

# Beyond the “deficit discourse”: Mapping ethical consumption discourses in Chile and Brazil

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## Abstract

This article challenges the longstanding trend of much empirical material on ethical consumption originating from the global North, offering instead rich data on ethical consumption and practices in Chile and Brazil. Drawing on data generated from 32 in-depth focus groups (179 participants in total) in both countries, the article identifies similarities and differences between these two countries and with the global North. We identify how ethical consumption in Chile and Brazil is conceptualized mainly at two different scales, namely first, the everyday ethics of consumption at household scale and, second, a more global scale of discourse on environmental problems and the negative effects of globalisation. At the household scale, narrative themes include those of prudence, of avoiding overconsumption, family health, and focus on quality. At a more national and international scale, respondents from all classes in both countries discussed labour conditions associated with Chinese imports. Further, particularly university-educated and well-travelled respondents had adopted international environmentalist discourses. Employing a relational

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geography to discourses, the article calls for research to both include and transcend cross-country comparisons, and binaries of global North and South.

### Keywords

Ethical consumption, Latin America, everyday consumption, south and north

## Introduction

Recent years have seen an important increase in scholarly interest in ethical consumption (Barnett et al., 2011; Clarke et al., 2007; Harrison et al., 2005a; Lewis and Potter, 2011; Whatmore and Clark, 2008). Much of this research, however, has focused on exploring ethical and sustainable consumption discourses and practices in European and North American countries, leaving questions of how “ethical consumption” is interpreted and practiced in other parts of the world comparatively underexplored. Furthermore, some authors, when commenting on countries in the so-called global South, have characterized them as catching up with “ethical consumption” practices in the global North, commenting on “the lack of understanding of ethical consumerism, ethical buying and CSR in developing countries” (Tahmasebi Aria, 2014). For example, sustainable consumption surveys carried out by National Geographic/GlobeScan (2008), and WBCSD (2008) all use European and North American countries as the reference point and compare this with a selection of “emerging market” countries. Further, several reports on this matters, mobilize a deficit discourse that defines ethical consumption discourses and practices from the perspective of the global North, and then sees how well (or not) people from other contexts measure up to that level. For example, in a 2008 report, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), which unites some of the largest global companies, comments on India:

Awareness and understanding of sustainable consumption among consumers was low; the majority of Indian consumers still buy small, unpackaged goods from low-cost, family-run shops. Even to wealthier Indian consumers, sustainable consumption was felt to imply only consuming less; the concept of consuming differently is a significant but missing factor. (2008: 17)

The irony is clear: while it did not fit the notion of a brand-led new green modernity, buying “unpackaged goods from family-run shops” may well *be read as exactly a form of “consuming differently”*—which was the supposedly missing factor.

The focus on Northern framings of sustainable (and ethical) consumption, and the resulting deficit discourse, is ironic given that by most measures, current lifestyles in the global North are far less sustainable than in the global South. For instance, the per capita Co2 footprint per year is 17.6 t in the United States, 11.7 t in Norway, 7.9 t in the United Kingdom, 4.2 t in Chile, 2.2 t in Brazil, and 0.3 t in Kenya (World Bank, 2013). Scholars such as Peter Dauvergne (2008, 2010) have drawn attention to the negative environmental consequences of overconsumption and wasteful consumption. Lifestyles in the global North are frequently characterized by overconsumption and irrespective of consumer awareness, consumer behavior is frequently socially and environmentally unsustainable.

By exploring how ethical consumption is interpreted in Chile and Brazil, this article provides rich empirical material to consider ethical consumption discourses and practices outside the global North. This article continues on from previous work in which we analyzed in detail the institutional contexts and paths of developments of ethical consumption in both

countries (Ariztia et al., 2013).<sup>1</sup> Here, we further argue that ethical consumption discourses are constructed differently at varying scales and contexts. In doing so, we take a broadly Foucauldian understanding of discourse as related to a particular set of statements that denote and produce particular modalities of existence by mobilizing specific normative rules and institutionalized types (Foucault, 1969). Against this backdrop, and by analyzing the outcome of 32 focus groups, we identify two discursive formations around ethical consumption in Chile and Brazil which we see as intertwined with at least two different scales or contexts, namely first, the level of ordinary ethics of consumption and, second, a more global scale of environmental problems and global justice.

Our findings show key similarities and differences with the Northern-based literature of ethical consumption. Similarities include, first, an embeddedness of ethical consumption in the everyday ethics of consumption, including a concern for family health and food safety. Second, we also found examples of reasoning which resembled Massey's "global sense of place" in connecting local ethical consumption practice with, in particular, global environmental consequences articulated particularly by the more educated and more internationally mobile participants. A further difference was the entanglement and frequent dominance of the theme of prudent household budget management and debt avoidance in the discourses of ethical consumption we documented.

The article thus contributes, first, to the yet very limited empirical data on ethical consumption in the so-called global South, and second, robustly tests the theoretical framings, including framings of scale, which have so far dominated ethical consumption research but which ultimately have emanated from a limited, Northern-centric empirical evidence base.

Chile and Brazil provide interesting case studies with differences and similarities. They differ for instance in the size of their domestic market (Chile has 17 million inhabitants while Brazil has 197 million) and the size of state/government expenditure (23% of GDP (Chile) vs. 39% of GDP (Brazil)—IEF, 2013). Also, in terms of their macroeconomic trajectory, while Chile has been considered the first neoliberal experiment globally (Harvey, 2005), Brazil continues to have a much larger degree of social intervention by the state. These differences illustrate the important and hopefully unsurprising point that there is not *a single* different view of ethical consumption in the Global South, but *a plurality* of views.

Both countries have been hailed as emerging economies and growing domestic markets where part of the population, for the first time ever, has had access to goods that most consumers from northern countries take for granted. However, levels of economic disparity remain high, with high Gini indices of 54.7 for Brazil and 52.1 for Chile (World Bank, 2013). Growth in domestic consumption levels has put further pressure on natural resources in both countries, resources which are already being exploited by powerful export industries. With deforestation, air and water pollution, as well as land degradation on the rise, both countries have to face large scale environmental and social challenges in addition to the global threat of climate change.

In this article, we empirically address these issues by presenting and analyzing a range of statements related to ethical consumption in Chile and Brazil, drawing on the focus groups in both countries. Based on this, we describe how these statements are organized in two distinctive discourse formations enacted through different contexts. On the one hand, there is an ethical consumption discourse formation that is intertwined with everyday life routines and ordinary social and cultural reproduction. Simultaneously, a second ethical consumption discourse formation we encountered was also connected with national and global level discourses on environmental and global politics. Based on this, we argue that instead of drawing on national or regional boundaries to try to understand and delineate

discourses on ethical consumption, it is more appropriate to map ethical consumption discourses in terms of their connections across different scales and contexts, with each context linked to a different set of consumption practices as well as discursive and institutional settings.

Theoretically, this aligns closely with a relational view of space (Massey, 2005), which goes beyond a container view of countries and acknowledges the radical plurality of different time-spaces, the co-existing heterogeneity, the “throwntogetherness” of different people, discourses, and materialities, within say, one imagined national frame, and their interrelatedness across scales.

The article is structured as follows: The first section briefly describes our theoretical standpoint: in our critical engagement with the literature, we approach ethical consumption as a mediated practice. The second section briefly discusses the methodology, while the third section presents and analyzes the ethical consumption discourses we found in both countries. We describe two main scales of discourse on ethical consumption: the local scale where ethical consumption is mediated by everyday life practices, and a second scale of linked national and global discourses on ethics and consumption. This leads us to radically challenge any neat global North/global South distinctions and show how discourses on ethical consumption are globally interrelated and then transformed in dialogue with place.

## Literature review

Recent years have seen cross-disciplinary scholarly interest in exploring ethical consumption (for an overview, see Barnett et al., 2010; Newholm and Shaw, 2007). For the purpose of our argument, we broadly identify two sets of literature. On the one hand, there is literature that has primarily focused on the figure of the ethical consumer as a person “*concerned with the effects that a purchasing choice has, not only on themselves, but also on the external world around them*” (Harrison et al., 2005b: 2).

Some scholars have explored how ethical consumption relates to a person’s set of pro-social and pro-environmental values (Pepper et al., 2009) and high level of ethical awareness of social and environmental issues (Freestone and McGoldrick, 2008). Against this backdrop, and focusing on high income countries, scholars have mapped how ethical consumer values appear to be on the rise (Irving et al., 2002).

Authors have also situated ethical consumption in relation to the increasingly central role of consumption and consumer culture in the production of self-identities in contemporary societies (Giddens, 1991). In particular, by focusing on Northern so-called developed countries, authors have argued that consuming “ethical goods” is related to the increasing centrality of consumer choices in markets as a resource for a self-identity production (Bauman, 2007). Some scholars have explored ethical consumption in terms of a new type of commodity activism through which the self is produced within the neoliberal, individualized economic sphere (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012). In a critical vein, scholars have argued that ethical consumption discourses and practices tend to reduce ethical political virtues to individual decisions in markets (Bryant and Goodman, 2004; Carrier, 2008, 2010). Finally, other scholars have explored the figure of the ethical consumer by analyzing how consumption and citizenship are not opposing concepts but emerge as connected spheres (Trentmann, 2007). Political scientist Michelle Micheletti has coined the term *political consumerism* to describe “actions by people who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices” (2003: 3).

### *Mediating ethical consumption*

There is however a second set of literature concerned less with the figure of the ethical consumer but focused more on how ethical consumption, as a practice and discourse, is mediated by multiple discourses, practices, and institutional settings. This second group of literature often posits that the seemingly self-evident link between ethical consumption, choice, and individual subjectivity appears insufficiently problematized at both the theoretical and the empirical level (Adams and Raisborough, 2010; Barnett et al., 2005a; Clarke, 2008). In other words, ethical consumption needs to be examined as intertwined with ordinary practices and moral obligations (Adams and Raisborough, 2010), institutional and organizational settings (Barnett et al., 2010; Ariztia et al., 2013), an infrastructure of provisions (Shove, 2003, 2010), global commodity chains (Cook et al., 2006), and/or class structures (Adams and Raisborough, 2008). Following the work of Barnett et al. (2010), it can be argued therefore that to understand ethical consumption discourses and practices we need to bring into the picture the different “contexts” through which ethical consumption is enacted (2005b). These contexts are not only understood in terms of a medium that influences consumers’ decisions, but instead are defined as the very basic material through which ethics and consumptions are discursively linked. Two contexts appear as particularly relevant for us at both the theoretical and the empirical level.

First, one way in which ethical consumption is enacted relates to everyday life practices. Ethical consumption is embedded in the everyday ethics of consumption, which Probyn (2011) rightly describes as “messy ethics.” Authors have explored how everyday practices of consumption cannot be separated from moral and ethical considerations (Miller, 2001). Here, consumption practices emerge as a central space through which moral boundaries are produced and negotiated in everyday life (Adams and Raisborough, 2010; Barnett et al., 2005b). Consumption is deeply embedded in the ordinary negotiations of moral values and logics of care (Popke, 2006), which often revolve around issues of household reproduction, family obligations, and more generally maintaining intimate social relations (Miller, 1999).

Second, authors have also explored how ethical consumption is mediated by national and supranational institutional settings (Ariztia et al., 2013) as well as organizational and campaign discourses oriented at politicizing consumption (Barnett, 2010). More concretely, ethical consumption discourses appear as related to the deployment of practical actions and organizations that allow the mobilization of the ethical subject (Barnett et al., 2005b). Here, ethical consumption might be better understood as organized efforts made by institutional actors (such as NGOs) to problematize ordinary consumption practices in terms of wider political and normative projects deployed through campaigning (Barnett et al., 2010).

Geographers have for example argued that ethical consumption discourses relate to imaginings of and caring about distant “others,” which is part of what Doreen Massey (1994) calls a “global sense of place.” The global South frequently appears in ethical consumption discourses such as Fair Trade as the place where the “other,” the iconic producer, often imagined as suffering, is imagined to be living. In fact, debates in Geography related to ethical and political responsibility have often taken the view that caring at close proximity is easier while caring for distant others is more of a problem (Silk, 1998; Smith, 1998). Doreen Massey (2004), on the other hand, vehemently critiques “a hegemonic geography of care and responsibility which takes the form of a nested set of Russian dolls” (9). In this logic, the sense of responsibility for others is imagined as being the strongest for the home, then the local community, then the nation, etc., all the way to more abstract and distant imagined others. Massey advocates instead a politics of place which

respects the local as meaningful yet insists on it being relationally constituted, outward-looking, and outward-connected. Others have argued that if it is true that a loss of sense of responsibility over distance occurs, this can be overcome to a degree through increased knowledge of distant contexts, for example through a critical analysis of commodity chains (Castree, 2001; Cook et al., 2006; Hartwick, 2000). Projects such as Fairtracing.org or followthething.com have tried to enhance knowledge and empathy with distant others along the value chain through the use of a co-produced online content about the production process and labor conditions, which can be linked, via barcode or QR code, to a specific product and delivered to consumers on their mobile phones (Kleine, 2008). This area of work helps to frame and problematize ordinary consumption in terms of global responsibilities (Barnett et al., 2010).

While this literature has been very useful to portray a more complex picture of how ethical consumption practices and discourses are enacted, it has often relied, at least in its depiction of the consumer end, on empirical material from North America and Europe. In this article, we extend the discussion and the critical views expressed previously by providing empirical evidence on the ethical consumption discourses in two countries, which are not part of the global North. In providing this, we want to emphasize a view from the “South,” which is not only identified as a site of production but also as defined by multiple places of *consumption* where different ethical discourses and subjects are mobilized. At a more theoretical level, we do so by following recent theoretical efforts to think of ethical consumption as enacted through and within everyday practices, discourses, and institutional settings (Barnett et al., 2010).

We present data from Chile and Brazil, however, the main focus of the analysis is not on comparing “national contexts” (see, for example, Dombos, 2008; Zick, 2009). Instead, while contextualizing embedded discourses and practices at the local and national scale, we also identify, in a sense of a relational geography, several links with the cross-national and international scales, discourses which also co-constitute, for a sub-group of respondents, ethical consumption discourses as enacted in both countries.

## **Mapping multiple discourses in the global South**

### *The case of Chile and Brazil*

Chile and Brazil have recently experienced a period of economic prosperity, with economic and social upward mobility for many, an extension of consumer buying power and, alongside this, an increase in the access to consumer credit.<sup>2</sup> However, the two countries’ political and macroeconomic trajectories are quite distinct (see our previous article, Ariztia et al., 2013). Chile can be considered the first experiment in macroeconomic neoliberal reform (Harvey, 2005). Guided by economists from the Chicago School, from the 1970s onward, the Pinochet regime deregulated the national economy and developed Chile as an export-oriented economy (Cademártori, 2001). The post-dictatorship democratic governments, headed by a coalition of center-left parties during 1990–2010, continued this policy. Faced with a limited domestic market of only 17 million consumers, Chilean companies have constantly been encouraged to find markets overseas and thus Chile’s main export companies have had to respond to new requirements, standards, and trends emerging abroad.

In contrast, Brazil has a much larger domestic market, an active civil society and successive center-left governments. Significant social and economic growth has pushed Brazil into being the seventh largest economy in the world with a GDP of US\$ 2.52 trillion (CIA, 2013). In contrast to Chile, the Brazilian state itself has played a much



more prominent role in publicly articulating ethical consumption discourses in tandem with NGOs (Ariztia and Melero, 2013).

In both countries, consumption is still a central matter of contestation between social groups, private actors, and the state. Against this backdrop, there is a nascent but increasing literature in the two countries themselves concerning ethical consumption in the widest sense. Authors have described how Chile's export-oriented economy has led to the introduction of environmental and social certification in forest production (e.g. the Forest Stewardship Campaign label) or the wine industry (e.g. the Fairtrade Labelling International label) among some companies (Ariztia et al., 2009).<sup>3</sup> In the domestic market, large companies particularly through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) schemes have increasingly developed ethical and sustainable consumption.

In Brazil, in contrast to Chile, the state has played a much more prominent role in articulating ethical consumption alongside NGOs, as well as providing a legal framework and supporting sustainable consumption. Furthermore, in line with the Chilean case, the private sector has also increasingly taken up ethical consumption as part of their CSR schemes, assisted by ethical consumption NGOs such as the Ethos Institute of Business and Social Responsibility, and the Instituto Akatu, the Brazilian NGO partner of the [Name] project.<sup>4</sup> This relates to the observed increase in different forms of political consumerism, which in turn is linked, first, to the existence (in the case of Akatu since 2001) and creation of NGOs related to ethical consumption, second to the increasing visibility of ethical consumption issues in the Brazilian media (Barbosa et al., 2011). Third, this is related to an increasing awareness of Brazilians of (but not necessarily a visible change in actions toward) environmentally and socially conscious forms of consumption (Akatu, 2005). Some important quantitative research on ethical consumption attitudes and behaviors has been carried out, notably the ethical consumption survey run biannually by the Instituto Akatu since 2001. However, there remains a significant gap where more qualitative research is needed aimed at analyzing the discourses and meanings of this type of consumption.

### *Research design and fieldwork*

This article is based on empirical material gathered from 32 focus groups conducted in Chile and Brazil. The focus groups were designed to broadly address people's understandings of ethical consumption in the context of their everyday life as well as in relation to more public discourses on the topic. We are aware that statements cannot account for the level of ethical consumption practices (Boulstridge and Carrington, 2000), but we were interested in the discursive dimension of ethical consumption.

The guide for the focus groups was jointly designed by the three-country project team and then used in Brazil and Chile. The themes chosen examined participants' understandings of the concepts "ethical/sustainable, conscious/responsible consumption" and their views on individual and public purchasing criteria, inclusion of environmental and social criteria in individual and public purchasing, and reported environmental practices. For the purposes of this article, we focus here on those statements and opinions related to individual consumption.

As our main aim was to capture emergent discourses formations on ethical consumption, to reduce social desirability effects, the term ethical consumption was not introduced at the beginning of the discussion. Instead, the facilitator started the conversation in discussing everyday consumption, by asking participants who buys what in the domestic realm and who controls the domestic budget. Only then was the discussion moved toward ethics and

consumption, including everyday ethics. At some later point of the discussion, however, we focused explicitly on environment and social justice in relation to consumption. So while we acknowledge that the study introduced narrower understandings of ethical consumption akin to Northern discourses into the discussions, the design of the focus groups explicitly encouraged an open discussion on consumption and ethics before the conversation was moved to more narrow, explicitly labeled “ethical consumption” topics.

The main criteria used to recruit focus group participants in purposive sampling were gender, income level, age, and urban/rural location, to tap into a diversity of views. In total, 87 participants in Brazil and 92 participants in Chile took part in the discussions. Participants were identified using purposive sampling and recruited using snowball sampling.<sup>5</sup>

## **Ethical consumption discourses in Chile and Brazil**

### *The meanings of consumption in Chile and Brazil*

Among most of the respondents in Chile and Brazil, the concept of ethical consumption was little known, distant, and not very precise. Indeed, when asked, only few of the interviewees (often those with more formal education) were able to provide a clear definition. However, other terms such as “sustainable consumption,” “conscious consumption”<sup>6</sup> (championed by Akatu in Brazil), and “responsible consumption” (championed by CR in Chile) were terms participants were more familiar with and these were sometimes used interchangeably. Nevertheless, as we will show in this section, it is worth noting that besides the relative unfamiliarity with these concepts, participants in both countries clearly associated consumption practices with ethical considerations, thus showing a practical understanding of the issues surrounding ethical consumption.

We identify two broad types of discourses formations that can be grasped from the analysis of the different statements and opinions produced in the focus groups. On one level, Chilean and Brazilian respondents viewed ethical consumption in terms of ordinary consumption practices related to issues of health and well-being, responsibility, and care for resources at the everyday household scale. On a second level, ethical consumption and equivalent concepts were viewed by respondents in connection with a globalized concern with the impact of consumption on the environment and society.

### *Consumption and the everyday*

In their immediate responses to the topic of everyday consumption in the focus groups, participants often related ethical consumption with care and everyday reproductive family work. We identified at least two elements. First, a discursive formation that links ethical consumption with overconsumption and discussions of quality and, second, a discourse that related ethical consumption with health and food.

*Prudence and resisting overconsumption.* In Chile and Brazil, frequently the first spontaneous responses on the topic of ethical consumption related to prudence and responsibility in household consumption practices. Ethical consumption in this sense is construed in terms of caring for oneself and one’s family through prudent household management and choice of goods.

Regarding the links between consumption and responsible management of resources, in Chile, one argument involves being reflexive and cautious, not engaging in overconsumption and not spending money on non-essential goods. In their study on middle-class ethical



consumption in South Africa, McEwan et al. (2015) distinguish between frugality as a concern around reducing consumption and thrift as the “art of doing more with less,” stretching resources to maximize consumption. In our focus groups, we found evidence of both, but a particularly strong articulation of frugality, often discursively entwined with prudence and avoidance of debt.

Here, ethical consumption was linked to an argument at the household scale, about the ability of “sustaining” the family, making sure there is enough for the basic needs, especially among the less well-off. When asked to explain what “ethical consumption” meant for her, one woman explained:

Consumption that is basic sustenance, everyday consumption. The things we actually need to live on. Basic sustenance. But we need to recognize what the consumption we need will be: this pair of shoes- these we will need. The most important thing is that there is enough food. Not having lots of it, but making sure that these things are not missing.

Lower income, urban, elderly woman from Santiago, Chile

Ethical consumption was, in this sense, defined in terms of consuming what “is needed,” partly because resources are scarce and this becomes a necessary strategy, but also as an implicit critique and resistance to the centrality of consumption and a system which constantly encourages the consumption of unnecessary things.

In Brazil, the concepts of “ethical, responsible, sustainable, and conscious consumption” were also associated with environmental care, and prudence in the use of resources such as water and electricity. In the lower income respondents, these concepts were associated with frugality, not being too consumerist—resisting fashion obsession and peer pressure—which can lead to debt. Often participants associated sustainable consumption with a level of consumption at which the individual can “sustain” himself/herself and their relevant others.

[P1]: I have this sense that... I think people follow fashion too much... they end up buying, buying, buying and getting used to the impossible [level of consumption]... People have this shopping compulsion; for example, I have a friend who, to be accepted by a certain group at school, has to have a certain brand of watch.

[P2]: It is difficult.

Lower income, urban, young adult woman, Northeastern Brazil

Ethical consumption was thus understood by some participants as contrary to overconsumption and its harmful consequences, in line with Dauvergne’s (2008) reasoning.

*Health and food.* A second type of discourse formation linking ethical consumption with the scale of individual and household everyday life relates to issues regarding quality and health in consumption. This was particularly explicit through the connections between food quality, health, and ethical consumption.

In Brazil, for example, participant understandings of the terms “ethical responsible, conscious, and sustainable” consumption were closely related to consuming things that are safe and healthy, for themselves, their families, and the environment. It ranged from a holistic view on how to care for the environment and how its preservation would lead to a healthier, better “quality of life”—a view for example advocated by a middle class artist from Rio de Janeiro—but it also included views from those working close to the land, such as a low income organic producer from Rio who mentioned the impact of pesticides on water sources and the risk to the health of fellow citizens living nearby.

Another key aspect were considerations about the quality of food and its impacts on individual and family health. In our understanding, this is due the fact food takes an

important part of family purchases. In the majority of the focus groups, participants reported that women were responsible for family purchases, something which has been confirmed in other studies in Brazil and elsewhere (e.g. Barbosa, 2007; Miller, 2001).

In the case of Chile, respondents, particularly those who were in charge of family purchases (often women), associated food consumption with family health and being an “ethical consumer.” In contrast to the cases in Brazil where most evidence connecting food and ethical consumption was related to middle class respondents and associated with natural and organic food, in Chile issues about food and health were commonly raised in relation to general issues regarding healthy food—such as reduced-fat food- and alcohol consumption.

I consume things that are beneficial to me [and my body]. That’s how I see it. I am not going to consume things which will harm me. That’s responsible consumption. . .

Young, urban, lower income female, Santiago de Chile

A central element here was concern about ingredients and nutritional information on food as well as issues regarding pollution and food ingredients.

Compared with “ethical consumption” literature about the global North, we might identify some similarities as well as some striking differences. On the one hand, in both countries ethics and consumption were spontaneously linked to family care and household reproduction, which was regularly defined as a central space and scale for being ethical. This echoes observations about the global North (Miller, 1998). Further, obsessions with health food and one’s family is commonly reported in Northern countries, e.g. the United States, and has been used by some initiatives as the hook for ethical consumption discourses (see, for example, O’ROURKE, 2012). On the other hand, a focus on too much consumption is less commonly reported in the empirical data in global North research. In Chile and Brazil, it appears as a central concern of what is being construed as ethical.

### *National and global concerns regarding environmental and social awareness*

Speaking with a degree of necessary simplification, we can distinguish a second type of discourse on ethical consumption. This is based on more meta-level statements that identify the impact of consumption on the environment and global social problems. It is thus a type of discourse that is much more closely aligned with global North and NGO discourses on what ethical consumption means. Ethical consumption is mediated at this scale not so much by everyday life but relates to a more abstract spatial imagination of national and global scale consequences of consumption. Furthermore, in most of the cases of our research, this level of discourse appeared less spontaneously and often only after asking respondents to propose specific purchasing criteria they might consider which went beyond price and quality. Key aspects mentioned were environmental and social consequences of consumption.

*Consumption and the environment.* In several cases, respondents linked personal consumption practices with global concerns about environmental problems. These statements appear more strongly in middle-income groups and were often accompanied by a more clearly articulated discourse and critique of a global consumer culture. One key idea was a critique of “useless” consumption—that is buying what one does not need due to compulsion or because of being pressured by advertising. This was a variation on the moral disgust and concern about debt expressed at overconsumption in the everyday and

instead it emphasized the negative consequences of overconsumption for the planet's finite resources and human survival. A Chilean woman commented:

[C]: I think this question of responsible consumption is a counterpoint to the question of "accelerated" consumption [...]

[C]: You buy what you don't need, you think you need things that you don't need.

[T]: This form of exacerbated consumption impacts the environment.

[C]: What I am trying to say is that these concepts emerged as a counterpoint to a form of irresponsible consumption, without concerns, just following this compulsion that we have nowadays to buy, buy, and buy, even what we don't need, and to be using too much packaging without a thought for the rubbish it generates.

Middle income, urban adult participant, La Serena, Chile

In Chile, statements connecting consumption and the environment were more present among young college and university students, upper middle class professionals and activists (activists were only present in one specific focus group). Aspects mentioned included preserving resources for future generations, energy and water consumption, and a preference for products from environmentally responsible companies.

It is worth noting that concerns about environmental consequences of consumption were connected to more general discourses about ethical and sustainable consumption at the national and global scale. Discourses also explicitly related to media reporting of political events. One young Chilean man explained his commitment to ethical consumption as:

"It goes hand in hand [and] in accordance with what was stated in Rio [Earth Summit] in '92, sustainability is about trying to enjoy [resources] today and preserve them so that future generations can also enjoy them. It goes hand in hand with being sustainable in one's consumption [...]. Fundamentally, when I buy a product which implies clearing a forest that is not sustainable, because future generations won't be able to enjoy that forest, and apart from that they will have fewer resources to produce oxygen and this ceases to be sustainable, in terms of economics, quality of life and health.

Middle upper income, urban, male adults, Santiago del Chile

Buying natural and organic products for environmental reasons was also mentioned, but mostly by participants in the upper and middle income groups. However, we noted significant cynicism and distancing regarding the cost and availability of this type of consumption, mostly because of affordability and access difficulties, even among these more affluent groups. These concerns were expressed, for example, with regard to the purchase of organic goods.

H1: Of course, like with organic food, we can't all afford to buy tomatoes with no chemicals [in them], which do not have chemicals. They cost more. Buying such a product is not a top necessity for somebody from a lower class background, but sure, somebody with more money can buy it.

Young, upper middle income, urban, adult female, Santiago de Chile

With regard to Brazil, it is worth noting that, with the exception of the plastic bag campaign mentioned below, the consideration of the impact of consumption on the environment rarely came up spontaneously. It appeared unprompted only in the group of conscious consumers, organic producers, and artists. Across all the focus groups, only a few participants were concerned with the environmental costs of transport, the use of water in production processes, buying environmentally friendly cleaning products, and energy saving domestic

appliances. In most cases, environmental issues appear as related to the impact of overconsumption of natural resources.

C: It is linked to water, energy, turning off the tap when brushing your teeth. It reminds me of older people, probably in your parent's house it was like this. Our parents were conservationists. Preservationists—before that word existed. I remember my father going around the house turning off the lights.

[R]: This generation is the problem. They are extremely consumerists and are not conscious, unless we do our part—and the school too. The majority of them are selfish.  
Adult, middle income, adult females, South of Brazil

In both countries, many focus group participants identified generational differences in attitudes toward the use of resources. Older generations were frequently characterized as more frugal, whereas younger generations were seen as “spontaneous” consumers not led by prudence. It would be easy to dismiss these discourses as cross-generational stereotyping; however, some participants powerfully used their own biographies as a way to explain how they themselves changed to become more prudent consumers as they grew older, thus moving the observation to a more fluid understanding of age as a factor:

[M] I have other priorities now. You know when I was younger I was much more spontaneous, like “I like it, I want it, I've got money, I'll buy it,” but now I see other priorities. Urban, upper middle income, adult female, Santiago de Chile

In Brazil, there were also a great number of spontaneous mentions, across groups from different income backgrounds, of the environmental impact of the use of plastic bags. This was partly due to significant media attention on this issue on national and regional television, radio, and press.

[D]: If I go to the supermarket and [my shopping] is heavy they want to put it into two bags and [I say] put it into just one. You don't need another bag. It is more rubbish.  
Rural, lower income class adult male, South of Brazil

*Social impacts of consumption.* Overall environmental consequences of consumption became more readily visible in the discourses than its social consequences on communities and producers. Regarding the social impacts of consumption, the only aspects mentioned without prompting connected with consumption were the product origin and its impact on the national and local economy as well as the concern about labor conditions in the production of some goods.

Labor conditions in less economically developed countries are a common concern in Northern discourses of ethical consumption (Barrientos and Smith, 2007; Cook and Harrison, 2007). In Chile and Brazil, focus group participants, especially from lower income groups in both countries, did spontaneously mention the importance of prioritizing products sourced nationally. When asked about reasons for this preference, one of the reasons given for the preference to buy nationally were concerns about the social conditions (including sweatshop labor) in production facilities overseas (in China, in particular). In several Chilean focus groups, respondents suggested that Chilean products were better in quality than imported products (especially those from China) and that national production was an important source of jobs for Chilean workers. While some of this discourse may well have been motivated by social concerns for distant others, there clearly was also a general concern about jobs for Chileans in a globalized trading environment in an extremely liberalized and open national economy.

Many factories have closed down because there was not much [demand for Chilean shoes]. In Santiago they closed down when all the Chinese shoes came in.  
 Urban, lower middle income, adult female, La Serena, Chile

In Chile, the concern for producers and workers in other countries was mostly concentrated among upper middle income respondents, and was focused in particular among those respondents who had international experience, through travel or periods of studying or living abroad, of the Fair Trade movement and CSR practices.

Some of these discourses, however, were critiqued in terms of their impossibility to cause further changes within the global capitalist system due to the lack of real choice. Some respondents also spoke about the complexity of these issues and the fear that too much worrying about these issues would result in paralysis. As one respondent from Chile put it:

F: And what about you?

H1: My view is that no matter what, it's difficult to worry about everything, about each of these products, about each of these companies, because I believe all of these companies have some [labor] abuse going on and [eventually] you can't buy anything. Shoes from China, from those little children [child laborers] and this question, and we can't worry about all of that.  
 Young, urban, lower middle income male, Santiago de Chile

In Brazil, labor conditions were not mentioned at all in the definitions of sustainable, ethical, responsible, and conscious consumption the respondents offered, which shows that these terms may be used in Brazil with no reference to such issues. Nonetheless, when asked what social criteria they would use when buying a product, the issue of labor conditions emerged without prompting. In the most general sense, using one's buying power to support the national or regional economy was the only social criterion mentioned spontaneously in all the focus groups. This was linked to spatial imaginations of different scales from local, regional, national, and even international scales, and a sense of responsibility for the regional and national economy.

In some cases, it was rooted in a political stance against foreign corporations or countries—mentions of China were as common in Brazil as they had been in Chile. On the subject of origin, respondents consciously reported to have used their buying power to promote social change, both in terms of buying to support or boycotting a specific product. This was also linked to how respondents believed foreign imports affected the national industry and consequently the job market. Moreover, similar to Chilean respondents, Brazilian respondents doubted whether their individual buying decisions as consumers alone could make any difference.

All in all, this level of discourse on the environmental and social consequences of consumption often related to a more globalized space of connections and consequences of consumption. We noted in some groups what Massey (1994) would call a global sense of place—an understanding of how local practices affected lives elsewhere, but also how far off processes affected the local place. Consumers were aware that their purchases could affect the lives of workers in China or Chile, but had also felt the impact of Chinese business practices on their own families' livelihoods:

[L]: At home we fight against it. For example, at the beginning of the year I bought a school bag for my daughter. We looked everywhere, and found many [bags that were] "made in China" but carried on looking. I am not saying that I will never buy [something that is made in China] but we try to stay away from it because what China is doing is absurd.

[J]: It must have been difficult to find something that is not from China.

[C]: Everything is.

[L]: It affects us directly. My husband makes these bags and the price of the ones from China made with slave labor put him out of business, so this impacts directly on our daily life.

Middle Income, urban, adult female, South of Brazil

Interestingly, here a respondent with middle income is actually married to a producer (the bag-maker) and has seen the impact of fellow Brazilian' consumption decisions to buy the cheapest bags on her own family's livelihoods.

Furthermore, a central element to note is the strong spatial imagination of the national scale impact of consumption, particularly in terms of labor conditions. This differs from traditional Northern societies' discourses of ethical consumption, which are linked to the imagination of a distant other, the producer, in other, poorer countries, particularly in Fair Trade.

## Final discussion

### *Examining ethical consumption from the global South: Exploring continuities and differences beyond the deficit discourse*

The discourses presented provide an understanding of how ethical consumption is construed in Chile and Brazil. By describing the statements on ethical consumption, we were able to identify broadly two types of discourses. On the one hand, in both countries, ethical consumption is interpreted in relation to everyday practices of household reproduction. This is in alignment with Miller's arguments about the imbrication between all forms of consumption and morality (2001). These discourses show that, for most respondents, it is very difficult to draw a line between taking care of themselves and their families and the ethics of buying and indeed not buying. Compared with Northern countries' discourses, this general concern with the morality of frugality, prudence, and consumption were much more prevalent than a discourse focused on specific types of products or ethical labels, which is familiar from global North ethical consumption discussions.

On the other hand, we have identified a second type of discourse more in line with global discourses on ethical consumption, particularly related to global campaigning. Here ethical consumption is also construed in terms of global environmental effects as well as labor conditions in production chains, especially in China. In line with the work of Barnett et al. (2010), we have described here how much these discourses are related to global discourses produced and circulated by NGOs and institutional actors concerned with consumption. This second level is thus related to respondents' access to global public discourses on environmental issues and the costs of global capitalism. Being linked to these global discourses frequently coincided with respondents' having been to university and particularly having spent time abroad, opportunities which increasing numbers of Chileans and Brazilians now have access to. From this perspective, the prospect of an expansion in the market in Chile and Brazil for products marketed as "ethical" or "sustainable" looks particularly promising. However, it is worth remembering, guided by our Chilean focus group results, that buying such products constitutes only a limited sub-set of ethical consumption practices. Given that "buying ethical/green products" has been proven in the global North as one of the aspects of ethical consumption that is most compatible with corporate growth plans and palatable for consumers, it is not surprising that this aspect is set to become increasingly popular in Chile and Brazil.



Against this backdrop, we might point to two further aspects by way of conclusion. First, a central element is that differences are not necessarily the most marked between countries in the so-called global North and the ones we described in Chile and Brazil. In fact, it can be noted that many of the identified discourses are quite close to familiar Northern discourses (such as the concern for food safety and family health or the discourses that connect ethical consumption with global environmental problems). It is thus not possible or sensible to draw a neat line between, for example, Latin American discourses and European ones. This is evident at different levels. First, empirical material presented here supports well-established Northern accounts of everyday consumption as a central space of moral obligations and ethical decisions (Miller, 2001). Both our material and the existing literature on Northern ethical consumption identify a similar primary geography of responsibility and care as described (and critiqued) by Massey (1994) as a powerful popular assumption of a “Russian doll geography,” where it is somehow natural and legitimate to have as one’s central concern the concern about loved ones (one’s “nearest and dearest” as the English phrase goes) and an increasing but somewhat secondary interest for distant others. Second, apart from this proximate producer phenomenon, there is, in our data, also evidence of people expressing versions of Massey’s own vision of an alternative “global sense of place,” recognizing the linkages (often characterized by uneven power relations) and co-constitutedness of places (Massey, 1994, 2005). At the same time, in line with the work of Barnett et al. (2010), we found that ethical consumption discourses that were focused on global environmental problems or global justice were strongly related with people’s involvement in public discourses and available campaigning and media reporting on ethical consumption.

However, there are some important nuances and differences that can be noted between the discourses described here and those commonly portrayed in Northern ethical consumption literature. One particularly relevant element is the striking relevance of the ordinary ethics of consumption. In most cases, respondents associate ethics and consumption with everyday life household reproduction practices rather than with global issues. While this is in line with Northern literature, it can be noted that in Brazil and Chile we found a clear difference in emphasis, for example, an understanding of ethical consumption as prudent management of the household budget and the avoidance of debt—aspects commonly mentioned in both countries (but not so common in Northern ethical consumption literature). Against this backdrop, looking at our material, we think that it is necessary to further problematize definitions of ethical consumption by exploring more in-depth people’s own notions of consumption and morality, from within the culturally specific normative frameworks of each specific non-Northern context.

Another difference between our findings and Northern literature is that everyday discourses of ethics and consumption appeared to be quite disconnected from the more global and standard narrative that links consumption to social and environmental problems. In fact, from our material, we noted that global discourses on ethical consumption were taken up and mobilized more by a certain type of respondent, e.g. middle class university students in Chile who had spent semesters abroad or upper class professionals who frequently take business trips around the world.

In sum, more than radical differences in ethical consumption discourses between the global North and the global South we noted *among* our Chilean and Brazilian respondents different emphases and different levels of engagement with global discourses on ethical consumption.

Future research, including our own, cannot be content with focusing on mapping differences between discourses from countries in the global North and South (maybe

assuming that discourses somehow stop at national borders) but must further explore these intra-national differences, not just through country comparisons, but through a twofold task. First, problematizing the concept of ethical consumption by taking time to examine the line of argument people present regarding the everyday links between consumption and morality. This will allow for a more nuanced co-constructed definition of morality. In doing so, we also need to recognize the need to resist the narrowing down of ethical consumption to “buying more ethically.” Second, there is a great need to conduct a more fine-grained analysis of how different levels of discourses on ethics and consumption relate not just to the local, national, or transnational scale, but are related to issues of class, education, age, and the production of urban/rural boundaries. Access to discourses, including the transnational tropes of the ethical consumption discourse, varies across the different lived realities of people in each of the multiple global Souths, including the varied lived realities within Chile and Brazil.

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1. This research is based on work undertaken by the Choices Project, funded by UK ESRC and DFID, which allowed our team of researchers from universities in the United Kingdom, Chile, and Brazil, and representatives from NGOs from each country to work together.
2. For example, according to a new report from the World Bank Ferreira FHG, Messina J, Rigolini J, et al. (2013) *Economic Mobility and the Rise of the Latin American Middle Class*. Washington, DC: The World Bank. At least 40 percent of the region’s households are estimated to have moved upward in “socio- economic class” between 1995 and 2010.
3. The fairtrade movement in Latin America has been also explored in other countries. See, for example, the work of Nelson et al. Growing a local organic movement: The Mexican Network of Organic Markets. *Leisa Magazine* 24.1 (2008): 24–27.
4. For more on this, please see our previous article: Ariztia et al., 2013.

5. In Brazil, we aimed for some regional coverage and ran focus groups in northeast, center-west, south, and southeast regions. We conducted more groups in urban areas (12) where 74% of the Brazilian population is concentrated (IBGE, 2010). As for Chile, nine focus groups took place in Santiago, the largest city in Chile, as well as in La Serena, in the north, and Concepción, in the south. While the majority of participants did not have a previous special relationship with ethical consumption, we also added a group with representatives from NGOs and small businesses based in Santiago that had a close relationship with ethical consumption.
6. This concept is widely used in Brazil. It refers broadly to consumers including in their purchasing decisions, ethical commitment, regarding social and environmental impacts of their choices.

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