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REVISED Ethical consumption: why should we understand it as a social practice within a multilevel framework?

[version 2; peer review: 2 approved]

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Abstract

This article discusses the importance of a multilevel and intertwined understanding of ethical consumption given its conjunction with other social practices. Although the literature on ethical consumption is vast, the role of sociotechnical regimes including technological and cultural elements, infrastructure, market and regulation has been mainly overlooked in this literature. This may be so because ethical consumption practices that refer to other-oriented consumption practices are mainly considered in the view of the motivations and preferences of individual consumers. Due to the insufficiency of individualistic approaches in explaining stimulators and inhibitors of ethical consumption, there might be “various constraints” and “competing demands” in society which limit the formation of "ethical consumption". Therefore, to avoid an oversimplified view of ethical consumption, this paper contributes with a theoretical discussion on combining social practice theory (SPT) with a multi-level perspective (MLP). Although the SPT is a very well-structured framework in consumption studies, the necessity of a combined approach concerns the often-insufficient attention paid to structural prerequisites of various consumption forms in social practice theories. By understanding ethical consumption practices according to a multi-level framework, the paper emphasizes the importance of structural factors at macro- and mesolevels. It also contributes attention to how ethical consumption grows due to dialectical processes between levels, showing that niche practices can simultaneously challenge and rely on existing regimes.

Keywords

Ethical consumption practices, social practice theory, multilevel perspective, combination approach.

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REVISED **Amendments from Version 1**

We would like to appreciate the constructive comments and suggestions that we received from reviewers. As a response to reviewers' comments, this second version provides more clarifications on the following key issues raised by the reviewers: first we have developed more concise arguments explaining why the multilevel perspective can enhance the understanding of the formation of ethical consumption; second, we explain the difference between flat and vertical ontology; and lastly, we have included some suggestions for future research.

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

1. Introduction

Studying consumption as a social phenomenon that represents the fabric of society has opened a broad research space for social practice theory (SPT) in consumption studies in the recent decades. It is well recognized in SPT studies that we ought to lift the sight from the individual as a unit of analysis towards that of social practices in the socio-material surrounding. We agree with this but find that social structure and culture on 'higher' levels still often get insufficient attention. In line with this, several scholars have suggested combining the SPT and multi-level perspective (MLP) to advance the understanding of sustainability in general[1] (el Bilali, 2019; Hargreaves *et al.*, 2013; Hinrichs, 2014; Keller *et al.*, 2022; Laakso *et al.*, 2021; McMeekin & Southerton, 2012; Spaargaren *et al.*, 2012; Watson, 2012; Welch & Warde, 2015). In one recent systematic review, Keller *et al.* (2022) point out that the main empirical focuses of such a combined analytical framework to date had included practices in niche innovations, energy, food and agriculture, mobility, water and housing. This method of understanding can be extended to the study of ethical consumption, which is a partly overlapping phenomenon. Ethical consumption[2] refers to a set of consumption practices that are shaped by societal and environmental concerns related to green issues, workers' rights and conditions, child labour, unfair trade, resource degradation, irresponsible marketing, animal testing, and oppressive regimes (Berki-Kiss & Menrad, 2022; Carrigan *et al.*, 2004; Carrington *et al.*, 2010; de Pelsmacker *et al.*, 2005; Freestone & McGoldrick, 2008; Huddart Kennedy *et al.*, 2019; Wooliscroft *et al.*, 2014). However, it remains contested how the representations of the phenomenon are formed and actualized in different societies and among different people. A great bulk of the literature on ethical consumption, particularly such inspired by marketing and psychological models, has tended to investigate the impacts of individual factors such as values, preferences and motives (de Pelsmacker *et al.*, 2005; Freestone & McGoldrick, 2008; Shove, 2010; and Zaikauskaitė *et al.*, 2022). For example, in a recent study, Berki-Kiss & Menrad (2022), suggest that consumer knowledge, attitude and emotions are significant factors to push consumers to purchase agricultural non-food (fairtrade cut roses) ethical products (Berki-Kiss & Menrad, 2022). Likewise, through investigating research models on consumption behaviour, Carrington *et al.* (2010) indicate that ethical purchasing intentions are mainly driven by factors such as personal values, moral norms, mental processes and internal ethics (Carrington *et al.*, 2010). Can we claim that these factors are merely individual factors? Can we see consumers as autonomous and independent actors in social structures? However, the remarkable "intention-behaviour gap" among ethical consumers' (Belk *et al.*, 2005; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Zaikauskaitė *et al.*, 2022) indicates there might be "various constraints" in society and "competing demands" to hamper consumers from acting ethically (Carrington *et al.*, 2010). In order to avoid oversimplifying consumer behaviour to linear psychological models (Bagozzi, 2000) (like the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB); and Value-Belief-Norm (VBN)), it is important to understand ethical consumption as a context-dependent phenomenon (Zaikauskaitė *et al.*, 2022) that is influenced by social structures, technical infrastructures, available knowledge, culture, public policies and social norms (see e.g. Boström *et al.*, 2019; Hysing, 2019; Wahlen & Dubuisson-Quellier, 2018). People, government, and businesses are, according to Stolle & Micheletti (2013), the pillars of social change through consumption practices, whereas de Moor & Balsiger (2019) highlight the role of social movement organizations for initiating forms of consumption such as ethical consumption. Thus, we suggest placing ethical consumption at the intersection of two analytical frameworks, social practice theory and the multilevel perspective for two reasons: first to take into consideration a set of interrelated elements in different levels (micro, meso and micro) influencing ethically oriented consumption practices; and second to generate deepened understanding of the phenomenon. This is an attempt to uncover why for example, ethical consumption appears more institutionalized, broad-spread and easily available in some societies like north-western European countries (de Moor & Balsiger, 2019) but not in others[3].

Social practice theory is a theoretical upgrade in consumption studies that would be useful in the study of ethical consumption and in filling gaps in the scholarship. This theory introduces a proper framework for consumption studies by making interconnections between the roles of material, meaning and competencies in the creation of practices (Gram-Hanssen, 2021). It argues that people's actions are influenced by their socio-material context, what they understand and receive from their environment, as well as their obligation toward others (Heisserer & Rau, 2017; Rinkinen *et al.*, 2020). Although by emphasizing mainly everyday life, the SPT has opened a broad theoretical area to consumption studies, key analytical critiques concern its insufficient attention paid to macro- or structural pre-requisite of various consumption forms (Keller *et al.*, 2022; Greene, 2018; Welch, 2020), and "supply side dynamics (like firms, innovation systems, technical capabilities" (Geels *et al.*, 2015: p. 10). Also, the power issue and role of macro-scale social

[1] About similarities and differences between the SPT and MLP and the advantages of co-employing them in consumption-related topics see Keller *et al.* (2022)

[2] similar concept is political consumption. See The Oxford Handbook of Political Consumerism Edited by Boström *et al.* (2019).

[3] It doesn't mean that we overlook the possibility of the creation of different versions of ethical consumption worldwide.

inequalities in the formation of daily routines are almost absent in its endeavours to theorize consumption practices (Geels *et al*., 2015; van Kesteren & Evans, 2020). A greater theoretical lens that gives a broader picture of the formation of ethical consumption will enrich our sociological understanding of the systemic and structural factors that delimit ethical consumption agency or (re)define it according to the specific sociotechnical context. It also helps to shed light on the phenomenon from different angles. The need is even more urgent if we want to address, for instance, firstly the very different conditions for ethical consumption practices in different geographical contexts, and secondly, newly established forms of consumption practices that are mainly associated with the structural attributes of the society in question. Therefore, understanding ethical consumption as practices that come about in multi-level frameworks, this paper provides a deeper conceptual insight into the social (im)possibilities of the formation of ethical consumption. It also contributes attention to how ethical consumption grows due to dialectical processes between levels, which also helps to avoid the tendency of overly individualized perspectives on ethical consumption.

The next section, by introducing the SPT and MLP, briefly discusses some late conceptual developments aiming to broaden the analytical power of SPT; the insufficiency of such development if not a broader analytical lens such as MLP framework is included; and how the SPT and MLP can mutually enrich a developed analytical perspective regarding ethical consumption. Section three provides examples of ethical consumption in different sociotechnical regimes across the world. Section four discusses the configuration of ethical consumption within social regimes and also the dialectics between the levels in forming ethical consumption practices. This section is followed by the conclusion and suggestions for future research avenues.

2. SPT and MLP: a combined perspective to explain the routinization and upscaling process of newly emerged consumption practices

By following insights gained from MLP (Geels, 2002) and recent scholarship, ethical consumption can be considered as a complex multilevel phenomenon "which involves more than an individual's behaviour and practices" (Boström *et al*., 2019: p. 4). Applying a multi-level analysis frame is a way to understand how practices are formed within a pre-given set of heterogeneous elements such as norms, conventions, infrastructures, knowledge, technology and other structural conditions like systems of provision associated with consumption practices in different levels of society. Despite the possible conflicts and tensions, practices evolve due to interdependencies and interconnections among these elements (Boström *et al*., 2019) and are reflected in social practices like consumption.

To understand social practices as a combination of elements, a useful and much-cited framework in consumption studies is the one suggested by Shove *et al.* (2012). They argue that a specific practice occurs through specific connections between three components: 1) materials and technology (artefacts, infrastructures, and hardware); 2) meanings (images, understandings, feelings, mental activities, emotions and motivational knowledge); and 3) competencies and skills (background knowledge, know-how, general understanding) (Shove *et al*., 2012). According to this, in the context of ethical consumption, the alignment of the meaning of ethical consumption (a culture of caring for the environment, community and society; that is, caring attitudes), competencies (how to do and develop this protection) and material (infrastructures and technologies that make this opportunity available for people, including market products) navigate this practice. Co-evolution between meaning, material and competencies may lead to a transition in (or transformation of) practices. In the absence of one of these elements, the ethical consumption practice would not be able to attract broader groups of practitioners in society. In other words, an external intervention to bring in new technology (material) or spread new knowledge and education (competence), along with supporting communities of practitioners that try to change conventions and norms (meanings) through niche innovations, may lead to a social shift that eventually is followed up by practice change. In comparison to previous research, social practice theory has undergone gradual conceptual developments to address neglected aspects such as culture, ethics of care, motivations and affectivity to understand the formation of practice (e.g. Gram-Hanssen, 2021; Welch, 2020). For example, Gram-Hanssen argues that variation in consumer practices and the way that 'ethics takes part in changing practices' can contribute to further developing theories of practice (2021: 1). She suggests that socioeconomic and demographic factors such as gender, life course and class must be considered in understanding the elements of practice theories, i.e., material possessions, competency and meaning. She also brings attention to the variety of "general understanding" of ethics among different people and in different fields like food, mobility, housing, or waste. A general understanding can operate on both discursive and more tacit (pre-reflexive) levels of knowing. In the case of ethics and consumption, such understanding may involve both more explicit ethical codes/principles (as "taking care of") and appear in more mundane situations in everyday life (as "caring for"). Ethics in consumer practices can be seen as a general understanding of "threading through many different practices, depending on the specific context and situation" (Gram-Hanssen, 2021: 13). Similarly, by introducing the concept of 'teleoaffective formation', Welch (2020) offers a configurational concept within the SPT to understand (sustainable) consumption practices in a nexus composed of general understandings of material, economic and aesthetic relationships. And Evans contributes insights into how various material semiotic approaches can link consumer practices to wider economic processes around commodification, production, distribution, and exchange (Evans, 2020). All these insights are welcome development within or close to SPT that help to pay analytic attention to more overarching social phenomena in the area of ethical consumption. Nonetheless, the MLP could progress further as it is not constrained by the 'flat ontology' of the SPT and address attention to a further span of factors like that of specific sociotechnical regimes of society. To better cover these too often neglected aspects in the study of ethical consumption, we believe we can better understand the function and interconnectivity of different factors in shaping interlocked practices such as ethical consumption through a multilevel framework. A key problem of combining the two approaches is

that SPT is said to be based on a flat ontology whereas MLP relies on a vertical ontology (see Keller *et al.*, 2022). Our argument as regards ontological assumptions is more in line with the latter, but we do not think this would invalidate the core insights from SPT. Rather, as emphasized by Keller *et al.* (2002), there are many ways these can be fruitfully combined (e.g. zooming out and zooming out, combining horizontal and vertical analysis; interactions/intersections among regimes/practices).

According to Geels (2002), the MLP provides a multi-layer analysis that sees sustainable practices as the result of the dialectic interaction between three levels of the micro (niche), meso (sociotechnical regimes), and macro (landscape). In this framework, the micro level refers to the spaces where innovative activities led by niches take place on small scales. The meso level, consisting of regimes, refers to the existing sociotechnical systems including the network of actors and social groups, rules and related technical and material elements. Finally, the macro level or landscape includes a set of external heterogeneous events and trends such as cultural changes, macroeconomic trends, wars and crises, pandemics like COVID-19, climate change, *etc*. The MLP locates technological and organizational innovations at the center of its analysis and argues that broader sociotechnical, economic and political contexts create more or less favourable circumstances for such innovation (McMeekin & Southerton, 2012). In this perspective, regimes are home to incremental innovations whereas radical innovations are generated in niches. However, change of dominant practices rarely happens without a level of co-evolution of all three levels.

To have a better insight into the gains of applying a combined framework of the social practice theories and the MLP in understanding ethical consumption, in the following paragraph, according to deficiencies of each theory, we shortly discuss why such a combined framework may be a constructive approach to understand how ethical consumption can be developed among broader group of audiences. This heuristic combination also targets critical factors that SPT and MLP lack in their explanations regarding consumption-related practices. Even though practice theorists do speak of how practices are embedded in socio-material arrangements in society, there is arguably insufficient attention paid on larger scales. Welch & Warde (2015; 12–13) raise several criticisms of the SPT, one of those criticisms is particularly the focus of this study: social practice theories fail in relating the *"minutiae of everyday performances of practices and the macro-institutional context*". Considering niche dynamics as fluid novelties that are created at the micro-level and which might be obstructed by incumbent regimes (Keller *et al.*, 2022), we argue that more attention needs to pay on how dispersed practices are able to expand to a wider range through supportive mechanisms at the meso-level (*i.e*. civic groups, environmental groups) and moreover shape and reshape the macro-level setting (while at the same time being shaped by macro-level factors). Furthermore, by locating ethical consumption practices in the social context and considering their interconnectivity to other practices (*e.g*. food practices, cleaning practices, commuting, *etc*.), we argue there is a need to take into consideration different forms and perceptions of the phenomenon that are created in accordance with the specific contextual situations (geography, sector-wise). Broad contextual factors include material and technological development (Heisserer & Rau, 2017; Warde, 2014), economy including production (Evans, 2020), the system of provision (Fine & Bayliss, 2022) and political democratic culture and discourse (Gundelach, 2020; Portilho & Micheletti, 2019). The advantage of the combination of the MLP and SPT in this context is to theorize in a deeper sense the structural conditions in terms of market, suppliers and producers' networks, policies, technology, science and knowledge (MLP), and bring further attention to cultural features such as the importance of meaning and competencies embedded in the immediate social and physical context (SPT).

While the SPT pays insufficient attention to macro-institutional elements, the MLP could be criticized for over-emphasizing them by prioritizing the role of sociotechnical regimes. A critique of the MLP is that it appears to propose a technical-based, mechanistic and over-determined view (Geels *et al.*, 2015; Hinrichs, 2014). However, we argue it is important with a perspective that recognizes that inertia is built into the system, and where nested regimes are stabilized and rarely undergo transformation. Yet, change is not deemed impossible, but we need to be more aware that moving towards sustainable/ethical consumption requires, in addition to technological changes, changes in consumer practices, cultural meanings, infrastructures, and economic practices as well (Geels, 2019). "[T]echnology of itself, has no power, does nothing" (Geels, 2002: 1257) and therefore the significance of human agency and organizational structure in moving towards societal transformation must be considered.

3. Ethical consumption in different contexts

By broadly viewing ethical consumption in different contexts, it becomes even clearer how both 'landscape' and 'sociotechnical regimes' shape conditions for (the organizing of) ethical consumption practices. It is mainly emphasized that ethical consumers "talk" through their consumption choices (read power) to buy or refrain from purchasing goods or services which do or do not meet their ethical criteria when it comes to social and/or environmental standards (de Pelsmacker *et al*., 2005). Although following this argument looks plausible in "open market" in "democratic" countries it is unclear whether this seemingly simple definition is feasible in every socio-political and/or sociotechnical regime.

Figures of ethical consumption in the western contexts reveal that the extent of ethical/political consumption in comparison to both non-Western Europe and non-European contexts is very high (de Moor & Balsiger, 2019; Koos, 2012). In addition to the explanations raised by the TPB (Ajzen, 1991) and the VBN (Stern, 2000) that generally represent the significance of individual factors (*i.e.* consumers' values, attitudes, subjective norms and knowledge), other plausible explanations, from sociological perspectives, relate to the relatively high level of welfare in the region along with the emergence of post-material values. Moreover, well-educated populations and free access to means

of communication are two effective factors according to Boström *et al*. (2019). This finding is in line with the Jacobsen & Dulsrud (2007) report that ethical consumption emerges in a more liberal world economy where new consumption forms are supported by non-governmental organizations, promote sovereign consumers' ideas and provide alternative products and businesses (Jacobsen & Dulsrud, 2007). Contrary to the nature of the phenomenon – which supposedly is to target governmental inefficiency pertaining pro-social and pro-environmental actions - interventions by both governmental and non-governmental actors play supportive role in the expansion of ethical consumption practices in the north-western countries. Examples include eco-labaling (Boström & Klintman, 2011; Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013), how ethical criteria is incorporated in public procurement schemes (Boström & Karlsson, 2013) and the encouragement to engage companies in "ethical competition" (de Moor & Balsiger, 2019; 447). Erik Hysing (2019) demonstrates a range of different ways in how governments have shaped the institutional context, provided incentives, legitimized, and in other ways facilitated and integrated – and they can obviously also counteract – ethical (political) consumerism. Nevertheless, the west is not the exclusive home of ethical consumption. Comparative studies reveal the importance of historical and geographical factors in the formation of various ethical consumption patterns among different populations (see Boström *et al*., 2019).

There are some studies uncovering different interpretations of ethical consumption in different geographies. Principles like justice, fairness, environmental protection, social solidarity and sustainability more broadly can appear in different ways and shapes. Hence, ethical consumption is a phenomenon that can be formed, realized, interpreted and demonstrated differently thanks to time, place, and circumstances. For example, in Africa, political/ethical consumption has been a response to the corrupted social and political system while in the MENA[4] region, consumption practices are greatly influenced by rapid economic transition, social development, democratic uprising, wars, political violence and religious contradictions (Oosterveer *et al*., 2019). Moreover, Hughes *et al.* (2015) brought up that in the context of Africa, "localized expression of ethical consumption" is essential in transformations on the supply-side (Hughes *et al*., 2015). Oosterveer *et al*. (2019) yet highlight the significance of the insufficient (social) base to explain the absence of ethical/political consumption in African and MENA countries. As regards Latin America, Portilho & Micheletti (2019) discussed the role of social movement struggles to push for a stronger state to regulate the market and revealed the significance of public policies and state regulation in promoting sustainable products and ethical consumption (Portilho & Micheletti, 2019). In Thailand, there has been rapid industrialization, which has provided opportunities for social movements to encourage Thai consumers to influence consumption-related policymaking and participate in discussions, for instance via social media, about changed social practices (Kantamaturapoj *et al*., 2019). In China (Lei *et al.*, 2019) argue that political/ethical consumption has its own characteristics and "consumer choices remain very much structured by governmental measures" (Lei *et al*., 2019: 599). Research indicates in social systems that provide a limited assortment of ethically framed goods and services the creation of such phenomena requires more creative and individualized initiatives (de Moor & Balsiger, 2019; Koos, 2012). Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is also a key factor in the promotion of ethical consumption (Sudbury-Riley & Kohlbacher, 2016) due to its positive role in encouraging producers to produce under ethical standards (even though sometimes targeted for greenwashing and watered-down ethical standards) and facilitating choice infrastructures for consumers. However, the main focus here is associated with more infrastructural supply-side factors. In a social structure with transparent regulations and laws regarding the social responsibilities of cooperation, producers are obliged to reflect the interests of stakeholders like employees, investors and the environment in their actions and policies and it directs, in turn, consumers to ethical decisions (Adams & Zutshi, 2004). Whereby corporations' policy to maximise their interest *via* CSR facilitates ethical decisions among consumers. From a multi-level perspective, in the lack of an efficient regulatory regime as well as technical and cultural support, CSR will prove insufficient to meet ethical consumers' demands from the market.

Based on the knowledge of ethical consumption scholarship obtained from different social contexts, it becomes clear that ethical consumption must be considered as an intertwined phenomenon with sociotechnical regimes that shape market structures, laws and regulations, infrastructure and materials as well as culture and norms. Markets, governance structure and the settings of everyday life frame consumers' decisions and practices (Jacobsen & Dulsrud, 2007). Therefore, niche novelties regarding ethical consumption are created in and influenced by the given situation (*i.e*., available knowledge, systems of provision, alternative markets and democratic governances). Therefore, studying ethical consumption practices in the light of the multilevel perspective brings attention to how everyday practices are formed and changed within particular sociotechnical regimes. It should also be kept in mind that due to the niche's capacity to fuel changes, any corporation or conflict between the elements of the micro and meso level can act as an assistance or obstacle to expanding niche novelties to more routinized and integrated practices.

4. Configuration of ethical consumption within multi-level interactions

When it comes to ethical consumption, niche innovations are often recognized as resistance to mainstream consumption and markets. Examples include asking for fair-waged, organic, and cruelty-free cosmetic and clothing products (buycotting), creating household initiatives to produce less waste or consume less energy, supporting local agriculture and products, and refusing from buying products or services with unfair work conditions or problematic production and distributing processes (boycotting). Some of these initiatives have become mainstream in some western societies, but appear radical, confrontative and/or illegal in several other contexts. Furthermore, decreasing the volumes of consumption, using second-hand stuff, and trying

[4] Middle East and North Africa

to challenge public attitudes by criticizing excessive consumerist lifestyles or encouraging other people to support eco-friendly and/or socio-friendly products (discursive ethical consumption) are other examples of mainly niche ethical consumption performances. These niche efforts are linked with efforts to, in the long run, reconfigure existing regimes (Hargreaves *et al*., 2013). This indicates that the embodiment of ethical initiatives in everyday life is conducted in sets of interdependencies within the different systems of provision, regimes and practices like eating, commuting, and cleaning. The concepts of zooming in and zooming out (Keller *et al*., 2022; Nicolini, 2009) can be related to each other as a tool to understand ethical consumption in the cross edge of regimes and embedded practices. While zooming in refers to deeper attention on mundane everyday practices, zooming out by adopting the bird's eye could entail observing how 'practices connect with each other' (Keller *et al.*, 2022: 20) and on how sociotechnical regimes may integrate/separate different practices.

Niche practices, like various trends in ethical consumption, reflect perceived deficiencies in regimes and landscapes. Nevertheless, they are configured and developed within existing regimes' capacities. Greene indicates that "a complex web of contextual processes including technological change, economic transitions and planning policies" are significant factors in the formation of consumption practices (Greene, 2018: 1). Therefore, one question that should be considered seriously relates to how socio-technical regimes constrain and fashion the development of ethical consumption practices. We argue that the formation of collective ethical consumption practices is contingent upon various determinants in sociotechnical regimes (e.i., policy, infrastructures, cultural meanings and conventions, markets, knowledge systems and (semi-) dominant discourse). Thus, ethical consumption practices can be deconstructed into their components by zooming in to better understand how these components are influenced, shaped, and reshaped by different regimes' components (zooming out). Perceiving ethical consumption practices such as supporting fairtrade or fair paid products, waste segregation, collaborative consumption, ethical lifestyle, *etc*. as autonomous and independent novelties which are led only by individuals' decisions and preferences misleads us in understanding the whole story of ethical consumption subject. Oosterveer *et al*. (2019: 135) indicate that "ethical consumption goes beyond individualistic choices" and relates to sociotechnical systems. This means that although niche innovations germinate separately among detached actors they are still being created inside the social setting and a level of regime support is necessary for their upscaling. For example, a regime may support a niche activity such as a boycott campaign either by providing space for democratic expression and media space for its promotion or by declaring new regulations and policies regarding the production processes that niche actors can rely on[5]. Furthermore, social movement campaigns can take advantage of the social and democratic space and support that is given to their claims and objectives (Forno, 2019). All societies do not provide such opportunities for niches to pursue their novel objective on a bigger scale, but this knowledge is too often taken for granted in theorizing about the opportunities for niche practices to grow. Therefore, we need to be aware that although ethical consumption practices try to make changes in the existing regimes, they are at the same time created within the given opportunities in the same regimes, receiving support and targeting the very same system.

Nevertheless, sociotechnical regimes might have two edges: supportive or deterrent or a mix of both. In this vein, many niche dynamics have been oppressed or marginalized in many social regimes to date or at least had a very small chance to scale up. For example, Marsden (2013) points out some food niche initiatives that are marginalized in the nested food governance regimes and proposes the necessity of policy spaces to facilitate niche paths through multilevel regulations. Similarly, van Kesteren & Evans (2020) argue how socio-economic inequalities through delimiting the capacity of practitioners affect cooking practice in terms of competencies, materials and meaning. Therefore, structural conditions in terms of top-down governance, upstream policies, institutions, actor networks, capabilities and resources should be considered as enablers and constrainers in forming niche initiatives (Boström, 2020; Slingerland & Schut, 2014). On the level of sociotechnical regimes, their role to develop ethical consumption on a large scale relates largely to existing structures/relations of power. This regards resource distribution, opportunities to pose new regulations, controlling markets, financial flows and international trade relations, investment in new technologies and materials, controlling media and making room for public debate, and providing public education. All these factors can prevent or enable the normalizing of novel ethical consumption practices.

When it comes to the creation and spread of ethical consumption initiatives, regimes and niches are not the only underlying elements. Geels argues that niche innovations will not spread widely unless external landscape developments create pressures on the regime, destabilize it, and then create space for novelties (Geels, 2005). Therefore, a synergetic mode between macro factors and micro initiatives facilitates the deconstruction of the nested regimes and the construction of new ones. For instance, a landscape change as the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted many conventional practices, has been seen to provide a window of opportunity for more "mindful consumption", in which issues of health and environmental protection are considered more among broad segments of consumers and less demand for transportation due to the possibilities of a more homebound life (Boström, 2021; Echegaray *et al*., 2021). However, landscape-level factors can appear as obstacles as well. For example, poverty in all its forms doesn't allow deprived people to (re)form their consumption practices aligned to the routinized consumption practices or niche novelties. A number of studies moreover indicate that "privileged groups" in terms of higher-income levels and more education are more likely to

[5] Similar to what happened against the Apartheid regime in South Africa, there are also examples of international boycott campaigns that have mobilized people through market-based strategies to act against oppressive regimes (for more examples see Boström *et al*., 2019).

be ethical/political consumers (*e.g.* Salonen, 2021).The above discussion shows there is a dialectical process between the levels. That is, to normalize a new practice both niches and regimes need each other, facilitated by broad landscape movements in the early stage, knowledge and information that consumers obtain from formal or informal learning environments are critical to developing niche ethical consumption practices. The perceived meaning of ethical consumption among niches, the skills and competencies that they obtain being an ethical consumer and the materials that are given to equip them in doing ethical consumption practices, are all generated in part through the sociotechnical regimes that surround them as well as by overarching landscape change such as digitalization, democratization and the like. At the same time, gradual or rapid changes in consumption patterns could trigger different forms of reforms within existing regimes to meet those changes. For instance, protein shift[6], which has increased in popularity recently, either because of ethical concerns (animal welfare) or health issues, could bring changes in sociotechnical regimes to synch policy, regulations, market and norms with this new trend. While such dynamics implicates the interdependencies of ethical consumption practices on one another, it also indicates how they can be embedded in particular sociotechnical regimes (Keller *et al.*, 2022), including how they are benefited from specific policies. For example, Wahlen & Dubuisson-Quellier (2018: 8) discuss policy instruments that promote consumer awareness through education and information, while at the same time arguing that policy measures should address a collective dimension of sustainability practices, for instance informed by SPT. Geels *et al.* (2015) argue that dispersed niche practices are less likely to be developed to the broader scale of meso-level unless taking advantage of broad learning processes and social network building (Geels *et al.*, 2015). In a social structure that through different ways (i.e., media debates, civil society organizations, alternative markets and labaling) make consumers becoming aware and informed regarding consumption-related issues, practitioners are more likely to broadly engage in ethical consumption and have better know-how skills to implement it. This reading also challenges the psychological and marketing approaches that advocate consumer sovereignty to make wide-range changes in unsustainable consumption cultures. Such processes can be referred to as a sort of teleoaffective understanding that makes ethical consumption meaningful. Teleoaffective understanding integrates practices through goals and the meanings that practitioners perceive and carry out. It means that through practical intelligibility, practitioners carry on actions that make sense to them (Heisserer & Rau, 2017) and are doable. Desires, beliefs and expectations are examples of teleoaffectivity (Schatzki, 2001) that help to create a general understanding of the subject. In the ethical consumption context, practitioners may organize themselves into an overarching cultural formation via development of a common understanding. In the lack of such understanding (culture, teloaffectivity), this phenomenon can only remain as a dispersed practice among individual practitioners and cannot spread to a large scale.

[6] https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/research_and_innovation/research_by_area/documents/2020.2057_en_05.pdf

5. Conclusion

This article discusses the importance of a multilevel and intertwined understanding of ethical consumption given its conjunction with other social practices. Social Practice theory, by understanding consumption as a multifaceted practice and interconnected to other social practices offers a promising perspective to studying consumption practices. However, this article argues that although this is a useful approach to theorizing consumption practices, it is not sufficient to shed light on all aspects of a phenomenon such as ethical consumption, which is a very context-related concept. We argue that ethical consumption should be understood as a practice interrelated to other ones and associated with different levels of agency and structure. Therefore, it needs to be analysed by applying a form of multilevel perspective. Even if the role of meso-factors is recognized in various studies, we believe they tend to be too much taken for granted. The different extent, shapes, and ways of ethical consumption practices throughout the world illustrate the importance of not bracketing factors relating to 'landscape' and 'sociotechnical regimes'. Putting ethically oriented consumption into practice requires structural, including infrastructural possibilities. In the literature on ethical consumption, which is mainly West-oriented, there is insufficient attention to social and structural obstacles that make it very demanding and costly (more than in an economic sense) to be involved in such niche innovations. There is great potential for future research to uncover a variety of structural obstacles in different geographic and sector-wise contexts, which limit the spread and upscaling of ethical consumption.

Following the above conclusion, and drawing on recent research (Keller *et al.*, 2022; Laakso *et al.*, 2021) that refer to the critical role of tensions among niche and regime practices in understanding sustainability transitions, we have suggested that ethical consumption practices are developed and organized through dialectical processes within a multi-level context. That is, although ethical consumption can be perceived in terms of a "general understanding" in a horizontal conjunction with other practices (Gram-Hanssen, 2021; Welch, 2020), the system of practices must also be understood as shaped along a vertical dimension. To put it simply, the structure of sociotechnical regimes in every society and their associated practices open spaces for local forms of ethical consumption, and these local forms may in turn trigger change of structure on 'higher' levels in the long run. By acknowledging such interplay, we can better grasp the conditions for organizing and upscaling ethical consumption practices in different sectors/sets of practices (e.g., food, clothing, energy) and countries around the world. Attention to such multi-level dynamics shows that every form of ethical consumption practice can simultaneously challenge and rely on existing regimes. This approach opens up many possibilities for further studies, and we can here end with indicating just a few. For example, the more known forms of ethical consumption (boycotting, buycotting, discursive ethical consumption and ethical consumption lifestyle) could be fruitfully studied within the combined framework of MLP and SPT, which provide a good analytical platform for the study on how ethical consumption both shape and are shaped by contextual circumstances.

This apply also to the study how niche initiatives can be upscaled and (or fail to) become mainstream, and even set off change processes on the regime and landscape level. Studies could also focus how these forms of ethical consumption are indirectly affected by other practice changes, for instance in areas such as food, mobility, commuting, housing, shopping, and how these in turn relate to broader changes on the regime or landscape level. Studies can contribute with further insights by studying how landscape change (e.g. the Covid-19 pandemic, political (de)stabilisations, cost crises due to conflicts, digitalization, etc) and sociotechnical regimes in different social contexts (re)generate, hold and/or perish a variety of practices in such consumption areas, which in turn impact on the prospect of integrating ethical consideration in the practices. This also applies to the study of social movements and teleoaffective formation surrounding ethical consumption. Another interesting focus for further studies would be to study how different systems of provision in sectors like energy, mobility, housing, food, etc, here understood as socio-technical regimes, facilitate or obstruct ethical considerations in consumers' practices (see Boström *et al.*, 2019 for examples). Finally, we see a great potential for future studies to study the material and non-material costs of developing ethical consumption within specific socio-political regimes; that is, in different countries and regions throughout the world with very contrasting political cultures, economies, welfare arrangements and conditions for democratic dialogue.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability statement

Underlying data

No underlying data are associated with this article.

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Version 2

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✔ **Kirsten Gram-Hanssen**
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With the additions and revisions made, I find the paper ready for indexing.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: consumption and theories of practice

We confirm that we have read this submission and believe that we have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 11 January 2023

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✔ **Philip Balsiger**
University of Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel, Switzerland

No further comments.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Ethical consumption, social movement studies, economic sociology

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Version 1

Reviewer Report 04 November 2022

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Philip Balsiger
University of Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel, Switzerland

This article proposes and offers a critique of studies of ethical consumption from an individual perspective and proposes to enhance understandings of ethical consumption by studying it from a social practice and multi-level perspective. It points at an important short-coming of the literature and presents interesting examples to advocate for the heuristic contribution of SPT and MLP for analyzing ethical consumption, in particular by pointing out the role of socio-technical regimes. I suggest four points for improvement:

1. First, some improvements could be made in the presentation of the relevant literature. While the authors present evidence for the prominence of studies on ethical consumption using an individual (and often psychological) perspective, there are studies in this realm that are more attentive to context (without using SPT or MLP). For instance, scholars putting forward the importance of social movements as a meso-level context, or the significance of supply. This is discussed widely in de Moor & Balsiger (2019).

2. A second critique concerns section 3 of the article (Ethical consumption in different contexts). This section does show studies from geographically dispersed contexts showing how ethical consumption often follows different logics and functions quite differently. However, the impression appears that sometimes, the differences pointed out are more due to the scholarly interests and foci of the different scholars. For instance, the role of public policies in driving ethical consumption has also been highlighted for European contexts (see Dubuisson-Quellier *et al.*, 2016[1] and Wahlen and Dubuisson-Quellier, 2018[2]) – not just in Latin America.

3. Third, the paper is quite uneven with regard to its dual objective of advocating for the usefulness of SPT *and* MLP. It does present both of them in part 2 (without however discussing their compatibility), but then in the more illustrative parts (especially section 4), the discussion concerns almost exclusively the multi-level perspective. It might be better to focus the paper solely on the MLP, since this is already a little bit the case in terms of focus, and since it is theoretically quite dense otherwise.

4. Fourth, in terms of the integration of the MLP in the study of ethical consumption, the paper

makes some very valuable suggestions of the potential contributions of this. These could be presented more systematically. There is in particular the double question of a) how socio-technical regimes constrain and fashion the development of ethical consumption practices, and b) how ethical consumption niches can spread and change landscapes and regimes.

Finally, and building on the above point, since the paper advocates for the use of SPT and MLP in the study of ethical consumption, it might be useful to have some kind of a research agenda at the end. To suggest a number of research avenues and questions such a theoretical approach implies.

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Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?
Partly

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?
Partly

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Ethical consumption, social movement studies, economic sociology

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 29 Nov 2022

Sara Karimzadeh

Dear Philip, Thank you very much for your constructive comments. In the following, we briefly describe changes that we have made in the paper according to your comments.

This article proposes and offers a critique of studies of ethical consumption from an individual perspective and proposes to enhance understanding of ethical consumption by studying it from a social practice and multi-level perspective. It points at an important short-coming of the literature and presents interesting examples to advocate for the heuristic contribution of SPT and MLP for analyzing ethical consumption, in particular by pointing out the role of socio-technical regimes. I suggest four points for improvement:

- First, some improvements could be made in the presentation of the relevant

literature. While the authors present evidence for the prominence of studies on ethical consumption using an individual (and often psychological) perspective, there are studies in this realm that are more attentive to context (without using SPT or MLP). For instance, scholars putting forward the importance of social movements as a meso-level context, or the significance of supply. This is discussed widely in de Moor & Balsiger (2019).

Response: We agree social movements are very important as well as relevant to highlight more, and we addressed this comment in the introduction section (in the last part of the first paragraph) and also made some changes in section two.

- A second critique concerns section 3 of the article (Ethical consumption in different contexts). This section does show studies from geographically dispersed contexts showing how ethical consumption often follows different logics and functions quite differently. However, the impression appears that sometimes, the differences pointed out are more due to the scholarly interests and foci of the different scholars. For instance, the role of public policies in driving ethical consumption has also been highlighted for European contexts (see Dubuisson-Quellier *et al.*, 2016[1] and Wahlen and Dubuisson-Quellier, 2018[2]) – not just in Latin America.

Response: We understand the previous version could bring this impression, and have, in response to this comment, developed section 3 (mainly the second paragraph) by referring to the mentioned studies and two more studies as well.

- Third, the paper is quite uneven with regard to its dual objective of advocating for the usefulness of SPT *and* MLP. It does present both of them in part 2 (without however discussing their compatibility), but then in the more illustrative parts (especially section 4), the discussion concerns almost exclusively the multi-level perspective. It might be better to focus the paper solely on the MLP, since this is already a little bit the case in terms of focus, and since it is theoretically quite dense otherwise.

Response: We chose to keep the logic of the structure but added pieces on SPT-related work in accordance with Hanssen's comment number 1 and 2.

- Fourth, in terms of the integration of the MLP in the study of ethical consumption, the paper makes some very valuable suggestions of the potential contributions of this. These could be presented more systematically. There is in particular the double question of a) how socio-technical regimes constrain and fashion the development of ethical consumption practices, and b) how ethical consumption niches can spread and change landscapes and regimes.

Response: We agree there is a double question, but they are at the same time always connected. Therefore, we have tried to make some clarifications and added examples in section four (to indicate both Qs), but kept the general structure of the argumentation. This dynamic is also itself a key topic for future research, which we tried to indicate in the concluding section.

- Finally, and building on the above point, since the paper advocates for the use of SPT and MLP in the study of ethical consumption, it might be useful to have some kind of a research agenda at the end. To suggest a number of research avenues and questions such a theoretical approach implies.

Response: According to our arguments in the paper, we suggested some ideas at the end of

the paper.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 10 October 2022

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Thank you for this opportunity to review an interesting and timely contribution on the theoretical foundation for understanding ethical consumption. As the paper writes, theories of practice have been utilized for understanding consumption broadly, and more recently also specifically for understanding ethical consumption. However, as the paper also points out, most consumer studies so far based on theories of practice have been reluctant in studying overarching cultures and structures of consumer practices. For this reason, this paper suggests combining theories of practice, or social practice theory (SPT) with multi-level perspectives (MLP) theories, which we agree is a relevant approach to take.

The present paper references other studies suggesting using SPT in the study of ethical consumption as well as other studies which suggest combining SPT and MLP, however, we miss a more thorough discussion with this literature which is referenced. Specifically, we will suggest that the paper includes the following discussions:

1. First, part of the literature already referenced in the paper has suggested to stay within SPT and from there find ways of including more overarching phenomena, including using the concept of Teleoaffective Formations (Welch 2020), the concept of General Understandings (Gram-Hanssen 2021) or discussions of how SPT relates to wider economic process (Evans, 2020). We think the paper would be highly improved if the authors went more into dialogue with these papers and their different attempts to close the gaps in SPT, before arguing for a move to include MLP.

2. Second, many authors have before this paper sought to combine SPT and MLP, as the authors of this paper also acknowledge. However, we miss a more thorough discussion on what is achieved by this combination and which problems it raises. The paper by Keller *et al.* 2022, has some relevant discussions on this, which we think this paper should go more into dialogue with.

3. Third, specifically (and related to the Keller *et al.* paper) a discussion on combining MLP and

SPT with each other needs to be included, as most of the leading authors of SPT would argue that SPT is a flat ontology which is not the case with the levels of MLP. This is in our view not an argument for not discussing the gains of combining the approaches, however, the authors need to go into this discussion, at least to show they are aware of it, and how they suggest to overcome it, or work with it.

Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?
Partly

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?
Partly

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: consumption and theories of practice

We confirm that we have read this submission and believe that we have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however we have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 29 Nov 2022

Sara Karimzadeh

Dear Kirsten and Line Thank you very much for your constructive comments. In the following, we briefly describe changes that we have made in the paper according to your comments.

Thank you for this opportunity to review an interesting and timely contribution on the theoretical foundation for understanding ethical consumption. As the paper writes, theories of practice have been utilized for understanding consumption broadly, and more recently also specifically for understanding ethical consumption. However, as the paper also points out, most consumer studies so far based on theories of practice have been reluctant in studying overarching cultures and structures of consumer practices. For this reason, this paper suggests combining theories of practice, or social practice theory (SPT) with multi-level perspectives (MLP) theories, which we agree is a relevant approach to take.

The present paper references other studies suggesting using SPT in the study of ethical consumption as well as other studies which suggest combining SPT and MLP, however, we miss a more thorough discussion with this literature which is referenced. Specifically, we will suggest that the paper includes the following discussions:

- First, part of the literature already referenced in the paper has suggested to stay

within SPT and from there find ways of including more overarching phenomena, including using the concept of Teleoaffective Formations (Welch 2020), the concept of General Understandings (Gram-Hanssen 2021) or discussions of how SPT relates to wider economic process (Evans, 2020). We think the paper would be highly improved if the authors went more into dialogue with these papers and their different attempts to close the gaps in SPT, before arguing for a move to include MLP.

Response: We agree. In response to this comment, in section two and paragraph three, we explained recent developments in social practice theory through the mentioned articles/concepts in the comment. We then argued that a multilevel understanding can progress our understanding of the phenomenon.

- Second, many authors have before this paper sought to combine SPT and MLP, as the authors of this paper also acknowledge. However, we miss a more thorough discussion on what is achieved by this combination and which problems it raises. The paper by Keller *et al.* 2022, has some relevant discussions on this, which we think this paper should go more into dialogue with.

Response: We agree Keller et al. have several relevant points, which we could build more on. In response to this comment, we tried to strengthen our argument and the main changes appear in sections one, second and four.

- Third, specifically (and related to the Keller *et al.* paper) a discussion on combining MLP and SPT with each other needs to be included, as most of the leading authors of SPT would argue that SPT is a flat ontology which is not the case with the levels of MLP. This is in our view not an argument for not discussing the gains of combining the approaches, however, the authors need to go into this discussion, at least to show they are aware of it, and how they suggest to overcome it, or work with it.

Response: We have now explicitly commented on the difference between flat and vertical ontology in section two.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.