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To cite this article: Sabeehuddin Hasan, Ben Wooliscroft & Alexandra Ganglmair-Wooliscroft (2025) New Zealand ethical consumption driven by universalism and personal achievement; can it also be fun?, Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online, 20:4, 1338-1347, DOI: [10.1080/1177083X.2024.2418485](https://doi.org/10.1080/1177083X.2024.2418485)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1177083X.2024.2418485>



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Published online: 28 Oct 2024.



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New Zealand ethical consumption driven by universalism and personal achievement; can it also be fun?

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ABSTRACT

Overconsumption and environmental pollution in New Zealand are leading to the depletion of its resources, threatening its ecosystem. This paper explores New Zealanders' ethical and sustainable consumption behaviour, and the motivations and values that drive them. Seventy in-depth interviews with a variety of ethical consumers were conducted and analysed using laddering technique to uncover drivers behind ethical consumption habits. Results reflect the complexity and variety inherent in ethical consumption, and its motivations and drivers. Most ethical behaviours are environmentally focused, aimed at pollution reduction and environmental conservation. Ethical behaviours with a social focus are directed at the local or the international community. Social justice, equality and unity of nature (all sub-values of universalism) are revealed as drivers of ethical behaviours, and are complemented by personal achievement (feeling capable) and feelings of enjoyment – consuming ethically can also be 'fun'. The complexity of the findings highlights the need for customised messaging from policymakers and businesses to increase ethical consumption behaviours in New Zealand.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 May 2024

Accepted 15 October 2024

KEYWORDS

Ethical consumption;
sustainable consumption;
environmental concern;
laddering technique

Introduction

New Zealand is an affluent, highly consumerist society (Timar et al. 2022) with overconsumption leading to depletion of resources, threatening its fragile ecosystem (Ministry for the Environment & Stats NZ 2019). In developed countries like New Zealand, that consume up to ten times more resources compared to poor countries (Giljum et al. 2009), more mindful, ethical or sustainable consumption is necessary to address issues of sustainability (Sheth et al. 2011; Mittelstaedt et al. 2014). Ethical consumption is a broader concept, which includes sustainable consumption. Sustainable consumption is concerned with fulfilling the needs of the current and future generations, focusing on environmental protection, improving efficiency and lessening wastages (Peattie and Collins 2009). Ethical consumption covers all consumption choices that are made on

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ethical grounds. It extends the environmental focus and emphasises that consumers are being 'mindful of the consequences their consumption practices have on the environment, on animals and on other human beings' (Andorfer 2015, p. 268), including consumption decisions based on religious beliefs (Hasan et al. 2023). Empirical studies generally deal with similar behaviours (Sheth and Parvatiyar 2021) as both concepts examine concerns about the ecological and human cost of consumption (Adams and Raisborough 2010; Chowdhury 2020).

Existing studies frequently focus on select factors behind pro-environmental concerns and sustainable consumption, such as ethical appeal, self-accountability (Tran and Pappas 2021), education (Djafarova and Fouts 2022), gender identity (Phillips and Englis 2022), age (Casalegno et al. 2022) or culture (Halder et al. 2020). Most studies regarding sustainable consumption in New Zealand focused on a single phenomenon, such as healthier and climate friendly diets (Drew et al. 2020), consumer perceptions of upcycled food (Goodman-Smith et al. 2021) and community supported agriculture farming (Savarese et al. 2020). Wooliscroft et al. (2014) presented the hierarchy of consumption behaviours in New Zealand on the basis of their ease of undertaking, but did not explore the drivers behind them. We take a more holistic approach and extend our understanding of multiple ethical consumption behaviours and the different motivations and values that drive them, by applying Gutman's (1982) Means-End model.

This paper shall proceed with the methodology, results, and discussion and conclusions sections. The methodology section discusses the use of laddering technique in this research. The results section presents values driving motivations and ethical consumption behaviour, while the discussion and conclusions section groups motivations and behaviours with their underlying values. Understanding the drivers of ethical/sustainable consumption is important for organisations that aim to increase ethical consumption in New Zealand.

Ethical consumption choices and their drivers

Ethical consumption includes green consumption, fair trade, voluntary simplicity and sustainable consumption (Simpson and Rapone 2000; Peattie and Collins 2009; Nair and Little 2016), with the latter often used as an umbrella term. What is regarded as ethical consumption behaviour is culturally specific and influenced by political, social and religious issues (Iyer and Muncy 2009; Witkowski 2010). While the precise conceptualisation and delineation of ethical consumption is debated (Shaw and Newholm 2002; McDonald et al. 2006; Bray et al. 2010), consumers generally know what is meant by ethical consumption (Holbrook 1994; Chatzidakis et al. 2004; Szmigin et al. 2009)

Consumption behaviour is driven by motivations (Maslow 1970) that are in turn driven by personal and social values (Schwartz 2012). Motivations occur when a consumer wants to satisfy a particular need (Solomon 1999) and urge consumers to engage in different actions (Maslow 1943, 1970). Previous international studies have shown that ethical consumption behaviour is frequently motivated by environmental concerns (Su and Luomala 2021), altruism (Wang et al. 2021) or animal rights (Moreira and Acevedo 2015). Studies exploring specific ethical behaviours revealed more nuanced motivations – consumption of green products has been linked to environmental conservation (Su and Luomala 2021), organic food consumption is motivated by taste and food

safety (McEachern and McClean 2002), while veganism is frequently driven by moral concerns of animal rights (Moreira and Acevedo 2015).

Consumer motivations are in-turn directed by personal and cultural values (Schwartz 1994, 2012). They determine what is important in a person's life and 'values refer to desirable goals that motivate action' (Schwartz 2012, pg. 3). Values also drive social norms and acceptance of these norms is required for individuals to function within that society. The overarching value categories provided by Schwartz (2012) are self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence, and universalism. Schwartz's theory (2012) lends itself to studying consumer behaviours, including drivers of sustainable and environmentally friendly consumption behaviours (Thøgersen and Ölander 2006; Jägel et al. 2012; Lundblad and Davies 2016). The values defined by Schwartz (2012) are comprehensive and are the basis for this research. These values are at the top of the laddering analysis guiding motivations, which in turn direct ethical consumption behaviour.

Methodology

We used Gutman's (1982) Means-End model – applying the laddering technique (Reynolds and Gutman 1988), a well-established approach to unveil motivations and values that drive consumption (Davies and Gutsche 2016; Lundblad and Davies 2016; Humble et al. 2021). Seventy in-depth unstructured interviews were conducted with consumers in Dunedin, New Zealand. A diverse group of respondents in terms of age (19–70 years old) and occupation was sought with the latter characteristic also reflecting different income levels. Previous research found that demographic characteristics do not explain ethical/sustainable consumption choices to a satisfactory degree (Verain et al. 2012; Finney 2014). We purposefully recruited consumers with different degrees of engagement with ethical consumption. Advertisements were placed around the University of Otago and outside supermarkets. Requests were also posted on different Facebook groups such as 'Dunedin Vegans and Vegetarians', 'Sustainable Dunedin City Community' and 'Dunedin/Ōtepoti Vegan Society – DÖVeS'. We wanted to attract consumers with a preference for and engaged in different ethical consumption behaviours. Interviewees were encouraged to inform their acquaintances about the research to snowball the response group.

Ethical consumption choices undertaken by respondents were uncovered using a stepped approach, using an unaided recollection of ethical consumption behaviours each interviewee undertakes followed by an aided recall where interviewees were presented with a list of ethical choices from Wooliscroft et al. (2014) (Table 1).

The list of ethical consumption behaviours respondents undertake provided the foundation for the Means-End Laddering interview (Reynolds and Gutman 1988). Respondents discuss why they undertake a behaviour and why the consequence is important – revealing motivations and values for each behaviour.

Data analysis using the Laddering technique

The data analysis used the protocol for Laddering technique as proposed by Reynolds and Gutman (1988). A 'ladder' is constructed for every ethical behaviour and the consequences (motivations) and the personal value(s) that drive it. In a second step, all ladders

Table 1. List of ethical consumption choices in New Zealand (adapted from Wooliscroft et al. (2014)).

No mainstream supermarkets	No motor vehicle	Low carbon diet	Fuel efficient vehicle
No airline use	Careful selection of power provider	Sustainable housing	Organic diet
No purchase of new clothing	Purchase at organic supermarket	Vegetarian diet	No meat from supermarkets
Free range meat	NZ made products	Reduced clothing purchases	Vegetable garden
Selected organic products	Free Range eggs	Composting systems	Support local suppliers
Farmers' market	Avoid products based on company reputation	Fair trade products	Avoid excessive packaging
Reduced vehicle use	Recycling	Reduced plastic bag use	

of an individual are combined into a hierarchy value matrix (HVM) with ethical consumption behaviours shown at the bottom followed by the motivations and values that drive them. In a third step, direct/indirect relations were calculated (Reynolds and Gutman 1988) and these relations were shown in an implication matrix in Microsoft Excel. Finally, all 70 individual matrices were summed up and an appropriate cut-off value was selected that resulted in a combined HVM. The complex task of summing up all relations across different nodes, deciding on an appropriate cut-off value and dropping relations below that cut-off value was achieved by programming a purpose written Excel Macro. For this study a cut-off value of 14 provided the best results and the final combined HVM for 70 in-depth interviews with ethical consumers in New Zealand is shown in Figure 1.

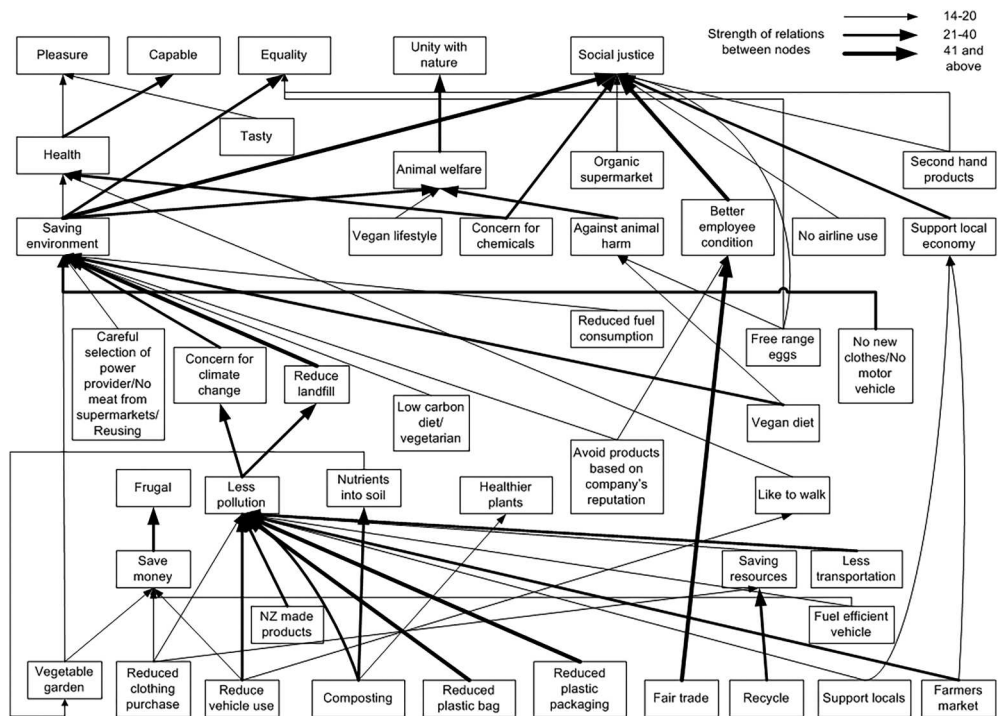


Figure 1. Values and motivations driving ethical consumption choices in New Zealand.

Results

Figure 1 reflects the complex nature of ethical consumption choices and their drivers for the 70 New Zealand interviews. Interviewees discussed the broad range of ethical behaviours at the bottom of the HVM matrix. Most behaviours can be classified as environmentally friendly behaviours (recycling, reducing plastic packaging and plastic bag usage, cutting clothing purchases, buying fuel efficient vehicles and lessening vehicle use), social / community oriented behaviours (purchasing from the local farmers' market, buying fair trade products, New Zealand made products and/or products from local suppliers) or behaviours relating to animal welfare (following a vegan/vegetarian diet, purchasing free-range eggs).

When the focus shifts to the motivational drivers of ethical behaviours (the large mid area in Figure 1), the complexity of the phenomenon becomes apparent with an array of motivations mentioned. The most frequently discussed motivations for ethical behaviours – and the most popular end-points of arrows in the middle of Figure 1 – support three categories of ethical behaviours: *less pollution* and *saving the environment*, followed by *better employee conditions* and *animal welfare*.

According to the combined HVM personal values that ultimately drive ethical behaviours, are *social justice* (discussed by all 70 respondents), *equality*, *unity with nature* – all sub-values of universalism – *being capable* (a sub-value of achievement), and *pleasure* (part of hedonism and personal enjoyment).

The first salient sub value of universalism is *social justice*, which is responsible for a range of motivational connections. This personal value motivates people to support the local economy by *buying from farmer's market* and *supporting local suppliers*. A respondent (F, 34) explained that she would buy local products to 'make sure that your own regional local economy is thriving that people have jobs, employment and are prosperous. And so it's nice to feel like you're helping to support the local economy and the producers here on your doorstep'. Secondly, *social justice* also drives buying *fair trade products*, to improve employee conditions in poorer and distant geographic regions. 'Fair trade products again are ethically sourced, and they are good for the people that are making it ... Just making sure that they get paid for their wellbeing' (F, 25, student counsellor). The third, and most prominent motivator for *social justice* is *saving the environment*, a motivation that is also key for driving the personal value of *equality*.

The second sub value of universalism, *equality* which along with *social justice* is the reason for the expressed motivation to *save the environment* and is subsequently expressed in a range of behaviours aimed at *lessening pollution*. An interviewee (M, 31, medical student) when sharing his views about recycling explains: 'If everyone can do their part in recycling then we're going to minimise the amount of new products ... that we have to produce ... And we're seeing problems like in the oceans being full of plastic ... the by-product of producing new materials is hazardous to the environment ... Well, we're in our environment anyway so I mean what we ... the way we treat our environment ultimately comes back to me.'

The third important sub-value of *universalism* expressed by the interviewees is *unity with nature*. Respondents in New Zealand show *unity with nature* primarily by caring for animals with *adopting a vegan diet* or purchasing *free range eggs* the most frequently

discussed ethical behaviours. Talking about her preference for free range eggs, an interviewee (F, 34) explained: ‘I want to eat the products of the animals that have had good conditions, that they live in that they are not factory farmed ... battery hens that they’re not in a cage. ... For me, free range means that the animal gets to express its natural behaviours and is in a high welfare situation.’

Health is an important consideration mentioned by almost all New Zealand interviewees (66 out of 70). It is driven by two personal values, *pleasure* (personal wellbeing) and *being capable*. *Health* in turn motivates concerns for chemicals and (again) for saving the environment. Organic products were discussed in that context: ‘There’s a lot of pesticides and herbicides that are used in producing food have been scientifically proven to cause damage to the human body ... I read this in a New Zealand magazine. A lot of products in supermarkets were tested. Some of them had ten times the safe level of these particular chemicals. So obviously the people eating that produce are getting way more past the safe level’ (M, 49, gardener). Active transportation and reducing car use (*driving less or walking and cycling*) was another prominent ethical behaviour motivated by *health*. Respondents discussed the *pleasure* inherent in exercise: ‘personal fitness and health is a big reason I like for walking and cycling.’ (F, 49, Journalist)

Discussion and conclusions

Research findings based on interviews with 70 consumers in New Zealand engaged in different levels of ethical consumption emphasise the complexity and diversity of ethical behaviours and its various motivators. Behaviours and motivators can be categorised into three main groups:

- Environmentally focused behaviours relating to recycling, but also reducing consumption related to various aspects including reducing plastic or waste in general, vehicle use, clothes purchases, or general carbon consumption are motivated by reducing pollution and or saving the environment in general.
- Socially conscious behaviours are either focused on the local economy / society – buying at farmers markets or, more generally, supporting the local economy, but also avoiding certain companies based on their reputation – or focus on external issues like Fair Trade and better employment conditions overseas.
- Vegan lifestyles and/or concerns about animal harms, including behaviours like buying free range eggs that are motivated by animal welfare.

The ladders depicted in the combined HVM matrix (Figure 1) do not reflect exclusive pathways; for example, the motivations for shopping at farmers markets are related to social concerns (supporting the local economy) as well as the motivation to reduce pollution and subsequently to saving the environment. However, the overall picture is consistent and makes sense and is in line with previous research in New Zealand (Wooliscroft et al. 2014; Ganglmair-Wooliscroft and Wooliscroft 2022) and overseas (Adams and Raisborough 2010; Chowdhury 2020; Sheth and Parvatiyar 2021). The categories show that the New Zealand consumers interviewed perceive ethical and sustainable behaviours as largely synonymous. The large number of environmentally friendly

behaviours discussed by the interviewees is also reflected in sustainability publicity and research's emphasis on environmental issues (Bangsa and Schlegelmilch 2020). While the previous studies typically focus on different individual ethical consumption practices and the themes surrounding them, our research focuses on the breadth of consumption habits practised in New Zealand and the drivers behind them. The results show that consumers' ethical habits are driven primarily by environmental conservation, animal protection and supporting the local economy. Value analysis shows that environmental conservation is driven by universalism. Engaging in ethical consumption also gives consumers a sense of achievement and pleasure.

The combined HVM is in line with previous findings that emphasise the importance of the self-transcendent, socially focused value, universalism driving ethical behaviours (Thøgersen and Ölander 2006; Biel and Thøgersen 2007; Ganglmair-Wooliscroft and Wooliscroft 2022). In addition to the general importance of *universalism*, the findings provide a more nuanced picture with the sub-values *equality* and *social justice* mainly driving the motivation to save the environment, while *unity with nature* motivates animal welfare. As can be expected, *social justice* also relates strongly to social issues, including local and international (fair trade) employment conditions.

Two values with a personal, rather than a social focus (Schwartz 2012) that are less likely to be associated with ethical consumption behaviours are *hedonism* (sub-value *pleasure*) and *achievement* (sub-value *capable*). In the current study both values motivate the health aspect of ethical consumption. Health therefore appears to be a 'by-product' of ethical consumption behaviours, mainly in the context of saving the environment. Being healthy is connected to valuing enjoyment and pleasure. Although these findings might appear unexpected when studying ethical consumption behaviour, they are in line with previous New Zealand research that explored ethical consumption behaviours, albeit in a different context, tourism and holidays (Ganglmair-Wooliscroft and Wooliscroft 2016) where at least for some consumers consuming ethically was also associated with hedonism, it was 'fun'. *Achievement* (sub-value *capable*) is the second personal focused value that complements values within the socially focused *universalism* dimension. New Zealanders get a sense of *achievement* if they are making ethical consumption choices motivated to saving the environment.

The variety and complexity of findings emphasises the need for customised messaging from public policymakers and businesses who aim to increase and support different ethical consumption behaviours: one size does not fit all as different ethical behaviours are driven by particular motivations. On the other hand, our results suggest that New Zealanders consider ethical and sustainable behaviours as 'the same behaviours', and any messaging can cover both types in one campaign. Finally, while *universalism* is the most prominent driver of environmentally, socially and animal welfare focused behaviours, the importance of one's health and related personal values of *achievement* and *hedonism* can provide an interesting angle for future communication campaigns. Particularly related to behaviours that aim to reduce pollution and save the environment behaving ethically is driven by other oriented, self-transcendence values, but it also provides a sense of personal achievement and hedonic responses: doing good for the environment might be altruistic, but it might also provide a sense of accomplishment and simply be 'fun'.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The research was supported by the University of Otago, Otago Business School Research Grant.

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