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Ethical consumption in Iceland

Results from an exploratory study in consumer awareness

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Ethical consumption has been defined as “the conscious and deliberate decision to make certain consumption choices due to personal moral beliefs and values” (Crane & Matten, 2004, p. 290).

Studies on “green consumerism” started to appear in the 1980’s in England; “green” was later substituted by “ethical” as the range of morally relevant topics broadened (Newholm & Shaw, 2007). The term “ethical consumption” now generally includes concerns spanning from environmental protection, to animal welfare, to human and workers’ rights (Tallontire, Rentsendorj, & Blowfield, 2001).

In the past few decades the phenomenon of ethical consumption has become increasingly relevant.

From an economic point of view, ethical concerns have already affected specific markets (for example, those of elephant ivory and dolphin-safe tuna; Nyborg, Howarth, & Brekke, 2006), and ethical consumption is still growing, both in numbers and popularity (Auger, Devinney, Louviere, & Burke, 2010; Co-operative Bank, 2011). Businesses have reacted by starting to openly accept responsibility for their practices and enacting self-regulation projects (often under the label of Corporate Social Responsibility) which aim at increasing the firm’s positive contributions to society. This shift in business practices is so relevant that some marketers have claimed that “ethical consumption is perhaps the biggest movement in branding today” (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Moy, 2008)

From a political point of view, ethical consumption has been indicated as a crucial factor in the shift towards sustainable development (Tallontire et al., 2001; Thøgersen & Schrader, 2012). The EU Sustainable Development Strategy includes the transformation of consumption and production patterns into more sustainable ones as one of the key challenges to be faced in coming years (Jäger, 2011). Clear links have been shown between various ethical consumption practices and environmental protection and sustainability (Michaelis, 2003; Ransom, 2006).

Academic and business studies investigating the ethics of consumer behaviour started to appear in the mid-1990’s; their number has been steadily increasing since, in relation to the growing relevance, and mainstreaming, of the debate on sustainability (Bray, Johns, & Kilburn, 2011; Thøgersen & Schrader, 2012).

Despite the increasing significance of the subject from a social, political and ecological point of view, it has been lamented that ethical consumption is still an understudied field (Bray et al., 2011; Newholm & Shaw, 2007). This objection is especially valid in Iceland, a developed country with high levels of consumption which was recently revealed to be the nation with the largest Ecological Footprint in the world (Sigurður E. Jóhannesson, 2010). The Ecological Footprint is a sustainability indicator which measures the disparity between human consumption and availability of resources. A person’s or a country’s consumption levels are calculated in global hectares, a weighted measure which translates into the amount of land needed to

produce the resources and absorb the waste of the given subject (Global Footprint Network, 2012). Basing on the global bio-capacity, it has been calculated that if the world's population consumed as much as an Icelander, we would need 21 Earths to sustain us (Sigurður E. Jóhannesson, 2010).

Despite the high relevance of the topic, specific analyses on consumption patterns and styles in Iceland have been very limited in number and scope. Studies on ethics in consumption, in particular, are severely lacking; the few studies available on the topic have noted little awareness and interest in the topic among the population (Ragna B. Garðarsdóttir, Ásdís Arnalds & Friðrik H. Jónsson, 2008; TemaNord, 2003). However, those studies were limited in both scope and content. Therefore our research - part of which is presented here - aims to provide an insight into the status of ethical consumption among Icelandic consumers. Such knowledge is fundamental to design appropriate measures to support the diffusion of ethical concerns, pro-environmental policies and consequently pro-environmental and more sustainable behaviours, in the larger population.

The aim of the present paper is to provide preliminary descriptive information as to the levels of awareness of ethical consumer issues. Based on the scarce previous research findings we predict that issues related to ethical consumption will be unfamiliar to the respondents and that they will display infrequent ethical consumer behaviour.

As the sample was not representative, the results should not be generalized to the population as a whole, as it is expected that people who are already interested in the topic of ethical consumption are more inclined to respond to such a survey. Rather, our study intended to give a glimpse as to the levels of awareness and understanding of green and ethical issues.

Methodology

Participants and procedure

The data was collected via an online survey in May of 2012. Number of completed questionnaires was 425. As is to be expected in surveys relying on volunteers, the majority of respondents, 310 (72,9%), were female and 112 (26,4%) were male. Three respondents (0,7%) preferred not to provide information on their gender. Average age of respondents was 37 years ($sd = 11$, range = 19 - 73). The sample was collected via convenience sampling employing both a university mailing list and a social networking site. Participation was voluntary.

Measures

The questionnaire, which was in Icelandic, was created for the purposes of the present research. The items were intended to gauge knowledge of ethical consumption, ethical consumer behaviour as well as attitudes towards ethical consumption.

Knowledge

Knowledge of ethical consumption was measured primarily by asking respondents about their level of familiarity with terms relating to the area of ethical consumption and production; testing recognition of Eco-labels and asking about awareness of GMO.

Respondents were presented with the following list of terms: Green; Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO); Eco-label; Fairtrade; Organic; Ethical consumption;

Carbon Footprint or Ecological Footprint¹; Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Each term was presented in Icelandic with its English translation in brackets. Respondents were asked to report how familiar they were with each term and its meaning on a 4-point scale ranging from total unfamiliarity (“I have never heard of this term”) to perfect knowledge (“I have heard this term and know exactly what it means”).

To test Eco-label recognition nineteen Eco-label logos were presented to the respondents, who were asked to “check” all the logos they remembered having come across. No question was asked on actual knowledge of their meaning, or what they entailed. The Eco-labels were chosen based on their presence, or relevance, in the Icelandic consumer panorama.

Respondents were asked if they felt confident in identifying GMO products (*Can you tell which foods are GMO?*), possible responses were “Yes”, “No” and “It’s impossible to tell”. Respondents were then asked a number of questions regarding GMO’s such as and whether they knew how GM products differed from other products.

Behaviour and behavioural motivations

Ethical consumer behaviour was checked with two yes or no questions, which focused on previous purchases of organic foods and Fairtrade products. Further, behavioural motivations were measured by asking reasons for buying or not buying organic and Fairtrade products. Respondents were asked to rate importance of reasons for buying or not buying organic products on a 4-point Likert-like scale. Questions on Fairtrade were structured as multiple choice: respondents were required to check all motives that applied for buying / not buying Fairtrade.

Attitudes

Concerns about environmental degradation and responsibility for the environment were checked by asking respondents to signal agreement or disagreement (on a 5-point Likert scale) with 19 statements regarding the relevance of environmental problems and matters of responsibility. Responsibility for environmental protection and restoration was also checked in a following question. Respondents were asked to rate, on a 4-point Likert-type scale, how responsible six different subjects were (Scientists and specialists; International bodies e.g. the UN; National bodies, such as the government; NGOs; Companies; Individuals).

Results and discussion

Knowledge

Three terms (“Organic”, “Green”, “Fairtrade”) were well known by the majority (> 50%) of respondents (Figure 1); three terms (“GMO”, “CSR”, “Eco-label”) were well known by at least 30% of respondents. A gender analysis revealed that fewer men than women knew exactly what was meant by the terms “Eco-label” (men = 24%, women = 34%), “Fairtrade” (men = 40%, women = 55%) and “Organic” (men = 55%, women = 73%). These differences were significant, as supported by Chi square tests.

¹ Although the terms are not strictly interchangeable (Ecological Footprint is a broader concept than Carbon Footprint, which it often includes), they have here been paired in order to simplify the discussion and also because they are often used alongside in the public discourse, as for example in many footprints calculators.

The two least known terms (“Carbon Footprint” and “Ethical consumption”) were well known to 23,6% and 11,3% of respondents respectively. Nearly 40% of the respondents had never heard of ethical consumption, and 31% had never heard of carbon/ecological footprint. These data support our hypothesis that ethical consumption is not widely known in Iceland.

The limited awareness of these two terms is of critical interest. Ethical consumption has become an omnipresent term in discussions about both consumerism and responsible business models (Devinney, Auger, & Eckhardt, 2010). Making private and public consumption sustainable is one of the core aims of the Nordic Strategy for Sustainable Development, initiated in 2010. Nordic governments are responsible for the creation of incentives and rules which contribute to the shift towards greener consumption and production. This includes (but is not limited to) stimulating the demand for more ethical and sustainable products (Norden, 2012).

The concept of Ecological Footprint is especially relevant in Iceland for the reasons outlined earlier. It is also increasingly visible in a consumer context, as “carbon footprint” labels on products, indicating the item’s environmental impact, have known a fast increase in the past few years (de Koning, Schowanek, Dewaele, Weisbrod, & Guinée, 2010).

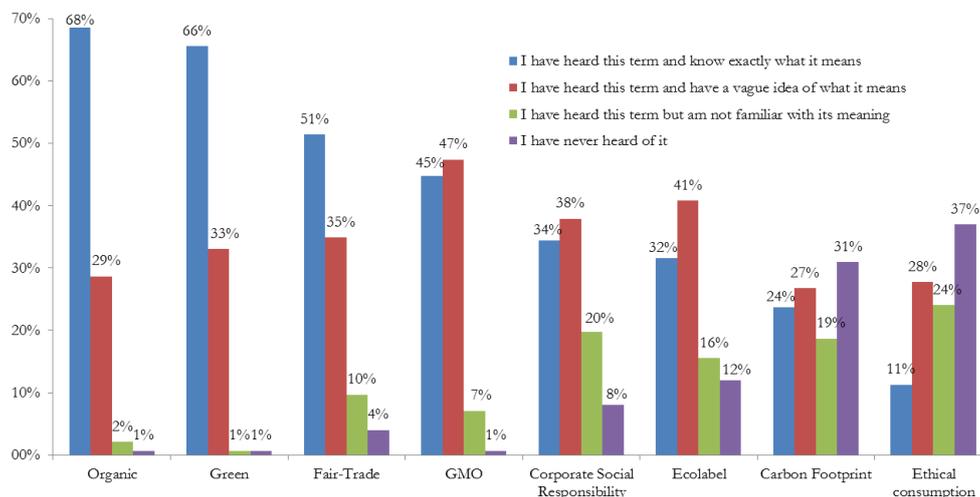


Figure 1. Knowledge of terms related to ethical consumption

On average, respondents recognised 6 of the 19 Eco-labels presented to them ($Mdn = 5$; range = 0 – 16). The most commonly known label (Figure 2) was the “Recycled / recyclable content”. It is, incidentally, not a proper Eco-label, as it is not certified by a third party agency (Umhverfisstofnun, n.d.).

The two Nordic Eco-labels (the Nordic Swan and the Nordic Keyhole) appeared to be well known to most respondents. This data is consistent with official statistics regarding the knowledge of the Nordic Swan in Iceland (Nordic Eco-labelling, 2011). The figure is, nonetheless, significantly low if compared to other Nordic countries, where 93,5% of the population is familiar with the Swan logo (Nordic Eco-labelling).

The fourth most recognised logo, the Fairtrade symbol, was known to 60,9% of respondents.

The EarthCheck symbol, a touristic Eco-label, was among the three least known labels, despite the fact that a whole Icelandic community (the five municipalities of the Snafellsnes peninsula) has been holding the certification, and displaying the logo, for the past 4 years (EarthCheck, 2011; Framkvæmdaráð Snæfellsness, 2012).

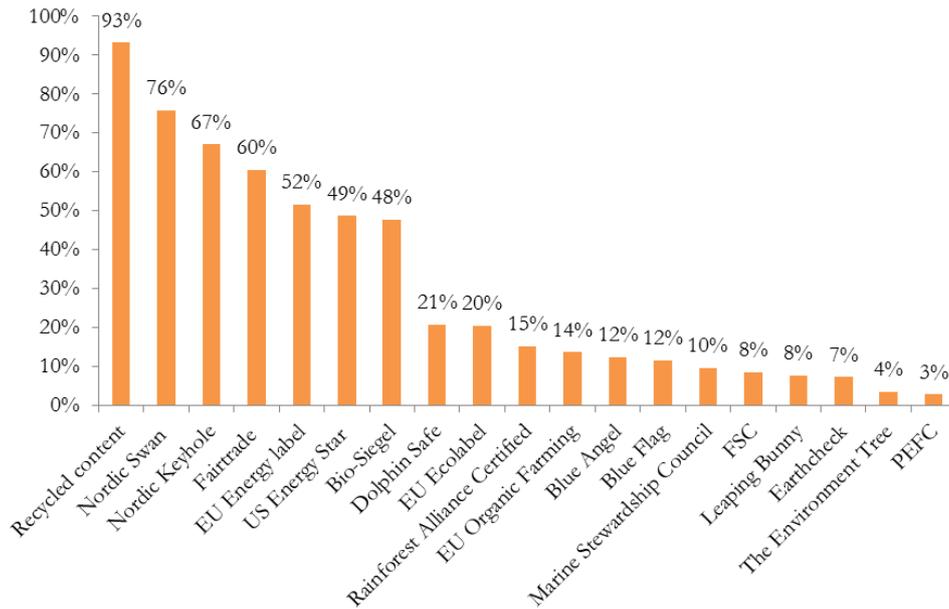


Figure 2. Knowledge of Eco-labels, ordered from best to least known

The level of Eco-label recognition (based on the number of logos clicked) was crossed with the knowledge of the term “Eco-labels” (from the previously cited question on terms awareness). The better respondents claimed to know the term, the more Eco-labels they recognised (Figure 3), indicating an association between knowledge of the concept and awareness of ethical consumption options. Those who had never heard the term Eco-label recognized on average 4,1 labels ($sd = 2,16$) while those who knew exactly what was meant by the term Eco-label recognized on average 7,5 labels ($sd = 3,10$), $F(2,420) = 33,99$; $p < ,001$.

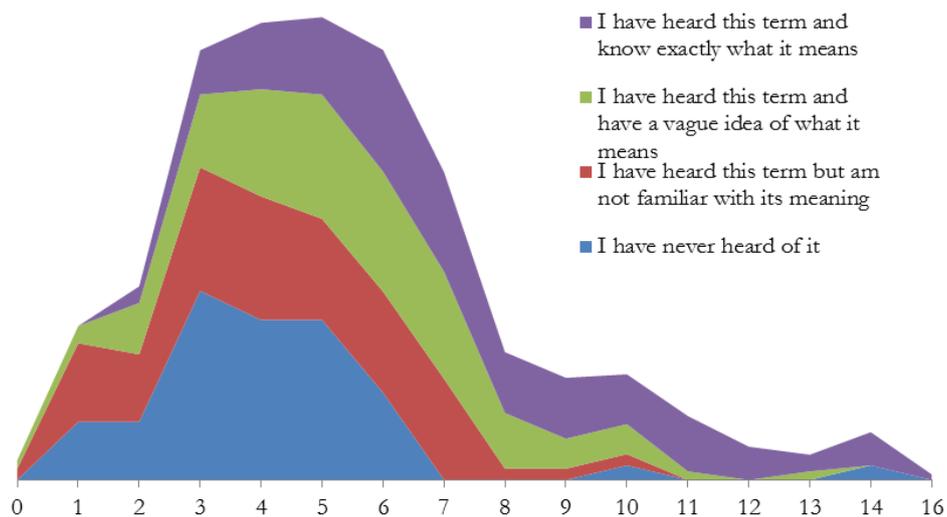


Figure 3. Knowledge of the term “Eco-label” and number of Eco-labels recognised

Behaviour and behavioural motivations

The majority of respondents (58%) reported buying organic products when they were available; 32,1% answered “no” and 9,8% chose “I don’t know”. Relatively fewer men (42,6%) than women (62,8%) reported buying organic food .

Those respondents who claimed to buy organic products were asked a follow up question about their reasons for buying organic.

Four out of the seven statements were judged as “very important” by the majority of respondents: “Because they are good for the environment” (67,8%); “Because they are healthier” (59,6%); “Because I want to support Icelandic production” (59,4%) and “Because animals are treated more ethically” (53,6%). The emphasis on health and pro-environmental concerns among the top reasons is consistent with the literature on organic products buying motivations (Cervellon, Hjerth, Ricard, & Carey, 2010; Hustvedt & Dickson, 2009). Two of the top four reasons – the first one and the fourth one- are evidently driven by ethical concerns. The third most chosen item, “Because I want to support Icelandic production” may be read as an ethical concern (food miles) or it could be seen as a form of domestic country bias (Auger, et al., 2010; Eden, Bear, & Walker, 2008). It has been here interpreted as an ethical-related concern for local produce because of the strong positive correlation this item has with “Because they are good for the environment” ($r = ,48; p < ,01$), as well as a significant, if weaker, correlation with “Because it is the right thing to do” ($r = ,34; p < ,01$) and “Because animals are treated more ethically” ($r = ,33; p < ,01$).

Most respondents appear to assign more importance to public rather than private benefits. Of the most important reasons for buying organic, only health benefits are solely self-directed; the other three main buying motivations are hetero-directed.

When asked about previous purchases of Fairtrade products, the majority (65,4%) of respondents answered that they had previously bought Fairtrade-labelled items; 5,1% said they hadn’t, and 29,4% were not sure. Even if Fairtrade products are now considered mainstream in many Western countries, and are especially popular in European markets (Carrigan & Pelsmacker, 2009; European Union, 2009; Newholm & Shaw, 2007), they appear to be little known to Icelandic customers, as more than one fourth of respondents did not know whether they had ever bought Fairtrade products.

It is also worth pointing out that 65,4% ($n = 267$) of respondents reported they had previously purchased Fairtrade items. However, only 216 of these 267 respondents had previously recognised the Fairtrade Eco-label (question 2). The 51 respondents who claimed they had previously bought Fairtrade, yet did not recognize the label, may be considered as either confused or displaying some desirability bias.

Respondents who had previously purchased Fairtrade items were asked reasons for buying Fairtrade. As they did in response to the organic aspects, respondents rated ethical and pro-environmental reasons among the most important (Figure 4).

The top 3 reasons for buying Fairtrade were “Because it is an issue I feel strongly about”, “Because it is the right thing to do” and “Because it eases my conscience”. The three reasons were shown to be strongly correlated, corroborating the idea of an ethical, concerned consumer (Table 1).

Respondents who did not buy Fairtrade products indicated, as the most frequent reason for not purchasing Fairtrade, “Because I do not know what Fairtrade actually means/entails” (52,4%). The second most frequently chosen reason was “Because they are hard to find” (43%). Only 5 respondents chose “Because this issue is not one of my priorities”, thus indicating that lack of concern for the issue was not the reason.

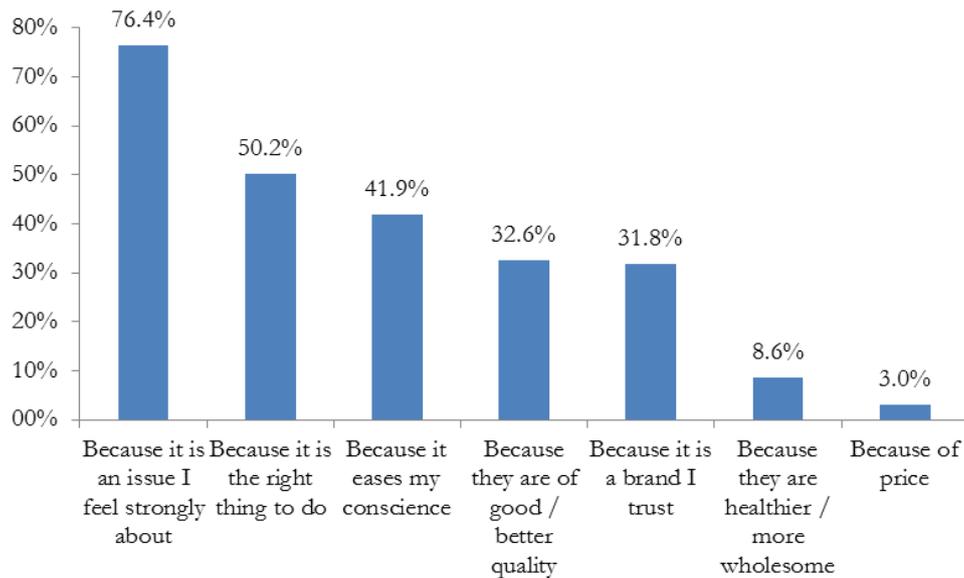


Figure 4. Buying motivations of Fairtrade items

Table 1. Pearson correlations of buying motivations for Fairtrade products

	Because it is a brand I trust	Because they are of good / better quality	Because of price	Because they are healthier / more wholesome	Because it is an issue I feel strongly about	Because it is the right thing to do	Because it eases my conscience
Because it is a brand I trust	1	,373**	,017	,218**	,297**	,170**	,208**
Because they are of good / better quality	-	1	,058	,368**	,330**	,274**	,226**
Because of price	-	-	1	,120*	,006	-,019	-,004
Because they are healthier / more wholesome	-	-	-	1	,145**	,108*	,164**
Because it is an issue I feel strongly about	-	-	-	-	1	,591**	,516**
Because it is the right thing to do	-	-	-	-	-	1	,541**
Because it eases my conscience	-	-	-	-	-	-	1

* $p < ,05$; ** $p < ,01$

Attitudes towards environmental issues

Respondents reported high levels of concern regarding environmental issues: 82% disagreed or disagreed strongly with the claim that environmental impacts are overstated; 81% agreed or strongly agreed that they are concerned about pollution; 80% agreed or strongly agreed they were worried about natural resource exploitation; while 66% agreed or strongly agreed that they were concerned about climate change (Table 2). The rate of respondents who perceived climate change as a serious threat is in line with other European states; according to 2011 data, 6 to 7 out of 10 European citizens believe that climate change is a very serious problem (European Commission, 2011).

Most respondents (83%) did not agree with the statement that the environmental impacts of their actions are too complicated for them to understand and worry about, thus indicating that environmental issues have a high level of relevance for the respondents.

Table 2. Attitudes about the environment and responsibility for environmental protection

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Each individual / household can contribute to a better environment	1,9%	1,0%	1,9%	23,4%	71,8%
Environmental threats and impacts are frequently overstated	52,0%	30,3%	12,4%	3,8%	1,4%
Environmental issues should be dealt with primarily by future generations	65,9%	20,6%	5,8%	3,1%	4,6%
Environmental issues will be resolved primarily through technological progress	20,6%	30,6%	28,4%	17,8%	2,6%
I am concerned about climate change	6,4%	9,5%	18,9%	39,6%	25,5%
Environmental policies introduced by the government to address environmental issues should not cost me extra money	18,1%	36,3%	29,2%	10,7%	5,7%
I do what is right for the environment, even when it costs more money or takes more time	3,6%	12,6%	27,1%	42,8%	14,0%
I am concerned about pollution	1,2%	5,0%	13,3%	44,9%	35,6%
There are more important things to do in life than protect the environment	15,3%	33,4%	28,9%	15,8%	6,7%
There is no point in doing what I can about the environment unless others do the same	49,5%	37,9%	7,9%	3,8%	1,0%
I find it hard to know whether the way I live is helpful or harmful to the environment	17,8%	35,8%	23,7%	20,9%	1,9%
The environmental impacts of my actions are too complicated for me to understand and worry about	35,6%	46,5%	15,0%	2,4%	0,5%
I am concerned about the overexploitation of natural resources (forests, water, energy)	3,1%	7,6%	9,1%	41,1%	39,1%
I wish I knew more about the environmental impacts of my actions and choices	4,5%	9,3%	21,7%	45,3%	19,1%
When I buy a product, there are other aspects (such as price, brand and looks) which are more important to me than its environmental impact	8,1%	24,6%	32,9%	29,1%	5,3%
I am worried about endangered species and the reduction of biodiversity	5,7%	9,0%	18,1%	39,0%	28,1%
Compared to most other nations, Icelanders are very environmentally friendly	30,7%	32,4%	27,8%	7,4%	1,7%
Compared to most other nations, Icelanders are very environmentally aware	27,9%	34,6%	26,0%	10,3%	1,2%

The majority of respondents agreed that they would like to know more about the environmental impacts of their actions. Respondents also appear to believe that Icelanders could benefit from more environmental education: 63% disagreed with the statements “Compared to most other nations, Icelanders are very environmentally friendly” and “Compared to most other nations, Icelanders are very environmentally aware”. This perception that respondents have of other Icelanders appears at odds with the previous responses to the survey: in fact, the majority of respondents reported purchasing organic and Fairtrade goods; they said they do what is right for the environment, even if it costs them more time or money; they agreed that it is worth doing everything they possibly can for the environment even though others do not do the same.

The conflict between the respondents’ self-portrayal and their perception of others as less environmental than they are may be explained with the concept of illusory superiority, a bias which causes people to believe that they possess positive characteristics to a greater extent than the average (Hoorens, 1993). An alternative explanation for this discrepancy is that the respondents’ inability to imagine other Icelanders engaged in pro-environmental behaviour might be due to a relative absence

of such topics in the public discourse. This argument is based on the concept of “availability heuristic”, which suggests that people’s assessment of others’ behaviours is influenced by their ability to imagine such behaviours. People tend to judge an event improbable if they cannot readily recall examples of its occurrence (Nyborg et al., 2006). Finally, the possibility of a sample bias cannot be excluded, as people who volunteer to respond to a questionnaire on environmental and ethical topics might be more aware of these issues than the general population.

Responsibility

Concern and interest in environmental and ethical issues was positively correlated with beliefs in personal commitment and responsibility, and negatively correlated with beliefs that environmental consequences are too complicated, and should therefore be solved by technology and future generations rather than through personal action (Table 3).

Concerned respondents, who believe environmental threats to be pressing, tend therefore to assign higher levels of responsibility to individuals.

Nonetheless in the question which dealt directly with responsibility for environmental protection, the large majority of respondents (87%) rated individuals as very accountable. No respondent thought that individuals bore no responsibility for environmental defence. Only governments were considered to be “very responsible” more often than individuals (88%).

Table 3. Concern for the environment and personal responsibility: selected correlations

	Environmental threats and impacts are frequently overstated	I am concerned about climate change	I am concerned about pollution	There are more important things to do in life than protect the environment	I am concerned about the overexploitation of natural resources (forests, water, energy)	I am worried about endangered species and the reduction of biodiversity
Each individual / household can contribute to a better environment	-,445**	,229**	,313**	-,134**	,126*	,127**
Environmental issues should be dealt with primarily by future generations	,202**	-,110*	-,150**	,189**	-,178**	-,183**
Environmental issues will be resolved primarily through technological progress	,402**	-,289**	-,291**	,249**	-,145**	-,201**
Environmental policies introduced by the government to address environmental issues should not cost me extra money	,242**	-,227**	-,226**	,210**	-,142**	-,228**
I do what is right for the environment, even when it costs more money or takes more time	-,278**	,324**	,440**	-,271**	,228**	,275**
There is no point in doing what I can about the environment unless others do the same	-,319**	-,280**	-,355**	,247**	-,303**	-,272**
The environmental impacts of my actions are too complicated for me to understand and worry about	,337**	-,309**	-,320**	,185**	-,243**	-,242**

* $p < ,05$; ** $p < ,01$

Conclusions

The results of this survey point towards a gap between the values (“Attitudes”) that the respondents hold, and their ability to act on them, due to their patchy knowledge of ethical consumption.

High reported concern for environmental issues is not matched by a corresponding level of awareness of green consumerism: the respondents are mostly unfamiliar with the concept of ethical consumption; they know few Eco-labels (which are arguably the main tool consumers can use to choose, and point business towards, greener products (Rex & Baumann, 2007); they tend to believe they purchase greener than they probably do (as is apparent in the inconsistency regarding Fairtrade buyers reported above).

Nonetheless, the answers show a strong belief in the idea of personal responsibility and ability to make a difference: The respondents’ concerns about environmental problems are positively correlated to the idea that they are in charge of finding a solution.

Respondents assign high responsibility for change to the state and to individuals.

Although the individuals in the sample display a strong belief that *every little bit counts*, it has been argued that a shift to more sustainable patterns of consumption will be unfeasible on an individual basis. There are several reasons for this: Consumption is not an individual project, but occurs in a shared social network; individuals have to make an effort to look for information on the green attributes of products from multiple sources, which are often unreliable or have a vested interest; as consumers, individuals are faced with multiple, contradicting stimuli, so that sustainability issues have to compete with financial concerns and aesthetic preferences, among other things (Michaelis, 2000; Tallontire et al., 2001; Thøgersen & Schrader, 2012).

The Nordic Strategy for Sustainable Development underlines the responsibility of governments in creating the necessary preconditions for a shift towards greener lifestyles. The Strategy aims at combining the provision of environmental information, to increase the citizens’ awareness of the impact of their actions, with an increased availability of eco-friendly solutions, ranging from public transport options to organic products (Norden, 2012). The state is thus seen as responsible for creating the right context for individual action by increasing levels of general knowledge as well as creating incentives to help consumers concentrate their limited efforts on the most environmentally sound options.

Due to the nature of the sample (convenience sample of volunteers) the results of this research cannot be generalized to the whole population of Iceland.

In ethical surveys, respondents are liable to answer according to socially acceptable norms rather than actual behaviour (Tallontire et al., 2001). The possibility of a desirability bias has thus to be taken into consideration. Future research should investigate Icelandic consumers’ ethical concerns in the field of consumption more in depth, in order to get a more precise image of consumers’ levels of awareness and relevant behaviours as regards the issues in question. The differences in terms of both knowledge and concern that the two genders displayed in this research should be investigated further. Men have, elsewhere, been defined as biased towards cynicism when it comes to environmental matters (ecoAmerica & SRIC-BI, 2006). Whether that is the case in Iceland, or whether women are, on the other hand, more biased towards giving desirable answers is a point worth exploring.

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