

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS

ETHICAL CONSUMERISM?

OUTLINE:

1) Introduction

Thesis statement: "The industrial revolution and capitalism led world order caused a stark rise in consumerism. However multifarious social, environmental and political upheavals introduced ethical consumerism. Today it has emerged as an effective tool for people to make a difference"

2) Ethical consumerism; an effective tool for masses.

3) Evidences of inspiration led ethical consumerism.

a) Consumer campaigns fueled by political motives

b) Human rights led consumer campaigns

c) Women rights as drivers of consumer led change

d) Environmental consciousness driven consumer campaigns

e) Animal rights and abuses led consumer campaigns

f) Global Warming led ^{consumer} shift; Fossil fuel dilemma.

4) Consumer ethics sparked by Ideological warfare

a) Balenciaga controversy led Boycott.

b) Anti LGBTQ campaigns in Muslim world.

c) Antisemitic campaigns in Global South.

5) Factors driving ethical consumerism.

a) Prevalent capitalism and globalisation backed interdependencies.

b) Rise of corporate sector and consumer power awareness.

c) Rise of social media and surging awareness.

d) Surge in novel online platforms and ethics based startups.

e) Conclusion.

It all started with water. Back in those ancient times, people started settling near water bodies giving rise to ancient civilizations like Mesopotamia. Introduction of alcohol in their lives founded the basis of a conscious consumer decision; to use alcohol for water polluted by agricultural boom or not as it emerged as a microbe killer. Times changed and world took a flight to 21st century when consumers can make well informed choices backed with ethics and distinction of right from wrong. Issues such as climate change; environment consciousness, human rights and world politics emerging in late 20th century have brought a change in consumerism patterns. In addition to such crisis, consumers asserted their power motivated by ideological differences. All of this is a product of the post world war II era and subsequent capitalism led global order that emerged with corporations at its heart. Sprouting of social media further added to awareness of consumer power by its ever increasing connectivity. With this rise of social media, multitudes of campaigns, organizations and NGOs upticked their work receiving a boost from ease of digitalisation. Hence the industrial revolution and capitalism led world order caused a stark rise in consumerism. However multifarious social, environmental and political upheavals introduced ethical consumerism. Today it has emerged as an effective tool for people to make a difference.

Ethical consumerism means that buyers of a product or receivers of a service make decisions of buying and receiving consciously. This consciousness is driven by various factors which trigger ethics and morality of a person thus causing conscious purchasing. The concept is as old as history itself. The documented form of ethical consumer choices is found in European history when people boycotted buying of beads as a resistance to prevalent slave trade. Multitudes of examples filling world history show people using their power as consumers and exerting an influence. Evolution of post world war two era gave much power to masses with the rise of corporate sector. Specially in twenty first century, ethical consumerism has got practiced by nearly everyone though uninformed in some countries. According to **Co-operative Bank**, ethical markets in UK grew upto 16%, from 13.5 bn Euros ^{in 1999} to 36 bn Euros in 2008. This shows an upward trend.

Multiple reasons can motivate consumers to boycott a particular product or company for example; human rights, environment degradation or religious and ideological differences. In the past, political upheavels led consumers to pursue biased purchasing. In this case consumers feeling disconnected from matters of political world, exert their voices in support or against by boycotting companies complicit in the issue. For example, **Unilever** faced a boycott for **financing Russia against Ukraine**.

Ukrain Solidarity Project USP accused Unilever of paying 331 mn dollars to Moscow in taxes in 2022. Similarly "Boycott Puma" campaign was launched by Palestinian footballers against Puma; a sports brand - to resist against its financing of Israeli Football Association. Pressured by boycott campaign, Puma announced in Dec 2023 to end the sponsorship. Thus Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Israel's atrocities in Palestine have attracted consumers to make choices against them as shown by these reports from "Ethical Consumer Website."

Another factor that sparked a consumer response and proved that ethical consumerism exists is human rights abuse. Human rights have been the vibrant most domain to fuel the persuasion of ethics on consumer end. According to Ethical Consumer Website, Unilever is listed among Boycott companies for its accusations of human rights abuse in Kenya - Kenyan tea workers working for Unilever, filed a complaint in UN for against the company for not providing support and wages when tea stopped growing after the civil unrest that followed controversial 2007 elections. Similarly nearly 120 companies united against the racist apartheid in South Africa. This boycott was pressured by people's protest galvanised against racist regime in South Africa.

In continuity of human rights abuses, women rights have gained sheer attention of consumer boycott campaigns at a global level. Oxfam International - a confederation of charitable organisations

allocates score card to nearly 40,000 plus corporations based on their ethical conduct at various domains like human rights, transparency and environment.

According to its survey **Nestle** was indulged in women rights abuse as it purchases **30% of world's cocoa** grown in **Africa** by women. These women receive unjust amounts of shares in profit and land.

Based on **International Labour Organisation's** statistics that African women receive just **1% share in Agricultural**

land, consumers led to boycott and Nestle saw a stark downfall in sales. As a result, it had to pledge to uplift women's status in Africa by signing up UN's women empowerment principle. Nestle's journey is a stark evidence that people do take extra five minutes to make a deliberate decision before purchasing.

Another important factor that has specifically gain consumer consciousness during their shopping spree is environment and climate change. With

surging levels of global warming, green and environment friendly services and products have seen a clear cut rise in demands. Also the growing trend of organic preference is there. Organic products are all those which during the production line, don't exhibit adverse influence on environment. One

of the example is from Pakistan where in 2017 governments imposed a **ban on Plastic shopping bags** which caused consumers to use eco-friendly fabric bags. Similarly brands and companies have been conscious of consumer awareness.

on their environmental footprint. Products are labelled as "Free vegan", "Organic", "100% recyclable" etc to facilitate consumers in their ethical purchasing.

In addition to human rights, animal rights have also grabbed consumer attention with the ever increasing research and awareness. Any corporation or company, directly or indirectly involved in animal abuse; either for the purpose of laboratory testing in research or as a matter of environmental footprint as biodiversity damage, today is subjected to sheer scrutiny on part of consumers. For example; "Air France" a European airline saw **plummeting sales of tickets** when it was accused of being the only airline transporting "**lab monkeys**". Similarly other pharmaceutical and cosmetic companies are shifting to safe animal practices.

Ali Abdal, a marine biologist researched on the fish abuse behind all the marine food companies who had dissipated labels of "**poaching free**" products. Result was that people started questioning the labels as a matter of ethics.

Environment consciousness ^{has} surged particularly in 21st century with the growing levels of carbon emissions and increasing global warming. UN has been holding Conference of Parties summits every year along with climate activists trying to raise awareness on fossil fuel phase out. Use of fossil fuels by consumers is the cause at roots for one of the major issues of modern era i.e; climate change. Thus a global campaign is prevalent that demands

corporations to shift to renewables and asks consumers to consume less fossil fuels. Instead consumers are being demanded to adopt environment friendly measures to decrease the carbon footprint.

Apart from social, political and environmental factors driving the consumer choices, ideological warfare has also played its part mostly in the Muslim world. One of the controversies that led to plummeting sales of a US based brand called **Balenciaga** was its objectional advertisement campaign. The advertisement was criticised of promoting pedophilia in its marketing strategy. Result was a huge rise of sales in the world predominantly the muslim bloc against the company. Being a part of corporate sector where consumers hold immense power, the company had to apologize for the advertisement and to make up for plummeting sales.

Similarly, another ideological movement that affected the consumer choices adversely was that of the **LGBT movement** of gender identity. 2020 onwards, the movement took a thrust and started to reach out people via the market campaigns. Rainbow flags and colours started to be used widely in products such as toys & clothes. This resulted in hue and cry in the muslim countries for their religious and ideological differences with the movement and all local brands

having a stance in favour of them faced a boycott at the hands of consumers. Entertainment giants such as **Disne+** saw plummeting shares and dwindling profits facing a backlash from Muslims round the globe.

Antisemitism which is bias against Judaism has clearly seen a rise intertwined with Israel's illegal settlements and atrocities in Palestine. Israel has always been a reason to fuel anti-Israeli campaigns specifically in global South owing to geopolitical intricacies. **BDS movement** - which stands on the slogans of **Boycott, Divest, Sanction** - spouting from Israeli backlash has subjected the country to ^{become} a target of sanctions and global boycotts. The recent escalation sparked on 7th October and emerged as Israel-Hamas escalation also caused boycott campaigns cascading throughout the world community. All the Israeli companies or those indirectly involved in supporting Israel are continuously facing a decline in sales and stocks, the recent example being that of **McDonalds** and **Starbucks** which had to bear heavy losses.

All these evidences prove that consumers have always been empowered to bring a change and display their preferences, protests and voices via a vote casted by their wallets. According to **Ethical Market report**, ethical markets grew by **35%** in **2022**. Issues such as carbon emissions, plastic pollution, ongoing wars such as those of Russia and Israel have caused a wide shift in consumerism patterns.

but these are other underlying factors which have further strengthened the practice of ethical consumerism. The world order that has evolved was bound to impregnate and provoke the element of ethics amidst the entire corporation led global economic system.

In the post world war II era, US pursued a policy of **trade liberalisation** under which companies started reaching out for other abodes to produce and pay lesser wages to workers. One of the destination was China which, via the US companies not only pulled out millions of people from poverty but also started producing cheaper products for export. This resulted in a huge rise in consumerism. Coupled with consumerism culture were other crisis of environmental and ethical nature that provoked people to exert influence via the power of consumption they had acquired.

Globalisation of world companies strengthening **interdependency** further made corporations vulnerable to consumer response. Thus the consciousness arose among consumers of the power in their hands to ^{bring} effect across oceans and boundaries. Thus the emerging global order drives ethical consumerism.

Cascading from the capitalism led globalisation was emergence of **corporate sector**. In corporate sector, consumer demands direct companies for their investment and work plan.

Corporations started to produce huge bulk of products under the influence of globalisation.

Overtime the consumer led corporate sector system strengthened consumer end and awarded them of their power. With South African apartheid being a launch pad for global consumerism led boycott campaigns, consumers since then have gotten empowered. Consumers started questioning the labels. For example: **Oxfam** ventured in **New Zealand** to test the authenticity of "**Fair trade Banana**" label on bananas just to find out that cultivation was studded with environmental and human rights abuses. The culture awarded people of their consumer power overtime.

Another important factor to push ethical consumerism is use of social media. Much of the 21st century consumer led boycott campaigns were boosted by the use of social media awareness to gain mass consumer attention. One of the good examples is the Vancouver based startup - "**Social Plastic**". A group of people raised awareness on social media regarding their plan to monetize plastic wastes - plastic waste would be sold as plastic bales which would sell the plastic to bigger companies for recycling. Starting from a single facebook like, the awareness reached to millions of people finally catching attention of **IBM** - a huge corporation - to invest in the project and support it. The social plastic project is a perfect example of environmentally ethical

Income system pulling a lot of people out of poverty.

Social media boom opened novel avenues for people to provide ease to people while making consumer choices. Today state of the art websites, INGOs and startups are performing on these lines. "Ethical Consumer Website" is a database that aids consumers to search for an ethical score of nearly 40,000 plus companies and their sub-company ventures. Along with details of their multifarious unethical practices, websites keeps on updated check on score of the companies. Such websites have efficiently paved a way for consumers to reflect on the product for extra five minutes before purchasing and deciding from the average 38,000 products placed among grocery store shelves. Today one can easily unveil the level of ethics pursued by a company at a single click, further enhancing the ethical use of consumer choice.

To sum it up, ethical consumerism is a force hidden and camouflaged in the widely spread corporate sector and globalised capitalism that has the potential to do wonders. Human rights, war crimes, environmental degradation and animal abuse are such factors which bring corporations to the limelight for financing the evil, out there. But the powerful consumer of globalised and capitalised world uses his

power enclosed in a wallet to make his input.

Be it social, environmental, moral, ethical or ideological fallacies, corporations entangled in the modern financial, economic and monetary system can't

ignore the power of ethical consumerism which is gradually turning into the voice of customers and

general masses. As they say, "Each purchase is a vote for the minds at the beginning of production line. Let your wallet support sane minds". Hence

Ethical consumerism sure is a tool in the hands of a modern man capable of exerting influence across oceans and beyond horizons.