

Abstract

Ethical Consumption as a Reflexive Project: Negotiation of Consumer Identities through Ethical Labelling

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Ethical consumerism is of growing interest to sociological research and is increasingly the focus of theoretical debates. This paper contributes to these debates, using the case of ethical food shopping. Drawing on Giddens' (1991) view of consumption as an arena of reflexive self-production and Archer's (2007) theory of human reflexivity, my work seeks to construe ethical food consumption as a reflexive project of an identity-seeking consumer. This, I contend, presents ethical choices as important elements in the reflexive process of consumer formation and articulation of a distinctive self-image, thus questioning narrow conceptualisation of ethical food labelling as merely an information tool. Labels take on new meaning as key mechanism in the symbolic construction of ethical products and a source of identity-enhancing meanings.

My intention is to put this theory to the test by investigating individual ethical consumption experiences through direct observations of consumer food-buying behaviour during a series of grocery shopping trips followed by an in-depth interview with ethically committed shoppers, recruited via professional connections with sustainability-oriented organisations (e.g. Grow Sheffield, The Kindling Trust). In this paper I will outline the ways in which I have consolidated Archer's model of human reflexivity with Giddens' understanding of identity as a consumption-mediated reflexive project of the self into a novel conception of the individual ethical consumption practices. I will detail my methodological assumptions underlying the choice of methods, and provide tentative observations arising from this work about ethical shopping as a site of formation, negotiation and articulation of consumer identities.

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