Exploring ethical consumption

Researchers are investigating the underlying reasons behind conscious shopping in non-Western and Western countries.

**Ethical consumption** (EC) is the active choice of shoppers to purchase things in line with their values, and avoid products, goods and services that have negative impacts. It can have positive effects on society and the environment, while reducing child labour and cruelty to animals.

EC quickly gained popularity in the West due to factors such as social movements, the rise of modern consumer culture and civil society organisations, consumer sovereignty, liberal market dynamics, new policies and regulations. This spurred a lot of academic interest, though mostly in northern and western European societies.

“Research suggests non-Western cultures also engage in ethically driven consumption practices, though they may not be represented in the literature,” explains Sara Karimzadeh, associate senior lecturer in Sociology at Örebro University and principal investigator in the EU-funded ECIRSW project.
In the project, researchers’ colleagues explored EC in a non-Western social context, studying two countries with largely different social, economic, political and cultural situations: Iran and Sweden.

“While existing research mainly focuses on EC practices suitable for Western contexts such as market-oriented EC – Fairtrade, for example – this study aimed to understand if these practices comprehensively represent consumption ethics more widely,” says Magnus Boström, professor of Sociology at Örebro University and ECIRSWE project coordinator.

Underlying social mechanisms

The project, carried out with the support of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions programme, sought to understand the different social mechanisms underpinning or limiting EC in each of the two countries.

Using a multilevel perspective analytical framework, the team found that EC is interconnected with various social practices at different scales in society, including, for example, local influences, social groups and broader cultural shifts.

To further understand the societal origins of EC, the team then conducted interviews with citizens of Sweden and Iran.

Uncovering disparate motivations driving consumption

The project findings demonstrate that EC is a well-established concept in Sweden, supported by policy interventions, civil society organisations and social capital among the public. However, it is more focused on market-oriented activities such as shifting consumption from product A to B, rather than on reducing the volume of consumption overall – and the effect on ecological and climate footprints.

In Iran, on the other hand, ‘EC’ lacks structural support, and therefore exhibits more individualised, local and case-by-case definitions and manifestations.

“Here, the motivations behind ethical consumption are rooted in cultural or traditional beliefs, rather than in concerns for the environment,” adds Karimzadeh. “The principal aim of ethical consumption for those who practise it is to benefit the people in their immediate surroundings, rather than focusing on environmental protection.”

Fostering social change

“Scholars and students, civil society, people and policymakers will benefit differently from our findings,” notes Boström. This includes ongoing discussion in academic
circles on the significance of societal mechanisms for transformative change.

The results of the project will be published in two forthcoming papers. The conceptual development of EC was also explored in an article published in 'Environmental Sociology'.

“The outcomes underscore the necessity for policymakers to synchronise efforts in revising production policies, regulations, and reshaping consumption values and norms for substantial change,” Boström says.

Currently, the research team are advancing their exploration of a more developed framework, particularly focusing on sufficiency and care concepts. “The goal is to explore their role in both consumption practices and production systems,” adds Karimzadeh.

**Keywords**

ECIRSWE, ethical consumerism, ethical consumption, societies, social, change, mechanisms, civil society

---

**Project Information**

**ECIRSWE**

Grant agreement ID: 101022789

DOI

[10.3030/101022789](10.3030/101022789)

**Funded under**

EXCELLENT SCIENCE - Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions

Nurturing excellence by means of cross-border and cross-sector mobility

**Total cost**

€ 191 852,16

**EU contribution**

€ 191 852,16

**Coordinated by**

OREBRO UNIVERSITY

Sweden

**Start date**

1 October 2021

**End date**

30 September 2023

---

**Discover other articles in the same domain of application**
NEWS

SCIENTIFIC ADVANCES

Promoting healthy working environments for small businesses

25 April 2023

SCIENTIFIC ADVANCES

Super laser lightning rod set up in the Swiss Alps

24 August 2021

INTERVIEW

Behind the scenes of Russia’s foreign policy-making

2 May 2019

Last update: 16 February 2024

Permalink: https://cordis.europa.eu/article/id/449241-exploring-ethical-consumption

European Union, 2024