

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study aimed on the identification of ethical consumption goals as related to organic and local purchasing in order to develop a suitable set of target criteria for a modified scoring model. In this context differences and commonalities between the ethical goals of the respective shopping options were assessed and the data was integrated in a structural framework. Moreover, it was intended to analyse the relationships between the relevant target criteria as perceived by consumers, so to conclude on their significance for the model.

The following chapters provide a brief summary of the results and the discussion of this research project referring to each of the three research questions. Then, recommendations for further research work related to the field of study are presented.

6.1 Conclusions

In order to develop a suitable framework three research questions were asked and answered. Question 1 and Question 2 targeted the development of a hierarchical Framework of Ethical Consumption Goals while Question 3 focused on the assessment of perceived linkages between the respective target criteria.

Question 1: Which ethical consumption goals matter to ethically motivated consumers when they decide for either labelled or local food products?

Question 2: In how far do the ethical consumption goals of both purchasing options match or differ?

The integrated research review showed that the scientific literature provides plenty of research projects and data with regard to ethical consumption goals (cf. Appendix I). Anyhow, organic and local purchasing are mostly treated independently from each other and the related goals of consumption are thus assessed for each shopping option independently too.

This study points out that the ethical consumption goals that underlie both purchasing options are very similar, since in both cases the same five ethical FCMs are mentioned frequently. Animal welfare, Environmental protection, Political values, Local/regional production and Fairness are important for both groups of consumers. It appears, that even though organic is quite clearly related to Animal welfare and local purchasing to Environmental protection and Local production, the preferences of the individual person are the crucial factor for the purchasing-decision.

Beside the ethical consumption goals also several social consumption goals were revealed to drive consumers' purchasing preferences. Local purchasing is often perceived as inherently positive because it is embedded in a context of social interaction. Even though, the knowledge on how local is defined is limited and dominated by beliefs and feelings related to social embeddedness, in many cases people rely on it as the preferred way of consumption. Organic in contrast is also linked to social consumption goals but trust is foremost created through certification and not through interaction with farmers or other consumers.

In this context it needs to be considered that consumers of local and organic products seemlikewise to be driven by a general interest in doing something good for the planet and themselves, regardless of explicit knowledge on the mentioned concepts. In addition, the ethical consumer is not as well informed as it was assumed. The concepts behind the purchasing options are often unclear and characterized by a perceived overlap of values that are assumed to be inherent to both purchasing options.

This study did not focus on an assessment on how these ethical factors are ranked by the majority of consumers but it was intended to capture a wide array of consumption goals to represent an equally broad group of ethical consumers at the same time. Ethical criteria are differentiated individually and prioritized through each consumer individually which then results in individual preferences for a certain purchasing option. Anyhow, ethical motives are relevant for allethically-motivated consumers and for many of them the results of this study could be helpful to clarify which products to choose if a certain ethical goal of consumption is desired.

According to the findings of this study, the modified scoring model is regarded as a suitable tool for consumers to achieve their individual ethical consumption goals, if it provides a system of target criteria that reflects all possible ethical goals and an objective and transparent evaluation also on the producers' side.

Question 3: How are the relationships between ethical consumption goals and other Food Choice Motives characterized?

The modified scoring model holds the potential to consider also relationships between target criteria representing the consumers' perceptions and valuations. In this integrated research review it was thus assessed if respondents refer to such linkages.

In this context, the results of the analysis revealed that these linkages appear not to be very important for consumers in a way that they influence the decision-making process and thus are not of relevance for the model. It is therefore reasonable to treat the ethical target criteria as independent factors in the scoring model.

Additionally, it turned out that the ideas behind local and organic purchasing are strongly overlapping in the consumers' perception. Purchasing-decisions are foremost based on the perceived relationships between each concept and ethical, social and non-ethical criteria. In contrast to this low level of valuation of relationships between single ethical target criteria, consumers have a strong focus on linkages between local or organic and non-ethical FCMs such as Price, Convenience or Sensory Appeal. These linkages are often characterized through competitiveness and can moreover lead to the exclusion of either organic or local as purchasing options.

Positive linkages are common for example with regard to the motives Health and Sensory Appeal (i.e. taste and freshness). In line with this, the motives for certain purchasing-decisions are claimed to be ethical but in several cases the underlying reasons are compelled by self-centred motives. Especially health concerns prove to be drivers of ethical consumption patterns, with consumers assuming for example that organic is generally beneficial for the health because animals are treated better or that local producers truly care for their customers and therefore only sell safe products. Also social criteria are observed to be strongly linked with ethical consumption goals.

Particularly for local purchasing, social factors can be supporting the perceived rightfulness of the shopping option.

Despite the clear relevance of relationships between organic and local purchasing with non-ethical Food Choice Motives and social target criteria, both are not supposed to be represented in the modified scoring model. In any way, they would create a bias in the model for one of the two purchasing options and thus compromise the sole focus on ethical consumption goals.

6.2 Future Research

The results of this study are based on research projects which did not exactly aim on answering the research questions that are of interest here. Consequently, theoretical frameworks were applied (FCQ, Relationship Types) in order to be able to assess the papers in a standardized manner. Anyhow, in many research papers the statements of respondents did not reveal unambiguous consumption goals. Instead, plenty consumer statements are open to interpretation and are hence associated with all possible Food Choice Motives (e.g. transportation distances – Animal welfare/Environmental protection/Price/Quality/etc.). For further research it is therefore recommended to avoid ambiguous results through immediate clarification during the conducted interview or focus group session.

Generally, an adjustment of the ethical dimensions of the Food Choice Questionnaire of Lindman and Väänänen (2000) is recommended based on the findings of this study. Ethical consumption is a growing trend that is still evolving and which incorporates many different issues, hence the current version of the FCQ leaves out relevant motives and thus does not reflect the full range of ethical FCMs. In the same way the relationship types of Bechmann (1978) appear not to be sufficient to describe all kind of linkages that are found. The linkages in his theory are strictly defined and restrictive in a way that always only two components are reflected. Since the connections between the consumption goals appear to be more complex and interlinked in various ways it should be considered that the concept of Bechmann (1978) is not sufficient to describe all prevalent consumption goals.

A scoring model is an applicable option to provide ethically motivated consumers with a tool that offers purchasing recommendations in line with individual ethical priorities independent of public perception or personal shopping habits. Additionally, it offers the chance to enable consumers to shop in accordance with ethical goals without spending time and money on an effortful search for information about purchasing opportunities. Therefore, the crucial question if there are appropriate ways to gather the relevant information from producers needs to be solved. Only then, the scoring model for ethical consumption goals as related to organic and local can be a viable tool for consumers.

Due to the exploratory character of this study only qualitative studies are included where consumers freely express their opinions and concerns. By that means it is intended to gather only those consumption goals which are brought up directly by the respondents. It is assumed that these motives truly matter for the respondents and are thus indeed relevant for their purchase decisions.

Concerning, the necessary conditions for a well-functioning model all prevalent ethical target criteria are supposed to be represented in the Framework of Ethical Consumption Goals. Although, the outcome of this research is representing the target criteria as presented in the assessed research papers, it needs to be considered that further ethical consumption goals might exist. These could be for example issues of biodiversity loss, climate change or the avoidance of plastic packaging etc. which do not find consideration in the Framework of Ethical Consumption Goals yet. In order to develop a valid scoring model it would thus be necessary to conduct further research in order to gather more target criteria and to verify the results of this study. Alternatively the tool itself could be conceptualized as an adaptive model where consumers could for example also contribute with new inputs while running the model. An extended research on the feasibility of an adaptive version of the modified scoring model is therefore recommended.