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Artisan food consumption and the moral identity projects of ethically ambivalent consumers

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigates ethically ambivalent consumers (EACs) – consumers who experience conflicting orientations towards ethical consumption due to structural marketplace contradictions, a substantial yet neglected segment. Drawing from the sociological ambivalence theory, it examines how EACs construct moral identity projects (MIPs) through artisan food consumption, challenging the ethical/mainstream consumer dichotomy that dominates current literature.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative study was conducted in the Irish artisan food sector. Screening surveys and 19 in-depth interviews with EACs were analysed using the Gioia method to develop a theoretical framework.

Findings – Three interconnected processes reveal how EACs construct MIPs: artisan producers enable identity development through values of care, responsibility, preservation and fairness; EACs express identity through health consumption, sociality, expertise sharing and waste reduction; while navigating tensions including marketplace accessibility, contradictory consumption, conspicuous signalling and consumer scepticism.

Research limitations/implications – This study broadens moral identity research beyond sustainability-focused frameworks and questions the ethical/mainstream consumer divide. Applying the sociological ambivalence theory to identity work, it shows how structural contradictions shape moral consumption and offers strategies for food marketers to engage EACs through broader moral appeals.

Originality/value – This research introduces the first empirical framework explaining how EACs construct MIPs, showing moral consumption operates through wider values than recognised in traditional discourse. Applying sociological ambivalence theory provides fresh insights into the structural nature of consumer moral contradictions.

Keywords Ambivalence, Artisan food, Consumer culture theory, Consumer identity, Moral identity, Ethical consumption

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Food consumption is greatly influenced by subjective consumer morality, as everyday consumption decisions inherently involve a moral dimension, varying in salience depending on the product category and its relevance to consumer identity (Barnett *et al.*, 2005; Grauel, 2016). Integrating morality into one's consumer identity can foster moral behaviour (Kim, 2019), accruing significant societal benefits compared to occasional compliance with socio-politically driven ethical norms. Understanding how consumers develop and express moral identity through consumption choices has become increasingly important as markets



incorporate ethical considerations into product positioning and consumer decision-making processes (Cairns *et al.*, 2016; Miloradovic *et al.*, 2022).

Research on consumer identity within the ethical consumption field has primarily focused on consumers who claim to follow ethical guidelines, such as vegans (Riverola *et al.*, 2022), Fairtrade consumers (Robichaud and Yu, 2022), voluntary simplifiers (Khan *et al.*, 2019) and green consumers (Watson *et al.*, 2023). For these ethical consumers, moral identity projects (MIPs) are primarily grounded in their ethical consumption choices, usually driven by the goal of fulfilling social or ecological responsibilities (Papaoikonomou *et al.*, 2016). This research has established how consumers use marketplace resources to construct identities aligned with environmental sustainability and social responsibility, creating a substantial body of knowledge around the motivations, behaviours and identity work of committed ethical consumers (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Carrington *et al.*, 2014). The recent shift in consumer culture has reinforced a dichotomous classification that divides consumers into either “ethical consumers” who adhere to marketplace norms of ethical consumption or “mainstream” consumers who supposedly operate outside these moral frameworks (Davies and Gutsche, 2016; Grauel, 2016).

This dichotomous approach neglects a substantial and economically significant market segment revealed by contemporary consumption data. Globally, 92% of consumers report that sustainability influences their brand choices, yet actual purchase behaviour remains much lower (NielsenIQ, 2024). In the U.S., 78% of consumers say a sustainable lifestyle is important, yet demand for sustainable products often falls short of expectations (McKinsey and Company, 2023). Studies document the “30:3 syndrome” where 30% intend to buy ethical goods, yet only 3% follow through (Lee *et al.*, 2017), while 66% of global consumers and 73% of Millennials, express willingness to pay more for sustainable products (Singh, 2024). These figures demonstrate that ethically ambivalent consumers (EACs), consumers who experience conflicting orientations towards ethical consumption due to contradictions between moral aspirations and practical constraints embedded within contemporary marketplace structures, constitute a substantial market segment, making them economically vital to understand and engage.

Limited research around EACs represents both a significant theoretical gap and a missed practical opportunity. Theoretically, the dichotomous ethical/mainstream classification fails to capture the complex moral realities of contemporary consumption, where consumers may value morality but face structural barriers such as limited marketplace accessibility, premium pricing and unclear ethical claims that prevent consistent ethical consumption. Drawing from sociological ambivalence theory (Merton and Barber, 1976), this ambivalence reflects structurally embedded tensions arising from incompatible normative expectations rather than mere consumer inconsistency. For EACs, morality includes immediate concerns like financial obligations, family health and community well-being, which often do not align with narrow ethical consumption discourse (ECD) emphasising anti-consumerism and environmental awareness (Adams and Raisborough, 2010; Dombos, 2012). When sustainability narratives fail to address these broader moral concerns, such as providing nutritious meals for family members or supporting local employment, they appear irrelevant or unclear to EACs, resulting in weak long-term commitment to ethical brands (Karimova *et al.*, 2020). Thus, the central research question guiding this study is: *How do ethically ambivalent consumers engage with their moral identity projects in the context of artisan food consumption?*

This study addresses these gaps by examining EACs’ MIPs in the artisan food sector, chosen for its rich moral complexities that arise from traditional ethical consumption discourse alongside consumer culture and emotional dimensions of food consumption. The Irish artisan food sector, valued at €1.4 billion in 2023 with 5% annual growth (Bord Bia, 2023), provides an ideal context where artisan brands embed values of authenticity, sustainability and cultural heritage while operating within marketplace structures that create tensions around accessibility, pricing and authenticity claims (Lingham *et al.*, 2022). Irish food culture’s deep roots in localism, heritage and sustainability create moral complexities where broader

values beyond environmental sustainability, such as care, responsibility, preservation and fairness, become salient to consumers' moral identity development.

Through qualitative research involving 19 in-depth interviews with screened EACs, we develop a theoretical framework that reveals how EACs construct moral identity through broader moral values beyond traditional sustainability narratives, how they express these identities through consumption practices and how they navigate tensions between moral aspirations and practical constraints. This research makes three key contributions: expanding ethical consumption theory beyond the committed ethical consumer segment to include the economically significant EAC market; revealing how broader moral appeals (e.g. care, responsibility, preservation and fairness) can engage consumers who might resist narrow sustainability messaging and providing actionable insights for food marketers seeking to align their strategies with diverse moral values, potentially advancing Sustainable Development Goals through more inclusive approaches to ethical consumption.

2. Literature review

2.1 Sociological ambivalence and consumer identity projects

Ambivalence represents a fundamental feature of social life, arising when individuals occupy positions with contradictory normative expectations and role requirements (Merton and Barber, 1976). Sociological ambivalence differs critically from psychological conceptualisations of mixed emotions or cognitive inconsistency. Rather than reflecting individual deficiency or confusion, ambivalence emerges from social structures that simultaneously impose incompatible demands on actors, creating enduring tensions within identity construction (Merton and Barber, 1976). As Nowotny (2011) demonstrates in analysing science-society relationships, ambivalence reflects the simultaneous negotiation of normative ideals and practical demands within institutional contexts.

This structural understanding of ambivalence offers valuable insights into contemporary consumption markets, where consumers increasingly face conflicting expectations around morality, sustainability and marketplace participation. Consumer identity projects, ongoing, fluid narratives of self-construction through consumption behaviours that shape and express identity, operate within these ambivalent structures (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). By purchasing products from specific brands, consumers continually impart meanings to their identities, incorporating these meanings into their identity projects (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). However, these projects are not free from contradiction. Extending Merton and Barber's framework to consumer contexts, ethically ambivalent consumers' identity projects can be understood as structurally ambivalent – they involve navigating competing moral ideals, social obligations and marketplace pressures, resulting in inconsistent yet patterned consumption behaviours.

Morality plays a key role in shaping consumer identity projects, giving rise to MIPs, where moral values and obligations influence consumption choices (Misiak *et al.*, 2020). Unlike narrow ethical consumption discourse focused on environmental sustainability, MIPs reflect a broader, more subjective view shaped by personal values, cultural contexts and life circumstances (Miloradovic *et al.*, 2022). Embedding morality in identity projects supports enactment of moral behaviour, yet the structural contradictions within contemporary marketplaces, between affordability and sustainability, convenience and ethics, individual desires and collective responsibilities, create the conditions for persistent ambivalence in consumer moral identity development.

2.2 Moral identity projects: beyond the ethical consumer dichotomy

The dichotomy created between the so-called “ethical consumers” and mainstream consumers proves problematic for several reasons. First, it assumes ethical consumers' decisions stem solely from moral concerns while non-ethical consumers make decisions without moral

considerations (Garcia-Ruiz and Rodriguez-Lluesma, 2014). Second, it overlooks consumers who engage with moral concerns but resist the narrow sustainability focus that dominates ethical consumption discourse (Grauel, 2016). Cultural theories of consumption reveal that moral values are socially constructed and vary across contexts (Douglas, 1966; Warde, 1997), suggesting that the sustainability-focused ethical consumption discourse represents just one cultural approach to morality in consumption.

Foundational work by Douglas and Isherwood (1979) demonstrates how consumption practices operate as cultural systems of meaning, while more recent contributions by Askegaard and Linnet (2011) and De Solier (2013) illustrate how consumption is embedded within broader sociocultural narratives that shape identity and morality. This cultural perspective suggests that moral values identified in contemporary consumption, such as care, responsibility, preservation and fairness, are not universal but culturally mediated, requiring attention to how consumption practices are situated within specific cultural contexts.

Understanding moral consumption through this lens reveals the limitations of the ethical/mainstream dichotomy and opens space for examining ethically ambivalent consumers who navigate moral values differently from committed ethical consumers. These consumers may prioritise family health over environmental impact, support local employment over global sustainability initiatives or value cultural preservation alongside ecological concerns, creating MIPs that extend beyond traditional ethical consumption frameworks.

2.3 Food consumption as a site of moral ambivalence

Food represents one of the most morally charged forms of consumption, deeply embedded in culture, history and identity (Fatha and Ayoubi, 2021; Misiak *et al.*, 2020). The moralisation of food can prompt consumers to assess, categorise and evaluate food products based on diverse moral considerations rooted in personal, cultural or societal reasoning (Jackson *et al.*, 2023). Beyond health-related moral dimensions, food consumption intersects with values of authenticity, place and cultural heritage, particularly in contexts like artisan food production.

Artisan food brands draw on craft, authenticity and provenance to signal trustworthiness and meaning. Classic work demonstrates that firms craft authenticity through cues such as heritage, method, relation to place and downplaying commercial motives (Beverland, 2005, 2006), while consumers purposively select authenticity cues that align with their identity goals (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Leigh *et al.*, 2006). In food specifically, provenance and geographical indication labels translate “taste of place” into market signals that connect products, producers and local culture (Melewar and Skinner, 2020). These authenticity and origin cues operate as credence signals that help manage consumer scepticism by offering assurance where product qualities are difficult to verify (Schrobbach *et al.*, 2023).

However, food consumption is also a site of structural tension and contradiction, where competing moral, cultural and economic pressures generate ambivalence. Consumers may simultaneously desire authenticity, health, sustainability and local embeddedness, *yet also* seek convenience, affordability and indulgence. Behavioural concepts help explain how consumers navigate these contradictions: bounded ethicality suggests that while individuals aspire to act ethically, contextual constraints limit their ability to do so (Bazerman and Tenbrunsel, 2011); cognitive dissonance explains how consumers rationalise contradictions between values and practices (Festinger, 1957) and moral licensing demonstrates how engaging in one moral act may provide perceived license for less ethical behaviour elsewhere (Merritt *et al.*, 2010).

Situating food choices within this framework of structural ambivalence reveals why artisan food represents a particularly rich domain for studying ethically ambivalent consumers. The sector embodies multiple, sometimes competing moral values while operating within marketplace structures that create barriers to consistent ethical consumption, making it an ideal context for examining how consumers navigate MIPs within ambivalent consumption environments replete with tensions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research setting

The Irish artisan food sector was selected due to its rich moral complexities arising from traditional ethical consumption discourse alongside consumer culture and emotional dimensions of food consumption (Lingham *et al.*, 2022). The sector provides substantial empirical justification: valued at €1.4 billion in 2023 with 5% annual growth, it contributes 20% of total food and drink exports and encompasses over 1,500 artisan producers nationwide, with concentrations in dairy (35%), beverages (28%) and specialty foods (22%) (Bord Bia, 2023). This growth is driven by rising consumer demand for locally sourced, sustainable and ethically produced food, consistent with global trends where 78% of consumers report sustainability as important to purchase decisions (McKinsey and Company, 2023).

Irish food culture's deep roots in localism, heritage and sustainability create moral complexities where broader values beyond environmental sustainability become salient to consumers' identity development. The study was conducted across 8 months from October 2023 to May 2024, recruiting residents of Ireland who had lived in the country for at least three months to ensure familiarity with Irish artisan food products and brands (Dunne and Wright, 2017). Artisan food was defined as food handcrafted in limited quantities by skilled creators using non-industrialised, minimally processed ingredients and small-scale operations, embodying producers' deep knowledge and respect for raw materials (Lingham *et al.*, 2022).

3.2 Data collection

A qualitative approach using in-depth, semi-structured interviews explored attitudes, beliefs, values and motives surrounding artisan food consumption (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021). Ethics approval was granted by the authors' institutional research ethics committee (Log No. 2023 107A1). To identify EACs and exclude conventional "ethical consumers", a screening survey was distributed, yielding 228 responses with 115 complete (50.4% completion rate). The inclusion criteria defining EACs were: (1) consumers who do not significantly consider social and environmental sustainability in food choices ($\leq$ three-fifths on Likert scales); (2) regular artisan food consumers ($\geq$ three-fifths); (3) consumers who perceive artisan food brands as moral ($\geq$ three-fifths). Seventy-two EACs met criteria; nineteen provided written consent and were interviewed.

The sample included 15 females and 4 males, with diverse cultural backgrounds (Ireland $n = 13$, Italy $n = 1$, Brazil $n = 1$, India $n = 1$, Lebanon $n = 1$, America $n = 1$) and ages ranging from 20 to 60 years, clustering in 26–30 ($n = 6$) and 31–40 ($n = 4$) cohorts. The female predominance reflects common patterns in ethical consumption research where women often drive food-related moral consumption practices (Feraco *et al.*, 2024). However, this demographic clustering may influence findings – younger, educated consumers may be more familiar with artisan food discourse while having less disposable income for premium products, while female participants may emphasise care and family-oriented moral values more than male counterparts (Feraco *et al.*, 2024). These characteristics align with typical artisan food consumer profiles but limit generalisability to older consumers, those with lower educational attainment, different socioeconomic groups or male-dominated consumption contexts (Huddart Kennedy *et al.*, 2019). Saturation in qualitative research is achieved when the addition of new data does not yield further thematic diversity or richness (Guest *et al.*, 2006). In this study, saturation was determined based on the homogeneity of participants' moral considerations and the recurring patterns observed across interviews. At the 19th interview, no new significant themes or variations emerged regarding consumers' MIPs in the context of artisan food. As such, the depth of data provided was sufficient for the study's exploratory aims and theoretical development (see Table 1 and Table 2).

3.3 Data analysis

Data was analysed using the Gioia *et al.* (2013) abductive method, iterating between literature and emergent codes to progress from 1st order to 3rd order codes, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Table 1. Participant profiles

#	Name	Sex	Age cohort	Country of origin
1	Catherina	Female	20–25	Italy
2	Lilly	Female	26–30	Brazil
3	James	Male	51–60	Ireland
4	Malina	Female	26–30	Ireland
5	Amy	Female	31–40	Ireland
6	Chloe	Female	20–25	Ireland
7	Steve	Male	20–25	Ireland
8	Hazem	Male	31–40	Ireland
9	Riona	Female	26–30	Ireland
10	Dora	Female	31–40	Ireland
11	Vicky	Female	20–25	Ireland
12	Harry	Male	26–30	Ireland
13	Julia	Female	41–50	Ireland
14	Maya	Female	26–30	Ireland
15	Layla	Female	26–30	Ireland
16	Shina	Female	31–40	Ireland
17	Mudisa	Female	31–40	India
18	Nicola	Female	26–30	America
19	Karima	Female	26–30	Lebanon

Table 2. Filtering survey questionnaire

Screening questions	
I	How often do you purchase food products because of health considerations? (1: Never 2: Rarely, 3: Sometimes, 4: Often, 5: Always)
II	How often do you purchase food products because of animal well-being considerations? (1: Never 2: Rarely, 3: Sometimes, 4: Often, 5: Always)
III	How often do you purchase food products because of environmental considerations? (1: Never 2: Rarely, 3: Sometimes, 4: Often, 5: Always)
IV	How frequently do you consume/purchase artisan food brands? (1: Never 2: Rarely, 3: Sometimes, 4: Often, 5: Always)
V	How ethical do you perceive artisan food brands to be? (1: Very unethical – 2: unethical 3: Neutral 4: Ethical 5: Very ethical)

Analysis began with open coding of interview transcripts to identify first-order concepts using participants' own language. This generated 245 initial codes such as "made with love," "supporting local jobs," "expensive but worth it" and "too good to be true" that captured direct expressions about artisan food consumption. Through constant comparison, these were systematically grouped into 28 second-order themes moving toward analytical abstraction while remaining grounded in data. For example, first-order codes related to production methods ("handmade"), ingredient quality ("natural ingredients") and producer relationships ("small family business") were grouped into the second-order theme of "care" as a moral enabler.

The progression to three aggregate theoretical dimensions involved further abstraction and comparison with existing literature: moral identity enablers (producer values embodying care, responsibility, preservation, fairness), vehicles for moral expression (health, sociality, expertise, waste reduction) and moral identity tensions (contradictory consumption, accessibility, conspicuous signalling, scepticism). [Figure 1](#) demonstrates this systematic progression from descriptive first-order codes through interpretive second-order themes to theoretical aggregate dimensions, providing transparency in how findings were constructed from raw data while extending beyond existing ethical consumption frameworks.

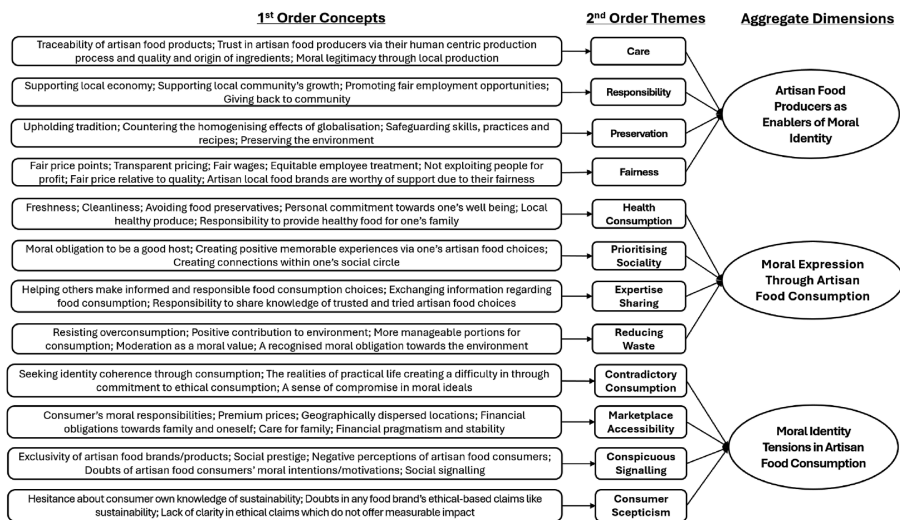


Figure 1. Data structure. Source: Authors' own work

Multiple strategies enhanced credibility and trustworthiness. The lead researcher's background in ethical consumption provided contextual sensitivity while requiring attention to potential bias through reflexive practices including peer discussions with colleagues unfamiliar with artisan food sectors, regular assumption reflection and systematic attention to disconfirming evidence. Methodological triangulation was achieved through combining interview data with over 400 pages of secondary sources including marketing materials, news articles and industry reports that provided contextual validation of findings. During data collection, each participant was presented with a summary of insights from prior interviews and invited to comment on their relevance and accuracy. This iterative process allowed participants to validate and refine the interpretations of previous interviewees, ensuring that the emergent themes resonated with their own experiences. This approach aligns with member checking, a technique where participants review and provide feedback on findings to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research with reflexivity maintained throughout (Helverschou *et al.*, 2020).

While providing valuable insights into EACs within the Irish artisan food sector, several contextual limitations require acknowledgment. The Irish cultural context, with strong traditions of localism and food heritage, may amplify certain moral values (preservation, community support) that could be less salient in other cultural settings. The specific characteristics of artisan food – premium pricing, craft narratives, local production – may create moral tensions different from those in other ethical consumption contexts. These limitations suggest findings may be most applicable to similar cultural contexts and product categories, though the theoretical framework's focus on structural ambivalence may have broader relevance across different consumption domains.

We adopted Coffin and Egan-Wyer's (2022) conception of morality linked to duties and obligations, broadening perspective beyond ethical consumption scope. This abductive approach enabled moving beyond existing theoretical limitations to generate original theory (Janiszewski and Van Osselaer, 2022), with the systematic data structure enhancing internal validity, transparency and reliability (Gioia *et al.*, 2013).

4. Findings

This study reveals how EACs construct moral identity through artisan food consumption, showing both the enabling and constraining forces within contemporary marketplace

structures. While producers enable moral identity development through embodying values like care, responsibility, preservation and fairness, consumers navigate significant tensions that reflect structural ambivalence rather than individual inconsistency. The analysis reveals demographic variations in how these processes unfold, alongside important counter-examples that illuminate the framework's boundaries.

4.1 Artisan food producers as enablers of moral identity

Consumers viewed artisan food producers as moral not only because of sustainability efforts but because they promoted broader values that resonated with consumers' diverse moral concerns, enabling them to see consumption choices as part of a broader moral narrative. Care emerged as a fundamental producer value, with participants highlighting the human-oriented approach to production. Harry noted that artisan foods seemed *"more specialised with more care put into them"*, referring to the hands-on production process. This animate quality, the living, breathing human element, distinguished artisan from industrialised food systems: *"I think it's somehow made with love and attention. So I think that people are probably doing smaller quantities, so they're probably putting a bit more effort and time and making sure everything is good"* (Karima).

Responsibility manifested through producers' contributions to local economies and communities. Amy emphasised how supporting artisan producers directly contributed to community well-being: *"you don't have to make major compromises to choose the artisan brand that you know is going to give back to the community because they employ local people"*. This responsibility extended to environmental stewardship through traditional practices and local supply chains: *"I suppose if you go down the route of local jobs and stuff like that, it's ethical for your locality. You're supporting local businesses, local jobs and local farmers"* (Maya). Dora reinforced this connection between artisan food consumption and broader environmental responsibility: *"avoiding preservatives for health reasons and being mindful of the environment, like reducing food miles. I find that artisan food brands ... often align with these preferences"*.

Preservation of cultural traditions emerged as another moral dimension, with consumers viewing themselves as actively protecting heritage through consumption choices. Julia articulated this clearly: *"Supporting local producers, small businesses and people trying to preserve traditional skills and ways of life is very important to me and is better than consuming mass-produced foods"*.

Fairness in pricing and employment practices distinguished artisan producers from exploitative mass production. While products cost more, participants believed producers charged fairly relative to quality and effort: *"Supporting 100% artisan Irish and local products is key. It's a mindset and the price points of these products are fairly similar"* (Amy). This extended to employment practices, as Dora noted: *"I think it depends on the people producing the product, ensuring they receive fair wages, are treated well"*.

Demographic variations emerged across these moral enablers, with older participants (31+ years) emphasising preservation and cultural heritage more strongly, while younger participants (20–30 years) focused more on fairness and responsibility. Female participants more frequently mentioned care-related values, particularly in relation to family provisioning.

4.2 Moral expression through artisan food consumption

EACs expressed moral identity through artisan food consumption in ways that aligned with personal values related to health, community well-being and environmental responsibility, though not necessarily centred on traditional sustainability narratives. Health consumption served as moral expression at both individual and collective levels. For many EACs, consuming healthy food represented moral obligation to oneself and family. James emphasised family provisioning: *"every kind of food was there, all fresh. When my children lived with us, there was always lots and lots of food and always good food. I think it's a family thing"*.

Sociality and hospitality enabled moral expression through creating meaningful experiences for others. Catherina described how artisan food enhanced her hosting obligations: *“If I’m hosting a dinner or lunch, or if I have a guest, sometimes I think that having an artisan product might enhance the reputation and the whole experience. For example, if I have a guest, I wouldn’t buy normal pasta; I might buy fresh pasta to make the experience better”*.

Expertise sharing allowed consumers to guide others towards better consumption choices. Harry described promoting artisan brands: *“If I had a good experience with an artisan brand, I would tell people about it”*. This extended to social media: *“I do share food-related content occasionally on social media, but only products I’ve personally tried and can recommend. It’s about sharing what I genuinely find excellent with my social circle”* (Layla).

Waste reduction represented environmental moral expression distinct from formal sustainability discourse by highlighting the value of moderation in food purchase and consumption. Malina explained: *“I think artisan food consumption is not just about buying; it’s also about minimising waste and not buying more than what you need, so that it doesn’t end up in the bin. Everything in moderation”*. Age-related patterns in moral expression varied, with younger participants (20–30) emphasising expertise sharing and social media promotion, with older participants (31–50) focused more on family health provision and waste reduction.

4.3 Navigating moral identity tensions in artisan food consumption

Despite moral satisfaction from artisan food consumption, EACs experienced persistent tensions reflecting structural contradictions within contemporary marketplace arrangements rather than personal failings.

Contradictory consumption created frustration when broader lifestyle choices undermined ethical efforts. Steve highlighted environmental contradictions: *“I don’t let my carbon footprint dictate my life... [but] if you’re driving a diesel car; you might as well buy products that aren’t environmentally friendly”*. The tension between wanting to make ethical choices and the realities of everyday life created a sense of compromise and moral ambiguity, undermining attempts to participate in meaningful acts of sustainable consumption.

Marketplace accessibility through dispersed locations and premium pricing created moral dilemmas between ethical desires and financial obligations. Riona articulated this tension: *“Mass-produced food might not be as good quality, but you’re going to be able to feed your family for less”*. Cost sensitivity varied significantly by age – younger participants (20–30) found pricing most prohibitive due to lower disposable income, while established professionals (40+) expressed less cost concern but greater scepticism about value.

Conspicuous signalling made some participants uncomfortable with artisan food’s exclusivity associations. Layla pointed out consumption *“for snobs or people who make a lot of money”*, viewing status display through food as morally problematic. Consumer scepticism about ethical claims pervaded discussions, with participants wanting to “look beyond what’s being advertised” (Hazem). Maya shared deep uncertainty about industry practices: *“I’ve heard horrific stories about Irish factories producing processed meat and I’ve made conscious decisions not to buy them”*. Nicola articulated frustration with vague sustainability claims: brands’ assertions like *“we’re X percent more sustainable”* lack clarity and measurable impact, making it difficult for consumers to make informed choices.

Several important counter-examples illuminate the framework’s boundaries. Several participants rejected artisan food despite initial interest. Mark, a 28-year-old professional, explained: *“I tried getting into the whole artisan thing, but honestly, it felt like performance. I’d rather just buy what I need and not worry about the story behind it”*. Similarly, some participants with strong environmental commitments found artisan food inadequate: *“If you really care about the environment, you’d go vegan and local. Artisan is just expensive food with nice packaging”* (field notes from an anonymous participant). These cases highlight that the framework applies primarily to consumers seeking moral identity expression through consumption, rather than those committed to specific ethical positions or those rejecting the

supposed morality of artisan food entirely. The tensions identified reveal how marketplace structures create conditions for ambivalence rather than individual moral failure, demonstrating why traditional ethical consumption approaches struggle to engage this substantial consumer segment.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The findings reveal three interconnected processes through which EACs construct MIPs that diverge significantly from traditional ethical consumption patterns. The dynamic relationship illustrated in [Figure 2](#) demonstrates how moral identity development occurs through ongoing negotiation between enabling forces and structural constraints. [Table 3](#) illustrates how these

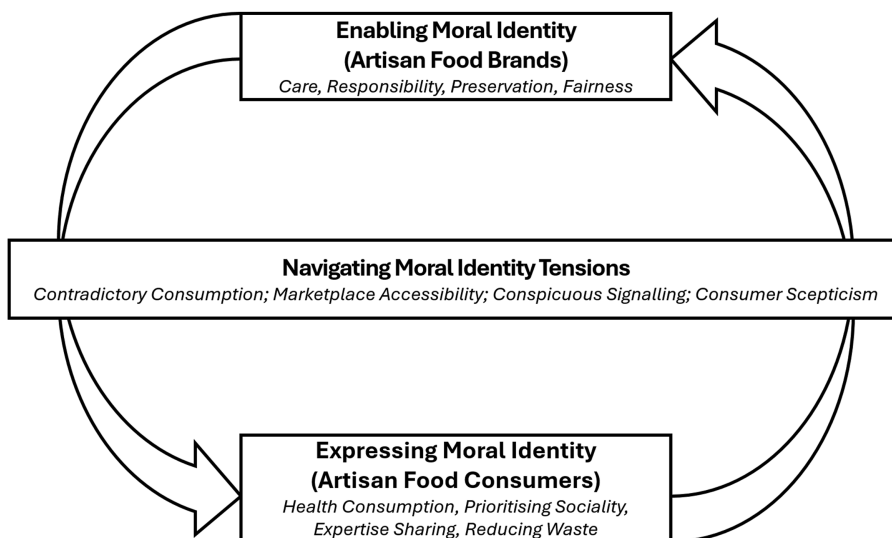


Figure 2. Conceptual framework of ethically ambivalent consumers' moral identity project. *Source:* Authors' own work

Table 3. A comparison between ethically ambivalent consumers and other consumer groups in relation to ethical consumption

Consumer segment	Dominant moral priorities	Common tensions/Barriers	Illustrative references
Committed ethical consumers	Sustainability, environmental impact, social justice	Intention–behaviour gap, scepticism over greenwashing	Shaw et al. (2005) , Carrington et al. (2014)
Occasional ethical purchasers	Pragmatism, selective adoption of ethical products	Price sensitivity, convenience, neutralisation	Chatzidakis et al. (2007) , Bray et al. (2011)
Mainstream value-driven shoppers	Affordability, fairness, health, functionality	Limited moral salience, focus on practical needs	Auger and Devinney (2007)
Ethically ambivalent consumers (EACs)	Care, responsibility, preservation, fairness, health, sociality, food expertise, reducing waste	Contradictory consumption, Marketplace accessibility, signalling, scepticism	This study

findings position EACs as a distinct consumer segment with unique moral priorities and tensions compared to committed ethical consumers, occasional ethical purchasers and mainstream value-driven shoppers.

The identification of care, responsibility, preservation and fairness as primary moral enablers contradicts assumptions in ethical consumption literature that environmental concerns drive moral consumption (Shaw *et al.*, 2005; Carrington *et al.*, 2014). While Papaoikonomou *et al.* (2016) found ethical consumers construct identity around sustainability, our findings reveal EACs prioritise human-centred values that extend beyond ecological frameworks. Table 3 demonstrates this distinction clearly – committed ethical consumers prioritise sustainability and environmental impact, while EACs emphasise broader moral values including care and preservation. This supports Grauel's (2016) argument that mainstream consumers conceptualise morality differently from committed ethical consumers but provides the first empirical framework showing how these alternative moral values operate in practice.

The vehicles for moral expression – health consumption, sociality, expertise sharing and waste reduction – challenge Thompson's (2014) characterisation of consumer MIPs as primarily resistance-oriented. Unlike the activist consumers described in CCT literature (Luedicke *et al.*, 2010), EACs express moral agency through care-giving practices that align with traditional rather than transformative social roles. As shown in Table 3, this distinguishes EACs from both committed ethical consumers who engage in activism and occasional ethical purchasers who focus on pragmatic concerns. This extends Silchenko and Askegaard's (2020) work on food moralisation by showing how moral meaning operates through nurturing rather than discipline or control.

The persistent tensions, contradictory consumption, marketplace accessibility, conspicuous signalling and scepticism, contradict assumptions that consumer inconsistency reflects individual failings (Carrington *et al.*, 2014). Table 3 reveals how EACs face distinct tensions around marketplace accessibility and signalling compared to the intention-behaviour gaps experienced by committed ethical consumers or the price sensitivity of occasional ethical purchasers. Our findings support Merton and Barber's (1976) structural ambivalence theory by demonstrating how marketplace arrangements create contradictory expectations for consumers. The demographic variations in these tensions extend Huddart Kennedy *et al.*'s (2019) work on class and ethical consumption by showing how structural positions create different patterns of moral ambivalence.

5.1 Contributions to theory

This study makes three key theoretical contributions to Consumer Culture Theory and ethical consumption research. First, it challenges the reductive ethical/mainstream consumer dichotomy by demonstrating that MIPs operate across a spectrum of engagement. The comparative analysis in Table 3 demonstrates how EACs represent a theoretically distinct consumer segment with unique moral priorities (care, responsibility, preservation and fairness), means of identity expression (sociality, health, expertise sharing and waste reduction) and tensions (contradictory consumption, marketplace accessibility, conspicuous signalling and scepticism) that differ from committed ethical consumers who prioritise sustainability and face intention-behaviour gaps, occasional ethical purchasers who focus on pragmatic concerns and price sensitivity and mainstream value-driven shoppers who emphasise affordability with limited moral salience. This expands Consumer Culture Theory's understanding of moral identity beyond narrow sustainability frameworks and consumer resistance and activism (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Carrington *et al.*, 2014; Thompson, 2014).

Second, the application of sociological ambivalence theory (Merton and Barber, 1976) to consumer identity work provides theoretical advancement by positioning moral contradictions as structurally embedded rather than individually determined. This extends Nowotny's (2011) institutional ambivalence concept to consumer markets, revealing how contradictory

normative expectations shape consumption patterns and explaining why traditional ethical consumption approaches struggle to engage substantial consumer segments. Table 3 illustrates how different consumer segments experience different types of structural barriers, with EACs facing accessibility and authenticity challenges that require different theoretical approaches than the mere greenwashing scepticism of committed ethical consumers.

Third, the framework demonstrates how cultural contexts shape moral value expression. The Irish emphasis on localism and heritage amplified preservation values, while care and responsibility manifested through family-oriented rather than activist expressions, showing how MIPs are culturally mediated (Douglas, 1966; Warde, 1997). This supports recent work by Askegaard and Linnet (2011) on context-dependent consumer culture while providing empirical evidence of cultural influence on moral identity construction.

5.2 Contributions to practice

The framework provides actionable guidance for engaging EACs through broader moral appeals, addressing gaps identified in food marketing literature (Cairns *et al.*, 2016). The distinct positioning shown in Table 3 requires different marketing approaches than those targeting committed ethical consumers who respond to environmental impact messaging or mainstream shoppers focused on practical benefits. Each moral enabler identified for EACs requires specific strategic approaches.

Building on Beverland's (2005) authenticity framework, marketers should emphasise human stories behind production through producer profiles, family histories and craft processes to appeal to EACs' care values. Packaging could include QR codes linking to producer videos, while in-store displays feature handwritten notes explaining craft approaches, providing the human connection EACs seek. This differs from the activism-oriented messaging that resonates with committed ethical consumers as shown in Table 3.

Communications should highlight local economic impact through specific data including suppliers support and community investments to address EACs' responsibility concerns. Marketing materials featuring measurable benefits such as "*This purchase supports 12 local farming families*" provide concrete evidence that counters the vague sustainability claims EACs distrust. This approach recognises that EACs face different scepticism challenges than other consumer segments outlined in Table 3.

Brands can appeal to EACs' preservation values by emphasising traditional techniques and cultural heritage through storytelling, as highlighted in Table 3. This approach operationalises provenance and heritage marketing (Melewar and Skinner, 2020) by, for example, offering limited editions that celebrate local traditions or partnering with cultural institutions. Such strategies provide tangible connections to preservation that go beyond the environmental focus typically used to engage committed ethical consumers.

Clear communication about pricing rationale and producer compensation addresses EACs' fairness concerns and scepticism about exploitation. "Fair pricing breakdowns" showing cost allocation build trust, operationalising credence signals discussed by Schrobbach *et al.* (2023). This transparency addresses the specific accessibility and signalling tensions EACs face as distinguished in Table 3.

Age-related patterns identified in our findings suggest targeted strategies – younger consumers (20–30) respond to preservation appeals through social media heritage stories; middle-aged consumers (31–40) prioritise family health messaging; older consumers (41+) require detailed transparency about sourcing and pricing. These demographic insights provide granular guidance for implementing the broader EAC framework.

Rather than avoiding tensions, marketers should respond strategically to the structural barriers identified in Table 3. Tiered pricing with smaller pack sizes addresses accessibility concerns; third-party certifications and measurable impact metrics counter scepticism; community-focused messaging rather than exclusivity positioning manages conspicuous consumption concerns. These approaches recognise that EACs face different structural barriers than other consumer segments.

While participants did not explicitly reference Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), their values align with SDGs such as decent work, good health, responsible consumption and sustainable communities. Marketing emphasising these broader moral values could indirectly advance SDG objectives while engaging consumers who resist narrow sustainability messaging, though this connection remains interpretive rather than empirically demonstrated.

5.3 Limitations and future research

Despite its contextual richness, this study's focus on Irish artisan food consumers limits generalisability across cultural contexts and product categories. The demographic clustering around younger, educated, female participants may not capture moral identity processes among different socioeconomic groups, as suggested by Huddart Kennedy *et al.*'s (2019) work on class and ethical consumption. The Irish cultural context emphasising localism may amplify certain moral values that could be less salient elsewhere.

The framework acknowledges potential counterarguments about moral identity authenticity, as some expressions may reflect self-enhancement motives rather than deeply held commitments (Sedikides *et al.*, 2025). However, the structural ambivalence perspective suggests these tensions are inherent features rather than limitations. The persistent intention-behaviour gap documented in ethical consumption literature (Carrington *et al.*, 2014) manifests through our identified tensions but is positioned as predictable outcomes of structural contradictions requiring systemic rather than individual solutions.

Future research should test the framework across diverse consumer segments, cultural contexts and product categories to establish broader applicability. Table 3 suggests the framework's structure, enablers, expressions, tensions, could accommodate different consumer segments with varying value prioritisations, but empirical validation is needed. Quantitative validation of relationships between moral enablers, expression vehicles and purchasing behaviours would strengthen predictive power and practical utility. Longitudinal studies examining how MIPs evolve over time could reveal developmental patterns and intervention opportunities for more inclusive ethical consumption approaches.

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