

# Why consumers support local: moral foundations theory and identity perspective

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Consumers support local businesses as an ethical choice. However, consumer ethics researchers have not paid much attention to local consumption, limiting the understanding of why consumers believe local consumption is ethical. To address this research gap, this study aims to develop and test the theoretical model for local consumption decisions by integrating moral foundations theory and local–global identity literature.

**Design/methodology/approach** – An online survey of US adult consumers ( $n = 362$ ) was conducted to test the theoretical model. A correlational structural equation model was used to analyze the data.

**Findings** – The results confirmed that consumers' moral obligations to engage in local consumption are driven partially by pro-group moral foundations, and that this identity-based motivation is an intuitive predictor of local consumption behaviors. The findings of this study demonstrate that traditional ethical consumption frameworks that assume knowledge-based decision-making are not enough to explain local consumption, and provide arguments for the need to consider both moral intuitions and moral reasoning.

**Originality/value** – This study synthesizes two isolated streams of literature and presents an integrated model to holistically explain consumer motivations for local business support. Local consumption was rarely investigated and its unique characteristics were not fully understood in the context of ethical consumption. This study specifically focuses on local consumption, advancing our knowledge of this understudied consumer behavior.

**Keywords** Moral foundations, Local consumption, Local support, Local–global identity

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Buying local is commonly considered as a kind of ethical consumption (Adams and Raisborough, 2010; “How to shop ethically”, 2020). Proponents of local consumption argue buying local reduces environmental impact (Hashem *et al.*, 2018; Tanner and Kast, 2003) and contributes to people's well-being as local businesses provide high-quality, fairly paid jobs (Patel and Martin, 2011). However, many researchers have shown that these claims of ethical superiority of local consumption are false (McCaffrey and Kurland, 2015; Megicks *et al.*, 2012; Memery *et al.*, 2015). The environmental impact of local consumption is hard to quantify (Hubacek *et al.*, 2016) and many local businesses put little effort into addressing environmental problems (Hess, 2008) or investing in social responsibility initiatives (e.g. worker treatment) (McCaffrey and Kurland, 2015). These researchers even warned that consumers would eventually stop buying local when they realize the truth (McCaffrey and Kurland, 2015).

These researchers represent the dominant perspective in ethical consumption research, the rationalist perspective. The

rationalists view morality as concerns for all individuals' autonomy and well-being (Haidt, 2012), and assume that ethical consumption is a result of careful and deliberate evaluation of information against this moral standard (Kumar and Smith, 2018; Zollo *et al.*, 2018). However, this viewpoint blinds the ethical consumption researchers from investigating consumer motivation that does not fit their assumption such as the desire to protect local businesses against global businesses for the sake of a local group (e.g. local favoritism), a motivation identified by many studies (Adams and Raisborough, 2010; Beagan *et al.*, 2010; Hashem *et al.*, 2018; Tanner and Kast, 2003).

Therefore, to fully understand consumers' local consumption behaviors, there is a need for a comprehensive framework that includes both rational and the local favoritism motivation. We argue that synthesizing the rationalist model with the moral intuitionist perspective can give us a holistic understanding of local consumption. The moral intuitionists emphasize our intuition or gut feeling that something is right or wrong (Cherry and Caldwell, 2013; Haidt, 2012), and can better explain local favoritism motivation.

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Thus, the purpose of this study is to develop and test a comprehensive model of local consumption which recognizes the role of both rational and intuitive decision-making. Built on the moral foundations theory (MFT; Haidt and Joseph, 2004), a theory built to describe fundamental moral beliefs from a social intuitionist perspective, and the identity-based consumption literature (Reed *et al.*, 2012; Sobol *et al.*, 2018; Westjohn *et al.*, 2012), we theorize that moral values and local-global identity predict consumer local purchase behaviors. Our study fills the gap in the literature by presenting a specific theoretical model for local consumption separated from other ethical consumption behaviors. This study also complements the dominant rationalist perspective and offers a holistic explanation for the psychological backdrop of local consumption.

## Theoretical framework and hypotheses

### Local consumption and ethical motivations

Local consumption is an umbrella term that includes two different behaviors: purchasing locally produced products and purchasing from local businesses (Shedroff, 2009). Consumers consistently expressed ethical motivation as a major reason to engage in local consumption. In the ethical consumption literature, ethical consumers identify “local” as one distinctive type of ethical behaviors (e.g. “close to home,” Adams and Raisborough, 2010). The local consumption literature also provides evidence that consumers buy local to be ethical. Consumers buy from local retailers because they feel moral obligations to do so (Miller and Kean, 1997) and buy locally produced goods as a pro-environmental alternative to products manufactured using a global supply chain (Hingley *et al.*, 2011; McEachern *et al.*, 2010). Consumers frequently mention the fair treatment of the local community members (e.g. local farmers need to get fair wages) as their motivation to engage in local consumption (Beagan *et al.*, 2010). In addition, the ethnocentrism literature confirms that consumers’ support for local (vs foreign) products and brands reflect their moral judgment to prioritize their own country’s well-being (He and Wang, 2015; Josiassen *et al.*, 2011). These research findings converge to suggest two types of ethical motivations for local consumption:

- 1 concerns for the environment and human rights; and
- 2 protection of the local community and its members.

Previous research on local consumption confirms these two types of motivations (Long and Murray, 2013).

### Different perspectives on moral decision-making

Traditionally, researchers assumed that consumers make rational, careful and intentional decisions to assess whether their choices satisfy their moral standards. This dominant view follows the contemporary cognitive perspective which viewed decision-making as a conscious and active mental process (Bargh and Chartrand, 1999; Greene and Haidt, 2002). For such decision-making, consumers must gather information, develop in-depth knowledge of a topic and carefully evaluate available information (Beagan *et al.*, 2010; Zepeda and Deal, 2009). Thus, consumer knowledge is a crucial element in rational decision-making. Similarly, ethical and local

consumption researchers have emphasized the role of knowledge (Feldmann and Hamm, 2015).

However, rational decision-making does not explain all consumer behaviors. Research shows there are two systems of decision-making or thinking styles (e.g. rational-intuitive, systematic-heuristic, system 1-system 2) (Chaiken, 1980; Kahneman, 2011; Zollo *et al.*, 2018). Unlike intentional and rational decision-making, intuitive decision-making is fast and automatic (Bargh and Chartrand, 1999). Some researchers began to highlight the role of the intuitive and automatic process in moral decision-making (Haidt, 2012; Zollo, 2021). These researchers argue that people mostly use intuitive moral judgment, and that careful reasoning guides moral decision-making only when intuition is unavailable or inconsistent with given facts. The intuitionist perspective also contends that intuitive moral judgment takes place before moral reasoning which is often used only to justify the intuition (Cherry and Caldwell, 2013; Zollo, 2021). Therefore, unlike rational decision-making, the automatic and intuition-driven judgment does not require information and knowledge.

In the following section, we will discuss two important streams of literature that inform how consumers endorse local consumption because of their moral intuitions: MFT and the local-global identity literature.

### Moral foundations theory

Morality is a system of value that determines whether an action is right or wrong and prescribes how individuals should behave (Turiel, 1983). The MFT (Haidt, 2012) explains moral systems as an evolutionary outcome of a group’s response to social problems. Thus, unlike the traditional morality theories, MFT emphasizes that morality is contextualized (i.e. what is morally right looks different in different cultures) and that emotions connected to moral issues (e.g. disgust) often determine our moral responses. Researchers found MFT useful, especially when dealing with moral ideas related to social issues (Clark *et al.*, 2017).

MFT posits that our moral system is built on five moral foundations (i.e. *harm, fairness, ingroup, authority* and *purity*) that are evolved to deal with specific kinds of social problems (Graham *et al.*, 2013). The theory also posits that these five foundations are grouped into two superordinate categories, namely, *individualizing* and *binding* foundations, based on whether the focus is on the individual or the group (Haidt and Graham, 2007; Napier and Lugini, 2013). The harm and fairness foundations make up the individualizing foundations which primarily concern protecting every individual’s rights and well-being. The individualizing foundations emphasize justice, equality and empathy. On the contrary, the ingroup, authority and purity foundations make up the binding foundations that emphasize protecting and preserving the social structure and group well-being. The binding foundation concerns the health and strength of one’s group and underscores values such as loyalty and self-sacrifice. While MFT is not free from criticism (Curry, 2019) and further validation and refinement of the theory may be necessary, the two superordinate foundations (i.e. individualizing and binding) were reliably confirmed (Davies *et al.*, 2014; Vainio and Mäkinen, 2016; Watkins *et al.*, 2016).

*The role of local–global identity in consumption decision*

One well-established intuitive (or irrational) consumer decision-making comes from our group identity. Because people form positive bias toward the group they associate with (i.e. ingroup favoritism) (Hogg and Terry, 2000), consumers tend to show preference for the brands and products that are associated with their predominant identity (Oyserman, 2009; Reed *et al.*, 2012).

In the context of local consumption, the consumer's identity as a local–global citizen is important. All consumers naturally have connections and attachment to their local communities and identify with people in the communities (Gao *et al.*, 2017). At the same time, globalization allowed consumers to build transnational and transcontinental connections with people around the world and identify with them (Grimalda *et al.*, 2018). As a result, consumers develop a bicultural identity in which part of an individual's identity belongs to their local culture (i.e. local identity), and part of their identity is derived from the global society (i.e. global identity) (Arnett, 2002; Gao *et al.*, 2017; Zhang and Khare, 2009). Individuals have a chronic level of local and global identity (Gao *et al.*, 2017) and one identity tends to prevail above the other (Arnett, 2002).

In the literature, the concept of local identity has been almost exclusively operationalized as national identity in the context of foreign versus domestic competition (Gao *et al.*, 2017; Zhang and Khare, 2009) or cosmopolitanism/ethnocentrism (El Banna *et al.*, 2018; Yildiz *et al.*, 2018). However, local identity can be an identity as a member of a smaller region (e.g. city, state) for the boundary of local is flexible and context-dependent. Indeed, Fernández-Ferrín and Bande-Vilela (2013) confirmed that the same psychological mechanism of national identity operates at a smaller regional level in that the local identity as a provincial citizen triggered the ingroup favoritism which led to regional product preference.

**Link between moral foundations and local–global identity**

Moral foundations are universally available moral values that determine individuals' actions and judgments (Haidt and Graham, 2007). Individuals' values contribute to who they are, and this sense of self affects the identity of the person in the society (Hitlin, 2003). Thus, moral foundations, as a broad moral guideline to assess what is right or wrong, prescribe the roles people take and the social identity they accept (e.g. traditional gender identity) (Prince *et al.*, 2019).

Although no prior research explicitly examined the link between moral foundations and local–global identity, conceptual associations between the binding moral foundations and local identity (or the individualizing moral foundations and global identity) imply logical relationships between them. The binding moral foundations emphasize the success and health of an ingroup, whereas the individualizing moral foundations highlight the well-being of every individual. Thus, the binding foundations are moral regards applied to a subset of people (i.e. ingroup members) (Prince *et al.*, 2019; Smith *et al.*, 2014), whereas the individualizing foundations are moral regards for all human beings as equal individuals (Haidt, 2012). Because the binding foundations prioritize the wellbeing of one's ingroup, they are consistent with strong local identity, the sense of self as a devoted citizen of a local community. In contrast, because the

individualizing foundations concern the people outside the local boundary, it is likely to be associated with strong global identity. Previous research on social identity and ethnocentrism (i.e. consumer beliefs of moral legitimacy of rejecting products made by outgroups such as foreign countries) also provides evidence consistent with these associations. Grimalda *et al.* (2018) showed people who perceive themselves as a global citizen do not see a clear boundary between ingroup (i.e. local community) and outgroup. Prince *et al.* (2019) found that the binding foundations are associated with ethnocentrism, whereas the individualizing foundations are associated with cosmopolitanism. Similarly, in a study of charitable giving behaviors, Nilsson *et al.* (2020) reported parallel findings that the concerns from the individualizing foundations enhance outgroup support, whereas the concerns related to the binding foundations predict ingroup support. Thus, we hypothesize the relationships between the moral foundations and local–global identity as follows:

- H1. The binding foundations will be primarily and positively associated with local identity.
- H2. The individualizing foundations will be primarily and positively associated with global identity.

**Relationships between local–global identity and local consumption motivations**

As discussed before, research on local consumption identified two kinds of ethical motivations:

- 1 concerns for fair treatment and environment; and
- 2 local community support.

Consumer identity is closely associated with consumption motives (Gatersleben *et al.*, 2019) and behaviors (Oyserman, 2009). We argue that the two motivations of local consumption are associated with different identities (i.e. local and global), which subsequently trigger different types of moral decision-making (i.e. rational and intuitive). In this section, we will discuss how each motivation is linked to local–global identity and decision-making styles.

*Concerns for fair treatment and environment*

One clear distinction between local and global identity is the salience of the boundary between the ingroup (i.e. the local community) and outgroup. Humans form attachment to their ingroups and develop selective altruism toward them (Brewer, 1999; Everett *et al.*, 2015). However, researchers demonstrated that, compared to people with strong local identity, people with strong global identity perceive a blurred and expanded ingroup boundary (Grimalda *et al.*, 2018). Those who perceive themselves as a global citizen perceive a higher degree of commonality among people, consider a wider range of people as their ingroup members and are more willing to cooperate for global crises and to show interests in humanitarian movements beyond the parochial boundary (Buchan *et al.*, 2011; Grimalda *et al.*, 2018).

The motivation to reduce the global environmental impact and promote fair treatment of all people through local consumption requires a perspective with less pronounced ingroup boundary because such moral values concern the safety, right and health of all individuals regardless of people's membership to the local

community. Therefore, this motivation is likely to be linked with global identity. Moreover, this motivation is likely to be related to the individualizing moral foundations, which is consistent with our conceptualization of the correlation between the individualizing foundations and the global identity. Research showed that concerns for all individuals' well-being promotes pro-environmental and fair-trade consumption behaviors (Vainio and Mäkinen, 2016; Watkins *et al.*, 2016). Hence, consumers' global identity is likely to increase local consumption behaviors as far as consumers believe that local consumption contributes to the well-being of everyone (Shaw and Newholm, 2002).

When people make decisions to endorse local consumption to promote well-being of the world and every individual, consumers need to carefully evaluate the impact of their behaviors on the environment, health, equality and justice (Moisander, 2007). Assessing the range of implications of one's consumption is incredibly complex (Hubacek *et al.*, 2016). Consumers reported feeling conflicted between environmental concerns (i.e. shorter distance transportation) and humanitarian concerns (i.e. fair trade), expressing difficulty resolving complex trade-offs among interrelated factors, or feeling doubtful about the completeness or the truthfulness of information they have (Moisander, 2007; Shaw and Newholm, 2002). In this complex decision-making, consumer knowledge about ethical consumption (e.g. what can be done to address the ethical issues, various costs of consuming a product) plays a critical role. Insufficient information, the complexity and quantity of relevant information and the inability to process, organize or evaluate information are common barriers for ethical consumption decisions (Moisander, 2007; Papaoikonomou *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, it is likely that the global identity is positively associated with local consumption behaviors and the influence is indirect through subjective knowledge. Formally, *H3* is posited:

- H3.* Global identity will indirectly predict local purchase behaviors and subjective knowledge about ethical consumption will mediate the relationship.

#### *Motivation to support local community*

The other motivation for local consumption is to support one's local community (McCaffrey and Kurland, 2015; Miller and Kean, 1997). This motivation emerges from one's moral values to promote and protect the community and its members, even at the cost of sacrificing personal interest (Brewer and Kramer, 1986; Gao *et al.*, 2017). Thus, it is an expression of loyalty and attachment to one's ingroup as a member of the local community (Miller and Kean, 1997). Logically, this motivation is consistent with the local identity. Because people engage in favorable behaviors for the members of ingroup (Gao *et al.*, 2017, 2020; Hardy *et al.*, 2010), consumer's local identity is likely to increase local consumption. In the context of consumer behaviors, researchers confirmed that consumers with a strong affinity for local identity endorse products and brands that convey the symbolic meanings of local heritage (He and Wang, 2015).

The desire to support the local community is likely to trigger rapid, affect-laden and intuition-based decision-making rather than deliberate and rational decision-making. When people are motivated to achieve collective goals, group identity serves as a heuristic that prescribes behaviors without careful deliberation

(Filippin and Guala, 2017). The need to protect and love the ingroup (often expressed as ethnocentrism or patriotism) demands unconditional support for the group, which manifests as normative beliefs and moral obligations (Miller and Kean, 1997; Vida and Reardon, 2008). The literature also suggests that automatic biases for self-related groups (Reed *et al.*, 2012) and empathetic responses to help ingroup members (Hein *et al.*, 2010) dominate decision-making. These findings together imply that consumers with strong local identity may not engage in careful deliberation and thus may not need knowledge about ethical consumption. Rather, research findings suggest the local identity is an immediate and direct factor of local consumption (Long and Murray, 2013). Based on this logic, *H4* is postulated:

- H4.* The local identity will directly predict local purchase behaviors.

## Methods

### Study design and instruments

The study used a self-reported online survey because of convenience and accessibility to many consumers. We used previously established instruments, when possible, to ensure validity and reliability (see Table 1 for items). Moral foundations were measured using the 32-item moral foundation questionnaire (MFQ30; Graham *et al.*, 2011). Researchers have validated MFQ30 in previous studies (Davies *et al.*, 2014; Watkins *et al.*, 2016). The eight-item local-global identity scale (Tu *et al.*, 2012) was used to measure local and global identity and the scale was confirmed to be reliable (Gao *et al.*, 2017). The three-item subjective knowledge scale (Moorman *et al.*, 2004) was adapted to measure subjective knowledge regarding ethical consumption. While many studies measured behavioral intention or attitudes to predict future behaviors, researchers showed that previous behaviors are the best predictor of future behaviors (Yildiz *et al.*, 2018). Thus, actual local consumption behaviors were measured. Because there is no established instrument to measure local consumption behaviors, six items were developed based on the literature review of ethical consumption behaviors (Lee *et al.*, 2014; Watkins *et al.*, 2016). To minimize social desirability bias, participants were asked to indicate the frequency of engaging in 26 ethical consumption behaviors including 6 local consumption behaviors during the past 12 months. Items for demographic information (e.g. age, education, income, ethnicity) were also included.

The survey was designed to minimize common method variance (Chang *et al.*, 2010; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were assured, and honest responses were requested. To prevent participants from guessing the study purpose, we presented the questionnaire as a collection of three unrelated studies. The scale endpoints or formats were varied and the order of items was randomized whenever possible.

### Study procedure

US adult consumers were recruited from a large Midwestern university and Amazon mechanical turk (mTurk) between November and December of 2019. Two different sources were

Table 1 Measurement items and validity measures

Variable	Item	Composite reliability	Cronbach's alpha	
Local identity	I identify that I am a local citizen	0.861	0.788	
	I care about knowing local events			
	My heart mostly belongs to my local community			
Global identity	I respect my local tradition	0.898	0.830	
	I identify that I am a global citizen			
	I care about knowing global events			
	I believe people should be made more aware of how connected we are to the rest of the world			
Moral foundations	Part 1	Harm = 0.846	Harm = 0.726	
	When you decide whether something is right or wrong, to what extent are the following considerations relevant to your thinking?	Fairness = 0.862	Fairness = 0.695	
	• Whether or not someone suffered emotionally (H)	Ingroup = 0.781	Ingroup = 0.735	
	• Whether or not some people were treated differently than others (F)	Authority = 0.816	Authority = 0.732	
	• Whether or not someone's action showed love for his or her country (I)	Purity = 0.895	Purity = 0.830	
	• Whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority (A)			
	• Whether or not someone violated standards of purity and decency (P)			
	• Whether or not someone cared for someone weak or vulnerable (H)			
	• Whether or not someone acted unfairly (F)			
	• Whether or not someone did something to betray his or her group (I)			
	• Whether or not someone conformed to the traditions of society (A)			
	• Whether or not someone did something disgusting (P)			
	• Whether or not someone was cruel (H)			
	• Whether or not someone was denied his or her rights (F)			
	• Whether or not someone showed a lack of loyalty (I)			
	• Whether or not an action caused chaos or disorder (A)			
	• Whether or not someone acted in a way that God would approve of (P)			
		Part 2		
		• Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue (H)		
		• When the government makes laws, the number one principle should be ensuring that everyone is treated fairly (F)		
		• I am proud of my country's history (I)		
		• Respect for authority is something all children need to learn (A)		
		• People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed (P)		
		• One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal (H)		
		• Justice is the most important requirement for a society (F)		
		• People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong (I)		
		• Men and women each have different roles to play in society (A)		
		• I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural (P)		
		• It can never be right to kill a human being (H)		
	• I think it's morally wrong that rich children inherit a lot of money while poor children inherit nothing (F)			
	• It is more important to be a team player than to express oneself (I)			
	• If I were a soldier and disagreed with my commanding officer's orders, I would obey anyway because that is my duty (A)			
	• Chastity is an important and valuable virtue (P)			
Subjective knowledge	Compared to the average consumer,	0.900	0.831	
	• My knowledge of ethical alternative products			
	• My confidence of using information about ethical alternative products			
	• My ability to comprehend information about ethical alternative products			
Local consumption behaviors	During the past 12 months,	0.903	0.853	
	• I purchased products (e.g., clothing) made in the USA			
	• I purchased local foods			
	• I purchased locally grown produce such as vegetables and fruits			
	• I purchased products from local artisans			
	• I purchased locally made alternative			
	• I purchased products from local retailers			

Note: Moral foundations items were noted to indicate the corresponding foundation they measure (H = Harm, F = Fairness, I = Ingroup, A = Authority, P = Purity)

used to maximize the number of participants. Undergraduate students in the Retail Merchandising program were recruited from two large classes and were offered course credits as compensation. The Amazon mTurk workers were recruited through the platform and were given \$1.50 for their participation. All participants were ostensibly invited to an online survey that combined three short consumer studies for efficiency of data collection. Study 1 was described as a research project to understand consumer ethical consumption behaviors. Participants indicated the frequency of ethical consumption behaviors including local consumption during the past 12 months and rated their subjective knowledge regarding ethical consumption. The participants then completed a filler task as Study 2. Study 3 was presented as a study to verify personality and belief instruments in which participants answered the moral foundations questionnaire and the local–global identity scale.

## Result

Four hundred and eight US adults responded to the survey. Forty-six responses were eliminated because of the high proportion of missing data and inaccurate responses for attention check items, leaving 362 responses for analysis (152 student participants and 210 Amazon mTurk participants). The majority of participants were white ( $n = 259$ , 71.5%), female ( $n = 244$ , 68.2%), had some college education ( $n = 138$ , 38.1%) and reported an annual household income of \$50~75K. The average age of the participants was 30.23. The participants perceived that they have about an average level of knowledge regarding ethical consumption (mean = 3.07, SD = 0.81; 1 = much less than average, 5 = much more than average) and reported in engaging in local consumption behaviors occasionally (mean = 3.19, SD = 0.93; 1 = never, 5 = always). Although we did not intend to contrast our student participants with mTurk participants, because our participants were recruited from two sources, we examined potential differences between the subsamples through descriptive statistics. Table 2 presents the demographic information and descriptive statistics for the study variables of each subgroup as well as the pooled sample. We also performed analysis of variances to test the statistical significance of the mean differences and found that only age and the global identity were significantly different. Although our overall sample could have biased our results to overrepresent females and skewed the education level, the student and mTurk participants were mostly similar.

To test the proposed research model, covariance-based structural equation modeling was used, and the data was analyzed using AMOS. First, the measurement model was evaluated. All indicators had acceptable factor loadings ( $\lambda > 0.50$ ) (Hair *et al.*, 1998). The measurement model exhibited an acceptable fit ( $\chi^2 = 1272.462$ ,  $df = 678$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.877$ , comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.898, parsimony comparative fit index (PCFI) = 0.821, root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.049[0.045;0.053]). Discriminant validity was confirmed by evaluating the square root of average variance extracted (AVE) and correlations between the latent variables (see Table 3 for details). High composite reliability scores ( $>0.781$ ) and Cronbach's alpha

values ( $>0.726$ ) suggest good inter-item reliability of the measurements (see Table 1 for more information).

After confirming the measurement model, the structural model was fitted to the data. The skewness and kurtosis values were within the conventionally accepted ranges for normality (skewness ranging from  $-1.190\sim 0.245$ , kurtosis ranging from  $-1.312\sim 1.335$ ). As the multivariate kurtosis was significant (kurtosis = 138.577, critical ratio = 28.261), the analysis was performed using the bootstrapping method. The model fit indices indicated an acceptable fit (Chi-square = 420.822,  $df = 198$ ,  $p = 0.000$ , normed Chi-square = 2.125, goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = 0.901, parsimony goodness-of-fit index (PGFI) = 0.705, CFI = 0.934, PCFI = 0.801, RMSEA = 0.056[0.048;0.063], akaike information criterion (AIC) = 530.822, Browne-Cudeck criterion (BCC) = 538.307). Although the literature review supported our research model, the survey method prevents us from hypothesizing definite causal relationships. Thus, an alternative model in which the local and global identities predict the moral foundations (i.e. identities as exogenous variables) was also tested. The results confirmed the superiority of our theoretical model over the alternative model (Chi-square = 446.518,  $df = 198$ ,  $p = 0.000$ , normed Chi-square = 2.255, GFI = 0.896, PGFI = 0.701, CFI = 0.927, PCFI = 0.794, RMSEA = 0.059 [0.052;0.066], AIC = 556.518, BCC = 564.003), providing some support for our conceptualization of relationships between the moral foundations and local/global identities.

The standardized path coefficients confirmed all hypotheses. As hypothesized, the binding moral foundations were positively related to local identity of consumers ( $\beta = 0.478$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) but not to global identity ( $\beta = -0.033$ , ns). On the contrary, the individualizing moral foundations were more strongly associated with global identity ( $\beta = 0.484$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) than local identity ( $\beta = 0.270$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) while both paths were significant. This result provides support for *H1* and *H2* that the binding (vs individualizing) foundations are primarily associated with local (vs global) identity. Global identity was positively associated with subjective knowledge about ethical consumption ( $\beta = 0.393$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and subjective knowledge was positively related to local purchase behaviors ( $\beta = 0.280$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). There was a weak direct relationship between the global identity and purchase behaviors ( $\beta = 0.155$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Examination of the standardized direct and indirect effect estimates and their confidence intervals showed that the indirect effect of the global identity through subjective knowledge is significant (effect = 0.110, 95% CI = [0.066; 0.176]), confirming the mediating role of subjective knowledge. The direct effect of the global identity remained significant (effect = 0.155, 95% CI = [0.048; 0.290]), signifying that subjective knowledge partially mediated the effect of the global identity. Therefore, *H3* was supported.

On the contrary, the local identity was not related to subjective knowledge ( $\beta = -0.007$ , ns), but directly and positively associated with local purchase behaviors ( $\beta = 0.341$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that subjective knowledge did not mediate the local identity effect. The indirect effect estimate and confidence interval confirmed that the local identity effect on purchase behaviors via subjective knowledge is not significant (indirect effect =  $-0.002$ , 95% CI = [ $-0.040$ ; 0.029]), whereas its direct effect was significant (direct effect =

Table 2 Sample description and descriptive statistics

	Student (n = 152)		Amazon mTurk (n = 210)		Total (n = 362)	
	Mean/Count	SD/%	Mean/Count	SD/%	Mean/Count	SD/%
Age <sup>a</sup>	21.09	2.39	36.85	12.44	30.23	12.36
Ethnicity						
White	116	76.3	143	69.4	259	71.5
Black	7	4.6	22	10.7	29	8.0
Asian	20	13.2	13	6.3	33	9.1
Hispanic/Latino	2	1.3	15	7.3	17	4.7
Native American	0	0	1	0.5	1	0.3
Middle Easterner	2	1.3	0	0	2	0.6
Multiracial	5	3.3	12	5.8	17	4.7
Gender						
Male	10	6.6	104	49.5	114	31.5
Female	142	93.4	102	48.6	244	67.4
Education						
Highschool	21	13.8	28	13.3	49	13.5
Some college	98	64.5	40	19.0	138	38.1
Associate degree	13	8.6	35	16.7	48	13.3
Bachelor's degree	18	11.8	85	40.5	103	28.5
Advanced degree	2	1.3	18	8.6	20	5.5
Household income						
<20,000	31	20.4	22	10.5	53	14.6
20,000–35,000	13	8.6	46	21.9	59	16.3
35,000–50,000	8	5.3	44	21.0	52	14.4
50,000–75,000	23	15.1	50	23.8	73	20.2
75,000–100,000	18	11.8	27	12.9	45	12.4
100,000–150,000	23	15.1	13	6.2	36	9.9
>150,000	34	22.4	4	1.9	38	10.5
Harm	4.68	0.72	4.59	0.91	4.53	0.84
Fairness	4.59	0.66	4.50	0.84	4.54	0.78
Ingroup	3.75	0.78	3.52	1.02	3.62	0.93
Authority	3.86	0.80	3.82	1.02	3.84	0.93
Purity	3.57	0.92	3.58	1.31	3.58	1.16
Local identity	3.83	0.71	3.80	0.85	3.81	0.79
Global identity <sup>a</sup>	4.13	0.63	3.82	0.93	3.95	0.83
Subjective knowledge	3.09	0.78	3.07	0.83	3.07	0.81
Local consumption behaviors	3.13	0.86	3.23	0.98	3.19	0.93

Note: a = Statistically significant difference was found between the subsamples for the noted variables at  $p = 0.007$  ( $p$  was adjusted for the family-wise error rate)

0.341, 95% CI=[0.218; 0.445]). Therefore,  $H4$  that the local identity would directly, rather than indirectly through subjective knowledge, contribute to local consumption behaviors is supported (see Figure 1 for the results).

## Discussion

Although buying local emerges as a distinctive theme of ethical consumer behaviors (Adams and Raisborough, 2010; Beagan et al., 2010), it is unclear why consumers consider local consumption as an ethical choice even when there is no clear evidence that local consumption support a typical agenda of ethical consumers (McCaffrey and Kurland, 2015). This study provides a perspective to answer this question by tying together several streams of local consumption research (e.g. ethical consumption, local food consumption, local shopping/retailing, local-global consumer

preference) and offering a holistic and systematic understanding of local consumption. In doing so, we presented a model that integrates local-global identity and the full spectrum of moral foundations within a single framework. This model allows us to explain why the ethical consumption researchers, especially those who used qualitative methods, repeatedly found local community support and protection as a key theme (e.g. “I want to make sure it is Canadian not US or New Zealand,” Beagan et al., 2010; “a high sense of care towards the economic viability of small local farmers [...] in a globalized food system,” Hashem et al., 2018).

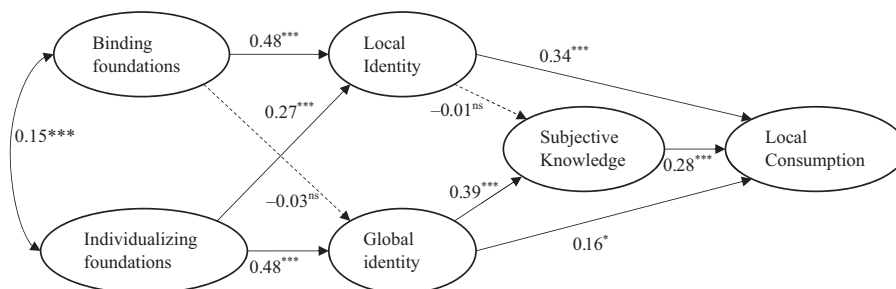
Theoretically, this study provides a comprehensive framework that incorporates both traditional ethical consumption motivations (i.e. social justice, environmental concerns) and pro-group motivations (i.e. local support) for local consumption decisions. Although some researchers noted that consumers support local businesses as a moral choice, they

Table 3 Discriminant validity of the measurement model

Variables	Binding foundations	Individual foundations	Local identity	Global identity	Subjective knowledge	Local consumption
Binding foundations	0.805	0.019	0.278	0.003	0.001	0.077
Individual foundations	0.139*	0.910	0.063	0.209	0.041	0.027
Local identity	0.527*	0.251*	0.514	0.110	0.024	0.202
Global identity	0.057	0.457*	0.332*	0.560	0.148	0.133
Subjective knowledge	-0.014	0.203*	0.155	0.385*	0.627	0.144
Local consumption	0.277*	0.164*	0.449*	0.365*	0.380*	0.537

Notes: Bottom half = correlations between factors (\* denotes statistical significance at  $p = 0.05$ ), Diagonal line = average variance extracted (AVE), upper half = squared correlations between factors

Figure 1 Research model and structural coefficients



Notes: \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

did not integrate or use ethical behavior frameworks and only focused on the pro-group motivations. In contrast, the ethical consumption literature relied solely on the values consistent with the individualizing foundations in MFT, leaving social motives out of consideration (Graham *et al.*, 2011; Zollo, 2021). The current study connects these two isolated streams of literature and provides a model to simultaneously consider both motivations. This study shares the view with the researchers who attend to the social component of morality and see pro-group behaviors as moral rather than amoral or immoral (Graham *et al.*, 2011; Haidt, 2012; Haidt and Graham, 2007).

Our findings confirmed that the individualizing moral foundations are associated with the global identity, whereas the binding foundations are related to the local identity (*H1* and *H2*). This result suggests the critical role of the moral foundations in determining the importance of local ingroup in one's identity. The binding foundations morally justify prioritizing the success of the local ingroup even at the expense of personal sacrifice and possibly outgroup's suffering (Graham *et al.*, 2011; Haidt, 2012). This moral basis is consistent with the consumer ethnocentrism literature which demonstrated that consumers feel a moral obligation to protect and be loyal to local businesses (Fernández-Ferrín and Bande-Vilela, 2013; He and Wang, 2015). Our findings are also in line with a recent study that demonstrated the correlation between moral foundations and consumer cosmopolitanism/ethnocentrism (El Banna *et al.*, 2018) and previous social identity literature which shows that the salience of a group membership activates psychological responses to increase ingroup cohesion (Hogg and Terry, 2000).

Importantly, we theorized and confirmed that, in addition to rational moral reasoning, moral intuitions driven by the pro-group motivations contribute to local consumption behaviors. Our findings (*H3* and *H4*) showed that intuitive local support driven by the local identity can be more important in determining local consumption behaviors than rational ethical decisions driven by the global identity (standardized total effects 0.339 vs 0.265). Therefore, our results highlight the rational, knowledge-based decision-making tells only half the story of local consumption and provide additional support for the need to consider moral intuitions in ethical consumption decision-making. In this sense, this result shares the view with the literature stressing the role of both rational and nonrational cognitive mechanism in ethical consumer decisions (Zollo, 2021; Zollo *et al.*, 2018) and is consistent with the study that showed our identity can initiate rapid and intuition-based judgment (Filippin and Guala, 2017). However, it is important to note that our findings do not suggest consumers only have one kind of moral foundations or identity, nor use only one mode of decision-making. Rather, our findings imply that the composition and valuation of each moral foundation collectively influence the likelihood of a consumer's endorsement of local consumption and their dependence on knowledge. All consumers may have both individualizing and binding reasons to buy local but differences in the composition of moral foundations can explain why certain consumers support local more for the sake of helping the local community than others.

Our findings also call for more nuanced and careful research design for local consumption studies because conceptually blurring local with other ethical consumption can bias the



results. Because many researchers assumed local consumers are also pro-environmental and pro-social, they assumed local consumers rely on the individualizing foundations. However, our results revealed some could support local strongly without caring about the welfare and justice for all individuals. Failing to recognize this motivation in research design can reinforce our biased perception of local consumers. For example, McEachern *et al.* (2010) recruited committed ethical consumers to investigate local support through farmers' market usage. They found only a small number of consumers regularly use farmers' markets. Although the authors might have correctly attributed the cause of the disappointing findings to practicality (e.g. inconvenience, cost), the sample of the study could have also contributed to the findings. In another study, Nie and Zepeda (2011) developed profiles of organic and local food consumer segments based on consumer value, behaviors, shopping habits and dietary restrictions. Because the authors assumed consumers either buy both organic and local or none, sampling criteria could have prevented the researchers from capturing what is uniquely local.

Our result provides additional support for the recent global-local identity literature that emphasizes the coexistence of both global and local identity within an individual (Makri *et al.*, 2019; Zhang *et al.*, 2022). For example, Makri *et al.* (2019) reported significant correlations between local and global identity in two different populations (0.41 and 0.47) and concluded that local and global identity are not opposite but together create one's identity. Our analysis corroborated this notion by finding a significant positive correlation (0.332,  $p = 0.01$ ) between global and local identity. Although past studies have reported mixed findings on the correlation between the two [e.g. insignificant correlations: Erez *et al.* (2013) vs significant positive correlations: Zhang *et al.* (2022)], global and local identity were conceptualized as independent constructs that can coexist from the initial development stage. Tu *et al.* (2012) confirmed, at the stage of scale development, that these two factors are generally positively correlated. Steenkamp (2019) suggested that sample characteristics may affect the correlation between local and global identity as a negative correlation between the two was found only when a small number of participants was recruited using convenience sampling [Tu *et al.*'s (2012) study]. Thus, our finding is in line with the majority of the global and local identity literature that reported positive correlations between the two and further supports the situational balancing and negotiation of global versus local identity in response to the immediate needs.

Our study also provides some insights on the local consumer market and practical implications. Previously, marketers viewed ethical consumers as a single market segment that cares about all ethical issues, including green, fair-trade and local consumption. Marketers have aggressively targeted the ethical consumer group with various ethical claims and information that shows how their products and processes address the concerns of this consumer group. This approach paradoxically made the ethical consumers feel confused and uncertain about their choices (Papaoikonomou *et al.*, 2018). In addition, this view of ethical consumers as a single market segment neglects an important consumer group that is different from the typical ethical consumers. When local consumption was specifically studied, a distinct group of consumers who are keen to support

local but no other ethical causes (Bean and Sharp, 2011) appeared. Our findings support that local consumption, among all ethical consumption kinds, is attractive to a broader consumer group than the traditional ethical consumer segment. Consumers who are interested in all ethical issues are likely to score high in individualizing foundations because of their values in individuals' rights and wellness. As a result, having adequate knowledge that this purchase contributes to individuals' rights, and wellness is important to them. Hence, marketers should craft their messages highlighting the happiness and wellness of individuals when targeting this ethical consumer group (e.g. "Buy local and reduce your ecological footprint for the world"). On the contrary, because the other local supporters are likely to score high in binding foundations, marketers need the strategy to target this consumer group with the messages that resonate with the pro-group motivations rather than information about ethical impacts. For example, activating local identity (e.g. by making one's local identity salient through messages like, "you are a proud New Yorker!") can be a very effective way to encourage local consumption for these consumers.

### Limitations and future study suggestions

The study presents some limitations and future research opportunities. First, we relied on the respondent's self-reported purchases during the past 12 months to measure purchase behaviors. The reported behaviors could be inaccurate due to errors in the recall of purchases and the social desirability bias. This might have reduced the variation of the behaviors among respondents. A future study to measure actual behaviors could be beneficial. Second, although we analyzed and compared an alternative model because this study was a cross-sectional survey, it is important to acknowledge that the tested relationships are correlational. Thus, our theoretical model proposed causal relationships based on theories and literature; these relationships could not be confirmed through this study. A future experimental study will be necessary to validate the causal relationships and strengthen the findings of the current study. One interesting approach can be to activate the global or local identity of the participants through experimental manipulations and test whether temporarily salient identities follow the proposed paths in the model. Another way to test the proposed relationships is to test whether marketing messages created to match moral foundations and/or identities enhance local consumption behaviors. Third, testing the factors and conditions that augment the binding (vs individualizing) foundations can provide additional insights. It is known that conditions that threaten the health of ingroup increase the moral demand for the binding foundations (Carvalho *et al.*, 2019), and it is likely that presence of threats promotes local consumption behaviors as ingroup protection. Individual characteristics, including demographic factors, may be related to moral foundations, which will be practically useful to marketers as demographics are easier to detect and use than one's invisible moral values. Finally, the current study measured the chronic level of local-global identity. However, research showed that our perception of ingroup boundary is flexible (Gino and Galinsky, 2012; Napier and Lugini, 2013). Consideration of this factor in the context of local consumption can be worthwhile.

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