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Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:

2022-02-18

Deposited version:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Santos, M. J. P. L. dos., Baptista, N. T. & Nobre, H. (2021). Exploring the relationship between ethical and sustainable consumption in short supply chains: A literature review. In Kantola, J. I., Nazir, S., and Salminen, V. (Ed.), *Advances in human factors, business management and leadership. Lecture Notes in Networks and Systems*. (pp. 197-203). Online: Springer International Publishing.

Further information on publisher's website:

[10.1007/978-3-030-80876-1_26](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-80876-1_26)

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Exploring the relationship between ethical and sustainable consumption in short supply chains: A literature review

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Abstract. Sustainable development, sustainable consumption and short supply chains are nowadays acquiring increasing relevance on the literature. On the other hand, from the consumers attitudinal statement, ethical consumption is also requiring more attention from marketing sciences. Besides that, the integration of the last concept on sustainability remains in a complete lack of systematic and integrative conceptualization. This paper tries to promote a potential integration of all the dimensions of sustainable consumption and to understand the potential linkage and interaction among them, in order to promote the Sustainable Development Goal 15 from the United Nations. The methodology follows a systematic literature review and preliminary information comes from a case study of the approved project SDGsConsum. The results confirm that, besides a huge development in sustainable development and sustainable consumption in the literature, the focus on shortly supply chains of production is yet modest. Moreover, the motivations and constraints that drive and restrain, respectively, consumers toward ethical and sustainable consumption presents several incongruences.

Keywords: COVID-19 · Ethical consumption · Sustainable consumption · Short supply chains · Systematic literature review · SDGsConsum project · SDGs

1 Introduction

Nowadays the literature, the main supranational institutions [1], the national and regional public decision-makers and other stakeholders are increasingly paying attention to sustainable development. They are debating the main institutional ways and the respective restrictions to achieve a compromise solution among the economic, social, environmental and institutional dimensions of sustainable development [3].

Sustainable development has become one of the most widely used conceptual frameworks for analyzing consumer and production sectors in a comprehensive and holistic way [2] and [4].

On the other hand, and despite the increasing focus of policy efforts on sustainable development, from a marketing point of view there is no consensus of what sustainable consumption is or should be and the state of knowledge continues to be fragmented without unifying paradigms according to [5]. Furthermore, besides the importance given to the ethical dimension in marketing scholarship, the holistic vision that includes their connections with the social, environmental, economic and institutional of the sustainable development is missing or disconnected, as well as, the side of supply of the production.

Considering the present fragmented and specialized state of research, which makes the systematic accumulation of knowledge difficult, this study presents a literature review of current literature to disentangle the intricate relationships among sustainable development, sustainable consumption and short supply chains, and to explore the social and psychological drivers that lead consumers to assume ethical consumption decisions. By adopting a consumer behavior perspective, the consumer is the focus of this research, rather than the organizational dimension of sustainability. The findings of the present study are expected to provide insights to public policymakers, social marketers, business corporations, non-profit organizations and other correlated publics.

Moreover, the world is currently facing a COVID-19 pandemic, and this create new challenges for all the society in general and for the relationship between sustainable consumption and short supply chains in particular. This paper also tries to overcome this gap on the literature.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Sustainable development

Sustainable development seeks to address the needs of current and future generations with the objective of increasing well-being by balancing economic, social and environmental dimensions. Current unsustainable development patterns, such as poverty, increasing population pressure, agricultural intensification, land degradation, and air, land, rivers and ocean pollution, will be further exacerbated by climate change impacts [6].

According to the literature, namely, [7] and [8] among others, sustainability includes the environmental, economic and social dimensions. Moreover, [2], presents a

new definition of sustainability based on four dimensions: economic, social, environmental and institutional. The institutional dimension of sustainability includes the country level or international institutional agreements of support and political measures and institutions that directly or indirectly contributes to promote the sustainability [2].

2.2 The project *SDGsConsum* to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 12 and challenges due the COVID 19 pandemic

Until now, the outbreak of the 2020 novel coronavirus pandemic disease (COVID 19) has caused more than 103,652,661 confirmed cases and 2,240,5441 deaths around world, according to the [9]. Nowadays, the numbers are still growing, despite the containment measures at the national level from the majority of countries around the world. In face this backdrop, the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 12) 12 (*SDG-sCONSUM*) - Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns by supporting micro, small and medium holdings to promote short supply foods and health foods to the world consumers – has acquired increasing importance. In order to address these questions, we got recently approved the project *The Ethical-Sustainable Consumer Behavior Before and After the COVID Pandemic* and the respective Living Lab in development in Portugal (*SDGsConsum*,) [10], supported by public funding for Portuguese science. The preliminary results show new and different patterns of consumption and some breakdown on short supply chains.

2.3 Sustainable consumption on pandemic times

Although sustainable consumption is clearly presented in SDG 12, the majority of studies about sustainable consumption refer broadly the demand side or the consumer, focusing mainly on attitudinal statements (attitudes, intentions, etc.) and only a few references on the supply side. Indeed, the scarce literature on short supply foods is mostly focused on the food sector ([10], [3]).

2.4 Short Supply Chains

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed businesses and societies to the shortfalls of *normal* patterns of production, consumption, and their long-lasting impact on supply chains [13]. New trends mainly in food consumption are shaping consumers' preferences and buying behavior ([11], ([12]). Non-traditional food retailing and short supply chains are offering bundles of attributes that fit the needs of larger consumers' segments ([14], [15]). Several studies have analyzed the factors affecting the choice of traditional and non-traditional food retailing ([13], [14]). Very few, however, analyze the predictive role of human values and attitudes on the choice of traditional and non-traditional food retailing and supply chains. None of these studies had analyzed, as our better knowledge, their contributes to the SGD12 or for sustainability. Only [14] and [3] present the ethical and sustainable consumption in the Italian coffee market to analyses the consumers' willingness to pay.

2.5 Ethical consumption

Ethical consumption involves a conscious and deliberate choice to use products selectively based on personal and moral beliefs and values and can be understood as an expression of ethical concerns about products and organizations ([15]; [16]). As such, ethical consumers frequently display their moral concerns towards one or more of the following areas: human welfare, animal welfare or environmental welfare [17]. Ethical consumption is a comprehensive concept because it encompasses a broad spectrum of manifestations, such as green consumption, socially conscious consumption, ethical consumerism, anti-consumption, boycotting, brand avoidance, voluntary simplification, brand rejection, consumer resistance, consumer rebellion and sustainable consumption [18].

The notion that consumerism according to [19] and [20] contributes to some of capitalism's weaknesses, including exploitative labor relations, environmental degradation, unfair trade, unbalanced corporate power, irresponsible marketing, and social inequality, has been pointed by scholars as the main driving force behind a growing segment of consumers who integrate notions of ethics, social justice, and environmental sustainability into their consumption habits [19] and [20]. Ethical consumption is supposed to offer a corrective to such problems, a chance for consumers to change the world, "one purchase at a time", forcing corporations to change their practices [20].

In marketing academy traditionally researchers have approached the concept of sustainable consumption by focusing on the "green consumer" segment [21], [3]. The moral principles that define one's responsibility towards the environment are designated alternatively as "environmental ethics" or "environmental philosophy" and consider the ethical relationship between human beings and the natural environment [22]. The concern of ethical consumers with environmental issues makes the distinction between ethical consumption and sustainable consumption ambiguous [22]. Frequently "environmental" is seen as a synonym for "sustainability", in which case an ethic of sustainability would be synonymous of environmental ethics [7]. However, the concept of sustainable consumption is much broader and more complex, involving other dimensions besides environmental concerns, namely, the economic, social, and institutional dimensions that could never be ignored or confused with sustainability [3].

3 Methodology

The present paper follows a systematic literature review based on ISI Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus papers databases, in order to identify the potential theoretical and empirical linkage on literature focused on sustainable development, sustainable consumer, ethical consumer and short supply chains in order to improve the patterns of sustainable consumption and production. Indeed, new insights from the project *SDGsConsum* were used as a case study with an exploratory methodology, based on initial information and data from stakeholders of the project *The Ethical-Sustainable Consumer Behavior Before and After the COVID Pandemic and the respective Living Lab in development in Portugal (SDGsConsum)*.

The ISI Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus databases were searched for full-text scientific papers by the beginning of November and December 2020. Non-English articles, book chapters, dissertations, interviews, and conference abstracts were excluded.

4 Results

The results of the systematic literature search present about 1392 papers SCOPUS and WoS referred with the above topics (namely, sustainable consumer; ethical consumer; ethical-sustainable consumer and short supply chains). Besides the huge number of papers reached for each one of the searched topics the connection between them seems very limited. This seems particularly true for the link between ethical and sustainable development and sustainable consumption.

5 Discussion

Sustainability and sustainable consumption are achieving increasing attention from the academic community. Their relevance seems to relate to the direct impact on consumption and consumer attitudes, and the influence on short supply chains mainly in food consumption, the SDGs 12 and the COVID pandemic times. The ethics of sustainability refers to the rules of moral conduct needed to achieve sustainability, or to be consistent with sustainability [3]. As such, a comprehensive exploration of sustainable consumption, understood as a rationalization of consumer practices to attain sustainability goals, cannot be achieved without careful attention to its economic, social and environmental ethical dimensions [7]. That is, the ethical dimension includes mainly the environmental concerns of consumers' attitudes and it could never be considered one dimension of sustainable development or sustainable consumption.

According to [23] and [24], although ethical consumption is considered a desirable social movement, the positive effect of ethical practice does not always translate into actual behaviors. That means the impacts on sustainable consumption are not visible and direct. Consequently, ethical markets have remained only a small proportion of total sales over the years [24].

6 Conclusion

The main results outlined confirm that production and consumption involving short supply chains have been analyzed in the literature through a holistic perspective. That means the umbrella of scientific knowledge is the sustainable development and sustainable ways of production and consumption in short supply chains. The marketing literature in ethical and sustainable consumption confirms that consumers' ethical attitudes reveal environmental and ethical concerns. However, these studies do not integrate their findings with research on sustainability.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to extend their gratitude to the Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa (IPL) for the approval of the project *SDGsCONSUM* and for providing this publication opportunity by granting financial assistance and making this manuscript available. Moreover, the authors also are thankful to the Dean of Research (and President) of IPL and Dean of ESCS, by the investment in science and by the approval of the present IDI&CA 2020 Project. We also are thankful to the anonymous members of the panel for their valuable time and approval of our scientific project *SDGsCONSUM*.

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