifts from the rational manner focusing on the products price and attributes to the food ethics associated with environment, social welfare, public health, and morality. Using data selected from a purposive sample of 20 consumers, this study employed a qualitative research procedure to explore the main dimensions that influence the decision-making process and eating preferences in the post-COVID 19 era and within an economically turbulent environment. The main results showed that health protection, sustainability, and social welfare constitute the main axes of ethical food consumption. Participants were found to be more individualists than altruists since the "personal health" dimension was the most prevalent. Future research should extend these findings and explore variations in the ethical consumption factors among various consumer segments.

Keywords: ethical food choice; personal in-depth interviews; health protection; environmental protection; social welfare



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1. Introduction

Climate change impacts are now visible all over the world through numerous physical and biological changes in agriculture, environment, and society [1]. These have contributed to the urgent need for enhancing sustainable development and the necessity for efficient coordination between governance and international societal systems [2]. Since modern food systems are estimated to produce about a third of global greenhouse gas emissions [3], there is an ever-increasing interest in ethical issues in agricultural production and the food industry with consumers becoming more environmentally conscious and susceptible to the social impacts of agro-food production [4,5]. In addition, the rapid technological development of recent decades and the modern consumer lifestyle in the western world have brought to the forefront new ethical dilemmas and concerns [6,7]. Therefore, the interlinkage of agriculture with environment, food seasonality and locality, farmers and employees' rights, animal welfare, and the protection of local businesses seem to have a crucial role in establishing ethical consumer's food choices and purchase behaviors [5,8,9].

The present study delved into the various dimensions of ethical consumption, namely the health, the environmental, and the socioeconomic dimension [10], to explore consumer ethics and values that influence the decision-making process and eating preferences. Furthermore, it shed light onto the main aspects of food choice motives in Greece in the post-COVID 19 era and within an economically turbulent environment.

2. Materials and Methods

A qualitative research procedure was adopted, and primary data were selected through personal in-depth interviews based on a semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended questions [11]. To achieve the objectives of the present research, a non-probabilistic purposive sample of 20 adult consumers from Northern Greece (Eastern Macedonia and Thrace area) was employed in order to reach data saturation and achieve the objectives of the present research [12,13]. All personal in-depth interviews were tape-recorded, and the interview duration ranged from 50 to 90 min. Health, environment, economy, and society were the main axes for the construction of the informal questionnaire according to the recent body of literature [14–17]. Data selection started in June 2021 and lasted for approximately three months.

3. Results

Our sample covered a wide range of sociodemographic characteristics. In particular, respondents were 18–83 years old, and the great majority were women over 35 years old (14 women out of 20 participants).

The main findings showed that consumers identify “ethical consumption” with “consumer health”, “environment (sustainability)”, and “social development” (benefits for the society and economy). Apparently, most participants (19 out of 20 consumers) interrelated ethical foods with pesticide- and chemical fertilizer-free products because “they seem to be healthier”, whereas five respondents linked such foods with environmental protection and sustainability. Seasonality in food consumption and locality (locally produced foods) were also underlined by a significant proportion of respondents that seemed to associate these perceptions with better quality in food products and more nutritious food choice, whereas the most prominent selection criteria was health protection. Less promoted food brands were also considered more ethical choices for consumers, because, as respondents explained, they provide more “natural products” to the food supply chain, and food items are produced with less environmentally invasive methods.

Although the main factors underlying ethical consumption are “health protection”, “environment (sustainability)”, and “benefits for the society/economy”, consumers seem to be more individualists than altruists with “personal health protection” selection criteria outweighing the “environmental protection” and the “social welfare” criteria. Given that the qualitative research procedure was conducted after the COVID-19 isolation measures, consumers’ increased awareness toward personal health protection at the expense of the other two criteria could be justified and explained.

Our results further support the previous literature on the values and motives driving ethical food choice, stating individual’s health [18], environmental protection and sustainability [5,9,19,20], and social welfare [19,21] as the key axes of ethical consumption.

4. Discussion

Ethical consumption of agro-food products is a multi-dimensional process. Our findings further support recent research indicating that the main motives for ethical food consumption include individual/personal factors, environmental preservation, and social well-being. However, it seems that Greek consumers are less informed on food ethics since they were found to mostly identify ethical consumption motives with self-advancement, and more specifically personal health protection. Ethical consumption motives associated with environmental protection and society were less prevalent and reported by a smaller proportion of consumers, highlighting the necessity for educating customers on the different aspects/dimensions of food ethics and their implications for action in the modern food systems. Of particular interest is the fact that none of the participants correlate their food choices with animal welfare or social welfare.

These findings will be elaborated in a subsequent quantitative research design to provide a thorough picture of the values, the motivation process, and perceptions toward ethical food choices and build the profile of “ethical consumer”. Future research should

also take into consideration these findings and explore variations in ethical perceptions and food consumption patterns among various consumer segments.

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