Ethical Food: Transitioning Towards Sustainable Meat Consumption?

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Introduction

Contrary to its ‘mythical’ status, the ethical consumption market continues to show impressive growth (Newholm & Shaw, 2007; Newholm, Newholm & Shaw, 2015; Carrigan, 2017). For example, in contrast to the conventional food market which declined by 0.9% in 2015, ethical food markets grew by over 5% and are estimated to have a net value of just over £9 billion (Ethical Consumer, 2016). These consumption trends are further supported by the mainstreaming of ethical food products sold in supermarkets (Doherty & Tranchell, 2007; McEachern, 2015) and increasing availability of ethical retail outlets such as Unicorn in Manchester and HisBe in Brighton (McEachern & Warnaby, 2017). Despite these positive foundations and greater visibility of the ethical consumption movement, ethical food consumption remains challenging for consumers as it requires continuous information-seeking, deliberation and negotiation across a variety of food contexts. Thus, triggering what appears to be flexible and often unpredictable consumption behaviours (Carrigan & Atala, 2001; Schröder & McEachern, 2004; Szmigin, Carrigan & McEachern, 2009; Carrington, Neville & Whitwell, 2014; Newholm, Newholm & Shaw, 2015; Carrigan, 2017). When attempting to transition towards a sustainable, responsible and/or ethical lifestyle, a particular consumption behaviour that continues to challenge consumers is the responsible consumption of meat. This consumption dilemma is especially highlighted by Schröder and McEachern (2004) and DEFRA (2008) who both draw attention to the increased concerns of consumers towards animal welfare, social justice and the environment but simultaneously acknowledge the reluctance of consumers to adapt their meat consumption to achieve a lower impact diet. Although this food purchasing context has received substantial academic attention over the last twenty years (see Frewer et al., 2005; McEachern et al., 2007; Miele & Lever, 2013; Graça, Oliveira & Calheiros, 2015), revisiting this topic is considered timely as research points to an increasing awareness of the associated environmental impact and animal welfare issues (Miele & Lever, 2013; Wexler, 2016) as well as a distinct shift in consumer attitudes towards reducing meat consumption (Lever & Evans, 2017). Consequently, this commentary aims to update previous knowledge and provide a more current overview of the underpinning ethical issues associated with the consumption of meat. In so doing, this article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of ethical consumer behaviour in this context, as well as shed light on the more flexible coping strategies adopted by consumers to reduce consumption behaviours that are perceived as being unsustainable.
Ethical Issues Associated with the Consumption of Meat

Throughout the 20th century, the growth of environmental and animal rights activism led to animal welfare and the environment as being the two main dimensions when discussing sustainable and/or ethical food production (Miele & Lever, 2013; Grunert, Hieke & Wills, 2014). Although public concern about animal welfare began as early in the 1960’s as a result of Harrison’s (1964) seminal work titled ‘Animal Machines’, it was only after a series of food scares and prominent media campaigns around animal confinement (e.g. tethered sows, battery hens,veal crates etc.) in the 1980s and 1990s, that consumer concern reached a broader level of awareness, resulting in public calls for greater assurances around safety, animal welfare and quality. As seen in Table 1, the UK food industry duly responded with a variety of assurance schemes and quality labels to assist the consumer in making ethical choices (McEachern & Tregear, 2000; Ortega & Wolf, 2018).

Table 1 Main UK Meat Assurance Schemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LABELLING SCHEME</th>
<th>The Red Tractor</th>
<th>Freedom Food</th>
<th>Lion Quality Mark</th>
<th>The Soil Association</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Standards Covered | Food safety  
Animal welfare  
Env. protection | Animal Welfare | Food safety  
Diet  
Traceability | Animal welfare  
Diet  
Envt. protection  
Food processing  
Packaging |
| Certifying Body  | Assured Food Standards | RSPCA | British Egg Industry Council | The Soil Association |
| Date Established | 2002 | 1994 | 1998 | 1946 |

However, aside from the RSPCA and the Soil Association (i.e. international organic certification), most schemes/labels largely emphasised the safety and traceability aspects (see Ilbery & Kneafsey, 2000) rather than go beyond minimum standards relating to animal welfare criteria (McEachern & Tregear, 2000; McEachern et al., 2007). Moreover, minimal attempts to educate the consumer regarding underpinning animal welfare and environmental standards of these initiatives resulted in consumers making limited cognitive links between their consumption behaviour and the live animal (Schröder & McEachern, 2004). Since the 2000s however, only a minority of consumers saw animal welfare as a top priority when purchasing meat (Verbeke, 2009; Brook Lyndhurst, 2012). Similarly, despite much attention given to supermarket policies on farm animal welfare as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies (see McEachern, 1997; Maloni & Brown, 2006; Spence & Bourlakis, 2009), a focus on animal welfare is seen as risky by the industry and thus, largely ignored in favour of reporting on wider concerns around environmental sustainability (Lever & Evans, 2017). With growing meat consumption in other parts of the world such as China, it is also argued that little priority and/or any consistency in animal welfare standards across International markets are put in place to help educate/inform consumers.
Despite the evidence being mixed with regards to whether consumer concerns around the environment and animal welfare are associated (Brook Lyndhurst, 2012), improved animal production is widely linked to improved sustainable development (De Backer & Hudders, 2014; Lever & Evans, 2017). Much of this literature relates to two key environmental issues associated with meat production – greenhouse gases and the use of water. Interestingly, throughout the meat consumption discourse, limited criticism and/or consumer-led campaigns centre on agriculture’s use of water. This is surprising given that the agriculture and food sector are by far the largest consumer of water, extracting up to 70% of all global withdrawals (The World Bank, 2018). Although the added greenhouse gases of methane and nitrous oxide which are considered to be much stronger than carbon dioxide, Wexler (2016) compares the beef industry as recording a greenhouse gas impact of up to 129 kg CO₂; the chicken industry as 6 kg CO₂; and the soya-based meat substitute sector as much as 2 kg CO₂. This reveals a greater environmental impact of the red meat sector compared to pork and chicken production. However, should the production of soya beans take place on deforested land in the Amazon, this would increase the greenhouse gas impact to 16.5 kg CO₂ (Wexler, 2016). This is problematic for the consumer to make an informed choice due to inadequate country-of-origin labelling legislation, thus emphasising the warranted importance of transparent and credible labelling surrounding the origin/provenance of food products. Nonetheless, in contrast to animal welfare communication policies, sustainability-led campaigns around the environmental impact of meat production have been plainly-spoken and avoided weakening the cognitive links between consumption of meat and the impact upon our climate. This has resulted in growing public concern and more importantly, greater engagement during purchase and therefore, become more visible and widespread since the beginning of the 21st century (Miele & Lever, 2013).

**Sustainable Consumption of Meat**

The success of the environmental argument around food production and how it is inherently associated with the sustainability discourse is clear to see. While many continue to question the limits of consumers’ willingness to pay, or adopt sustainable alternatives, especially when it comes to meat (see Ortega & Wolf, 2018), 7% and 5% of the UK population are now considered to be vegan and vegetarian respectively and 25% of consumers have reduced their meat consumption (Vegetarian Society, 2013). This statistic is offset against the consumption of meat as a symbolic value of celebration (e.g. the wedding feast) and ritual (e.g. the meat-based Christmas dinner) which proves difficult for many consumers to give up. Browne et al., (2017) also identifies cultural reluctances to give up meat and acknowledges the tensions between rising incomes (e.g. ability to afford meat) and increasing urbanisation (i.e. expanding disassociation with the rural landscape) as reasons why global meat consumption continues to form a key part of the diet and in some cases, increase consumption further. Another primary reason that prevents consumers from giving up meat is their attachment to meat consumption (Corrin & Papadapoulis, 2017) especially in terms of inter-generational practices being passed down as part of family traditions; and secondly, an unwillingness to give it up completely (Graça, Oliveira & Calheiros, 2015).

Arguably however, an increasing awareness of the sustainability issues from younger Western consumers has played
a significant part in persuading consumers to reduce their meat consumption (De Backer & Hudders, 2014). Supported by meat reduction campaigns such as ‘Eating Better’ by NGOs and celebrity chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall who calls for consumers to eat less meat and support farming systems that benefit the environment, health and animal welfare (see WWF, 2013). Other NGO campaigns such as Meat-free Mondays and Veganuary, led to over a third of consumers indicating a willingness to reduce their meat consumption (Vegetarian Society, 2013), resulting in the worldwide growth of ‘flexitarianism’ and ‘reducetarianism’ dietary trends. Flexitarianism describes a trend whereby the individual remains flexible but is conscious about food decisions, as well as ethical and environmental concerns (Ambler, 2017). While flexitarians mainly eat plant-based foods along with the occasional consumption of meat, eggs, and dairy, reducetarians instead, gradually reduce their consumption of animal products. This reductionism is also evidenced by Statista (2017) who conclude that 56% (i.e. 23% strongly agree; 33% agree) of consumers now feel that they do not need meat to have a good meal. Compared to the one-size fits all argument whereby meat eaters are condemned by vegetarians/vegans, the ethos of both reductionist trends away from meat consumption is underpinned by a pragmatic and flexible acceptance, that it is significantly better to make meaningful changes to our diet no matter how small. Interestingly, rather than respond with promises to implement improved animal welfare and environmental policies, the meat production industry in the US has retaliated by launching a website titled ‘Meat Myth Crushers’ (2018), whereby attempts to refute claims around health impacts and environmental impacts are made. Simultaneously, the Veganuary charity (Veganuary, 2018) is capitalising on the popularity of flexitarianism and reducetarianism trends, and encourages consumers to shun meat/meat products throughout the month of January. In January 2017, of the consumers who participated, 67% say they will remain vegan in the future and of those not staying vegan 95% say they will reduce or stop eating meat from cows and 92% say they will reduce or stop eating meat from chickens. Small steps to achieve the latter are promoted by ethical supermarkets such as Unicorn and HiSBe (see Note 1) who are also aligned to providing local produce, improved welfare and sustainable fish/meat provision. However, these advances could be much greater if supported by the main retailers also regarding their CSR strategies (Lever & Evans, 2017). Thus, potentially enabling producers, retailers and consumers to lay the foundation towards a more sustainable food system overall.

Conclusion

This commentary aimed to contribute towards a more nuanced understanding of ethical consumer behaviour in the context of meat consumption, as well as shed light on the more flexible coping strategies (e.g. flexitarianism, reducetarianism) adopted by consumers to reduce consumption behaviours that are perceived as being unsustainable. While these strategies become more popular with younger, millennial consumers, another sustainable option becoming more prevalent across the globe is the practice of entomophagy (consuming insects as food). Further research around whether flexitarians and/or reducetarians are willing to consume alternative sources of protein to save the planet could be undertaken to assess the impact this could have on the sustainability of the meat industry.
Notes

1 Ethical retail outlets such as Unicorn and HiSBe are alternative supermarkets to the dominant retail multiples such as Tesco and Asda (McEachern & Warnaby, 2017). They are described as ‘alternative’ due to their alternative organisational structures (e.g. often associated with co-operative business models as opposed to shareholder business models) and their ethical principles associated with sourcing food products fairly and sustainably; provision of fairtrade, organic, and/or welfare-friendly ethical food products; provide a duty of care towards their employees; and contribute towards the community.

2 Although often used interchangeably, this commentary uses the term ‘sustainable’ to describe a food production system that meets environmental, health, social and economic concerns sustainably (e.g. see Belz & Peattie, 2010). The term ethical consumption covers a wide range of concerns/behaviours from animal welfare, labour standards and human rights to questions of health and wellbeing and environmental and community sustainability. Responsible consumption refers to taking personal responsibility for the environmental costs and consequences of your consumption patterns and lifestyle. Being responsible or ethical, can help an individual to follow a more sustainable lifestyle.

3 Animal welfare promotion (especially in Western markets) is seen as risky by the global meat industry as it reminds consumers that they are consuming what was once a live animal. As named farmers and celebrity chef’s help to promote certain welfare-friendly brands, the retail sector generally design shopping environments and meat marketing campaigns to remove any such associations.

References


Biography

Morven G. McEachern is Professor of Sustainability & Ethics at the University of Huddersfield. Her research interests focus on business and consumer behaviour within a variety of sustainable production and consumption contexts. In addition to a wide variety of peer-reviewed international conferences, she has published in academic journals such as Consumption, Markets and Culture, Sociology, Journal of Marketing Management and the Journal of Business Ethics. She has also co-edited various Journal special issues around her related research interests; contributed to edited books (e.g. The Ethical Consumer, Sage, 2005) and is co-author of Contemporary Issues in Green and Ethical Marketing (Routledge, 2014).

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