



## Research report

# Savouring morality. Moral satisfaction renders food of ethical origin subjectively tastier <sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Past research has shown that the experience of taste can be influenced by a range of external cues, especially when they concern food's quality. The present research examined whether food's ethicality – a cue typically unrelated to quality – can also influence taste. We hypothesised that moral satisfaction with the consumption of ethical food would positively influence taste expectations, which in turn will enhance the actual taste experience. This enhanced taste experience was further hypothesised to act as a possible reward mechanism reinforcing the purchase of ethical food. The resulting *ethical food* → *moral satisfaction* → *enhanced taste expectations and experience* → *stronger intentions to buy/willingness to pay* model was validated across four studies: one large scale international survey (Study 1) and three experimental studies involving actual food consumption of different type of ethical origin – organic (Study 2), fair trade (Study 3a) and locally produced (Study 3b). Furthermore, endorsement of values relevant to the food's ethical origin moderated the effect of food's origin on moral satisfaction, suggesting that the model is primarily supported for people who endorse these values.

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The past two decades have witnessed a dramatic and global increase in consumers' demand for food of ethical origin. Since the establishment of the Fairtrade Labelling Organisation in 1997, the market of fair trade products has spanned over 125 countries, reaching a value of 4.8 billion US dollars in 2012 (Fair Trade International, 2013). Similarly, organic food is produced in almost all countries in the world (162 countries in 2011, cf. Willer & Lernoud, 2013), with the agricultural land dedicated to organic produce expanding threefold since the late 1990s; in 2011 the value of the organic food market amounted to the remarkable 62.8 billion US dollars (Willer & Lernoud, 2013). In the same vein, consumers are showing increasing preference for locally produced food, largely due to its sustainability-related attributes (AT Kearney, 2013; Day-Farnsworth, McCown, Miller, & Pfeiffer, 2009). While these statistics are a reason for celebration, they pose an intriguing question: What led to this

incredible increase in people's appetite for food of ethical origin, despite its typically higher price? One obvious answer is a desire to contribute to good, moral causes, such as preserving the environment and helping producers from developing countries. Indeed, research has shown that moral considerations positively predict intentions to buy organic (Arvola et al., 2008) and fair trade (Shaw & Shiu, 2002) food.

If the morally motivated pursuit of pro-environmental and altruistic causes is a leading factor underpinning the increase in demand of food of ethical origin, then we should expect similar increase in other activities reaching the same ends. To put this proposition to test, we compared statistics from relevant sectors in the UK for the past ten years. In relation to ethical food consumption, the UK market share for organic food has shown a threefold growth (Soil Association, 2010); even more astonishingly, the consumption of fair trade food has increased more than 26 times (Fair Trade Foundation, 2011). However, the uptake of other forms of pro-environmental behaviour has been rather modest in comparison (Defra, 2008); even engagement in recycling – one of the least costly and most heavily campaigned forms of pro-environmental behaviour in the UK – has increased at lower rates (235% vs. 300+% for organic food; Defra, 2011). Examinations of the trends in charity donations

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for overseas causes – a behaviour also supporting people in developing countries as the purchase of fair trade food – reveals that the levels remained largely unchanged over the past decade, both in percentage of donors and of the sums donated (UK Giving, 2011). Thus, it appears that moral motivations alone are insufficient to explain the growth in sales of food of ethical origin.

What is it then that contributed to the unparalleled increase in demand for food of ethical origin? We propose that the operation of a possible reward mechanism – the subjective experience of this food's taste as superior – may complement the role of morality in sustaining and increasing people's appetite for it. To test this proposition, we designed the present research with a two-fold aim. Firstly, we examined whether food of ethical origin is experienced as subjectively tastier compared to food of conventional or unethical origin. If that was the case, we further sought to examine whether its subjectively superior taste may act as a reward mechanism, reinforcing subsequent buying intentions and willingness to pay a higher price.

Studying buying intentions is an efficient and frequently used way to gain an understanding about actual purchase behaviour, often with a fairly good degree of accuracy; for instance, in a meta-analysis of 87 behaviours, Sheppard, Hartwick, and Warshaw (1988) found a frequency-weighted average correlation between intentions and behaviour of .53. However, researchers have warned that behaviour may often diverge from stated intentions, especially with regard to ethical consumption where social desirability and contextual factors play a significant role (for a review, see Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2010). Therefore, any findings obtained in research reliant on intentions as a proxy measure of behaviour should be interpreted with caution (cf. Ajzen, Brown, & Carvajal, 2004). Likewise, self-reported willingness to pay is an efficient and frequently used proxy measure of actual purchase behaviour (for a review, see McCluskey & Loureiro, 2003), which warrants caution in inferring real-world behaviour.

### Taste as influential yet malleable embodied experience

Taste is one of the most important factors influencing consumers' food choice and purchase, often outweighing other important factors such as food's healthiness and price (Glanz, Basil, Maibach, Goldberg, & Snyder, 1998; Magnusson, Arvola, Koivisto Hursti, Aberg, & Sjoden, 2001). And rather than being invariably determined by the food's chemosensory properties, the experience of taste can be affected by a range of external cues (for a review, see Coppin & Sander, 2011). For example, customers evaluated the taste of restaurant food more favourably when it was described with appealing and evocative names than when it was described with standard names (e.g., Succulent Italian Seafood Filet vs. Seafood Filet; Satin Chocolate Pudding vs. Chocolate Pudding; Wansink, van Ittersum, & Painter, 2005). Furthermore, consumers reported experiencing the taste of food or beverage as superior when it was served in popular brand packages than when it was served unbranded or in less popular brand packages (McClure et al., 2004; Robinson, Borzekowski, Matheson, & Kraemer, 2007). Brand's familiarity has been also found to influence taste experience; consumers reported enjoying the taste of food or beverage more when it was served in packages of familiar (vs. unfamiliar) brands (Cova & Pace, 2006; Paasoara, Luomala, Pohjanheimo, & Sandell, 2012).

In addition to documenting the influence of externally provided information (vs. observable food properties, such as colour, smell, or texture) on the subjective experience of taste, researchers have sought to examine how and why this influence occurs. Converging evidence from behavioural and neuro-imaging research points to the role of expectations as a mechanism through which external information influences gustatory experience (Chib, Rangel,

Shimojo, & O'Doherty, 2009; Lee, Frederick, & Ariely, 2006; Plassmann, O'Doherty, Shiv, & Rangel, 2008; Siegrist & Cousin, 2009). Chib et al. (2009) and Plassmann et al. (2008) have shown that the expectations created by external information are accompanied by activation in reward-related neural substrates, and is followed by higher self-reported ratings of subjective taste experience.

The external information provided in Chib et al.'s and Plassmann et al.'s studies, as well as in most other studies demonstrating its effect on taste, seem to concern the product's quality; whether the food/beverage was described as succulent, its brand name was popular, its price was high, or experts evaluated it favourably, consumers were likely to infer the food or beverage was of high quality. Expecting to consume food or beverage of high quality in turn influenced the subjective taste experience.

### How could information about the food's ethicality influence taste?

Information about the food's ethicality often bears little or no implications for its nutritional and gustatory quality (for example, in fair trade, locally produced, or rainforest-friendly food). Furthermore, although there are studies indicating that labelling food as of ethical origin may positively influence taste, the evidence remains inconclusive. For instance, in a study on consumers' evaluation of tomatoes, the participants rated the taste of four sorts of tomatoes when each sort was presented as either conventionally or organically grown, or with no information (Johansson, Haglund, Berglund, Lea, & Risvik, 1999). The ratings tended to be higher when the consumers believed the tomatoes were organically grown; however, this finding was not consistent across the four sorts of tomatoes. In another study on taste evaluation participants in three conditions consumed the same kind of juice which was presented as either organic, fair trade, or conventional (Grankvist, Lekedal, & Marmendal, 2007). These authors did not detect a statistically reliable taste enhancement by the ethical label of the juice either. Obtaining trends, but failing to detect a solid and reliable effect of food's ethicality on taste, may be due to the operation of undetected intervening processes that link the food's origin to its (subjectively experienced) taste.

We propose that labelling food as of ethical origin can result in subjectively enhanced taste experience to the extent that consumers feel a sense of moral satisfaction from buying or consuming the food. The experience of moral satisfaction may further lead consumers to attribute more positive characteristics onto the food, including forming expectations for its superior taste. As outlined above, expecting to consume tastier food is likely to enhance the gustatory experience when the food is actually consumed. In short, we hypothesise that ethical origin and enhanced taste experience are linked by two sequential intervening processes: moral satisfaction and greater taste expectations.

### Moral satisfaction as a link between food's ethicality and enhanced taste expectations and experience

Much evidence suggests that people are not only concerned about the outcomes of causes they care about, but also derive personal benefit in the form of moral satisfaction when contributing to such causes (e.g., Andreoni, 1989, 1990, 1993; Kahneman & Knetsch, 1992). Buying or consuming food of ethical origin presents a readily available opportunity for people to attain moral satisfaction by supporting a cause they consider important. The food then becomes not only a source of nutrition and gustatory enjoyment but also a physical artefact symbolising the contribution. Experiencing moral satisfaction derived from the contribution at the same time as sampling the food may bring about a subjectively enhanced taste

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