



# Making space for ethical consumption in the South

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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that, given the rapid growth in the middle classes across the Global South, debates about ethical consumption need to be reconfigured to admit these middle classes, not as a problem but as a possibility. It establishes the potential to constitute Southern consumption as a surface of mobilisation for ethical consumption and, through working from the specificities of the South in Bangladesh, demonstrates how within-South framings unsettle and challenge existing North–South understandings of ethical consumption. The paper makes three specific contributions. (1) It shows how North–South conceptual understandings of ethical consumption as political consumption might be reworked to admit the South. (2) Through an examination of the Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh it demonstrates the absence of a politics of consumer responsibility amongst the Bangladeshi middle classes, and suggests how a politics of responsibility might be forged, through paying attention to Southern brands and supply chains. (3) Through an examination of the Aarong retail brand of the corporate NGO BRAC, the paper shows that ethical consumption exists in Bangladesh, not as ethical consumption but as ordinary consumption with ethical effects. The paper concludes by considering the wider implications of these findings for furthering academic and practitioner debate.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper argues that ethical consumption needs to be rethought to admit Southern consumption, particularly the middle class consumers of the South. In so doing, it seeks to make space for, and to think critically about, the role of the Southern middle class consumer in a global politics of responsibility.

Our starting point is the rapid expansion since the 1990s of the middle classes outside the Global North. This phenomenon is documented in wider commentary as an effect of economic liberalisation, but it has also provided a new site for empirical research in consumption studies. Here, recent work has shown the significance beyond the Global North of classic theorisations of consumption, notably Veblen on the connections between status and conspicuous consumption, and of Bourdieu's (1984) highly influential account of distinction and taste in cultures of consumption (Hanser, 2008, 2010; Gregson et al., 2010; Podoshen et al., 2011; Lin et al., 2013). Related work has established the importance of safety and anxieties over provenance in Southern consumer cultures (see Yan, 2012; Gong and Jackson, 2013, on food safety; Yeh and Lama, 2013, on medicinal products).

As both Gregson et al. (2010) and Yeh and Lama (2013) have argued, work on consumer cultures beyond the Global North has significance beyond its contribution to consumption studies. It challenges a long-held identification in academic and practitioner literatures that sees consumption as the exclusive concern and activity of people living in the Global North. Studies of consumer cultures beyond the Global North pose trouble for the meta-theoretical framings that underpin much social scientific research, particularly political economy-based analyses of global commodity chains, global value chains and global production networks. In these highly influential accounts consumers are of the Global North, by virtue of their position at the apex of global value chains. In contrast, the economies of the Global South are characterised by export-led producers and production, be this in agriculture or manufacturing/assembly. There is little space in these accounts for either consumption or consumers in the South. This situation is increasingly untenable on empirical grounds and important in furthering debate on ethical consumption, where a broad political economy-informed conceptual underpinning holds sway, based on Northern consumers and Southern producers.

The majority of research on ethical consumption continues to focus on production in distant places, bracketing consumers from its analysis. A smaller body of work addresses ethical consumption in the Global North. It has examined ethical retailing (Hughes et al., 2013), pointed to the importance of celebrity

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marketing in promoting Fair Trade products (Goodman, 2010), and positioned ethical consumption as political consumption, that is, as an effect of strategic interventions of key agents and intermediaries (Barnett et al., 2011). In all this work an imaginary of Northern consumers and Southern producers prevails, and in Barnett et al.'s work forms the basis for thinking ethical consumption through a politics of global responsibility. In this reading, the people of the Global South are positioned as objects of care-at-a-distance for subjects in the Global North. They are the objects of campaigns over labour rights and trade injustices, and are represented as the victims of environmental degradation. In such a way, responsibility in consumption becomes the exclusive responsibility of the Northern consumer. The unstated implication is an absence of responsibility for consumers in the South, for if the ethical is attached to export markets and the consumers of the North, it leaves untouched and written out Southern consumption, Southern consumers and their connection to notions of responsibility. Further, it leaves the door open to the suggestion that ethical consumption and ethical consumers are absent from the South.

It is this last possibility that we counter in this paper. After reviewing the literature on ethical consumption, its relation to wider debates on ethical trade, and establishing its location in a North–South (consumers – producers) imaginary, we turn to the work of Hilton (2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2009) to show how consumption has been shaped by agents and intermediaries working in the South (Section 2). Here, an emphasis on consumer rights in conditions of relative poverty has led to a consumer politics focused on consumer protection and product safety. We argue that the rapid expansion of the middle classes across the Global South, when combined with consumer cultures grounded in status, distinction and conspicuous consumption, makes a rights-based approach to consumer politics in the South increasingly problematic. There is a need to make space in Southern consumer politics for consumer responsibilities as well, not least if Southern middle class consumers are to avoid charges of irresponsibility and reckless over-consumption and for the South to stake claims in a Northern-centric debate in which ethical consumption is increasingly being cast not only through trade injustices and labour rights but also through the lens of global sustainability.

As we show, the potential to work from Barnett et al.'s conceptualisation of ethical consumption to make space for the South is considerable. The force of this conceptualisation is in its potential to establish ethical consumption as a site for strategic intervention in the South. We tackle this in two ways. First, in Section 3, we examine the potential to extend accounts of ethical consumption to Southern brands. Our intention here is not just to counter an emphasis on Northern export markets by incorporating Southern brands in debates over labour conditions in the South but also to constitute a more complex surface of mobilisation of Southern manufacturing and assembly. We draw attention to the too stark separation drawn in the literature, and by activists, between (visible) export and (invisible) domestic manufacture, to the intricacies of Southern factories, which blur the lines between export and domestic manufacture, and to the potential for Southern consumers to become entangled in a wider, global politics of consumer responsibility. In Section 4 we take a different approach. Recognising that Section 3 tactic is an extension of Northern-centric understandings of ethical consumption and post-colonial arguments, which state the potential for notions of responsibility grounded in North–South understandings to be contested and refused (Noxolo et al., 2012), we take seriously the possibility that Southern consumers may refuse to accept the privilege, and attendant responsibilities, that a Northern-centric discourse of ethical consumption defines as coming with

being a consumer. We consider the potential afforded by a different model of ethical consumption, in which ethicality is mainstreamed.

Notwithstanding the wider political canvas of Sections 3 and 4, it is imperative to recognise the South is not a homogeneous site from which to theorise ethical consumption. Its heterogeneity matters. With that in mind, the site for the paper's empirics is Bangladesh, a country whose position in global apparel manufacture and trade makes it an exemplar illustration of North–South ethical consumption. As we show, however, Bangladesh can be constituted as differing, and contradictory, surfaces of mobilisation for ethical consumption. In Section 3 we draw on Barnett et al.'s account to position ethical consumption as a site of strategic intervention in Bangladesh. We work from the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster, first to establish its representation through a North–South imaginary. Second, we consider Rana Plaza's representation within Bangladesh, highlighting the absence of a politics of consumer responsibility amongst the Bangladeshi middle classes. Third, working from publicly accessible data on the supply chains which connect apparel manufacturers, domestic retailers and retail brands, we sketch a politics of possibility in which Bangladesh's middle classes might be incorporated within a politics of responsibility in relation to clothing consumption. In Section 4, through an examination of the Aarong retail brand, we show that ethical consumption is a well-established facet of middle class consumption in Bangladesh. Aarong shows the mainstreaming of social enterprise in Bangladesh. The success of this retail brand is such that it has brought social development goals (women's empowerment and support for traditional craft and artisanal production) into the homes of the Bangladeshi middle classes, but as objects of desire not as goods expressive of ethicality.

Sections 3 and 4 unsettle North–South understandings of ethical consumption. Section 4 in particular poses trouble for these accounts, showing that ethical consumption exists in Bangladesh, as consumption with ethical effects. The poverty of North–South framings of ethical consumption is that they render such activity not just invisible but also unknowable. In that regard, a key aim of the paper is to show the difference it makes to the theorisation of ethical consumption to work from the South. A subsidiary aim is to work from somewhere like Bangladesh precisely to trouble Northern-centric understandings of Bangladesh.

To begin our analysis we make some preliminary remarks about Bangladesh's middle classes and their relation to consumer cultures. This is not the Bangladesh of a Northern imaginary, dominated as this is by the legacy of being labelled the 'basket-case' failed state of South Asia (Lewis, 2011), by poverty-reduction development programmes and by a future threatened by climate change.<sup>1</sup> Bangladesh-based analysts have emphasised the importance of the middle class as a means to move away from the country's traditional reliance on global export markets, advocating domestic growth strategies based on urban, middle class consumers (Barkat, 2012). Yet, there is a dearth of research on the Bangladesh middle class. Vernacular accounts point to its origins in the pre-colonial upper castes of Bengal and then in the British colonial period and the state-controlled industries of East Pakistan, before highlighting a new middle class consequent upon economic liberalisation, private

<sup>1</sup> Web of Science searches on Bangladesh show a country whose place in academic knowledge is defined by poverty-reduction development programmes, flood risk and climate change adaptation. Other work has appeared recently on domestic violence, arsenic poisoning, recycling industries, and the Bangladeshi middle class diaspora. This complicates, but has yet to disrupt, prevailing representations of the country.

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