

Mapping the Landscape: A Study of Contextual Variations in Empirical Research on Ethical Consumer Behaviour Contributing to Sustainable Consumption

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Abstract:

Studies on ethical consumption have been on the rise in recent years, with consumers making informed, sustainable choices. Understanding the contexts of such research becomes important since it shapes consumers' decision-making. Since the domain of research on ethical consumer behaviour encompasses various contexts, analysing them fulfils the aim of understanding whether specific consumer profiles are more likely to engage in ethical consumption. However, ethical consumption is a complex issue, and ethical intent often does not translate into actual purchase. Existing literatures in the field often concentrate on individual features of products or other attributes. To understand the intention-behaviour gap regarding ethical consumption, a holistic understanding of the influencing factors is necessary. This study undertakes a thematic literature review of the different contexts under which ethical consumption is studied. It helped in identifying some broader aspects, which were then utilised as constructs for a conceptual framework. The results have important implications in framing marketing strategies since they explore many subtle psychological aspects of the consumer mind that are otherwise not apparent.

Keywords: Ethical consumption, ethical values, sustainable consumption, green purchase

Introduction

Excessive usage and consumption of natural resources, resulting from massive economic expansion, have drawn attention to environmental degradation (Chao, C. M., 2022). In recent times, with the rise of environmental awareness, consumers are making more informed decisions about the products they purchase. Existing research indicates that current consumption levels and patterns must be adjusted to ensure long-term sustainability. It is a fairly common scenario in the modern era for consumers to make moral decisions in purchasing goods that are fairly traded or environmentally beneficial, or to boycott products /brands or businesses that pose a threat to the environment. Concerns regarding green issues, workers' rights and conditions, child labour, unfair trade, resource degradation, irresponsible marketing, animal research, and oppressive regimes contribute to ethical consumption (Karimzadeh, S., & Bostrom, M., 2024). Ethical consumption is thus a relevant part of the broader picture of sustainable consumption. An increasing amount of scholarly literature exists in research that has examined ethical consumption. Some have linked it to moral identity, which may be conceived as a moral value and belief. Moral values are characterised as a preconceived idea of morality or otherwise of a specific behaviour (Yaprak & Prince, 2019). Consuming ethically has the power to improve the world significantly. Customers can strongly influence firms by emphasising ethical items. Businesses may be encouraged to adopt more environmentally friendly and socially conscious practices in response to the growing demand for products that are sourced and manufactured ethically. Studies related to ethical consumption are numerous, and ethical consumption is examined in various contexts (Hassan, S.M., and Rahman, Z., 2024; Rasool, S. et al., 2020; Papaoikonomou, E. et al., 2011; Maja Hrlec Gorše et al., 2024; Küster, I. et al., 2023). While ethical consumption is gaining importance as a topic for global research, studies that delve deeper into the understanding of ethical issues remain limited. However, it remains debated how the representations of the phenomenon are created and actualised in

different societies and among different people. A significant bulk of the literature on ethical consumption, particularly such inspired by marketing and psychology models, has tended to study the impacts of individual factors such as values, preferences and motives (de Pelsmacker P.,2005; Zaikauskaitė L et al,2022). Since contexts often help in building intention and therefore shaping consumers' habits, it is worth investigating them to gain a better perspective on ethical consumption. This work, through a thematic review of various research contexts, aims to identify the primary impetus behind ethical consumption.

Literature Review

A gradual increase in population has significantly contributed to environmental degradation and the depletion of natural resources on Earth. The immediate consequence of the population explosion has been overconsumption and simultaneous overproduction to match the need. This has contributed to the generation of waste, adverse climatic impacts, loss of biodiversity, and increased pollution. With the passage of time, unsustainable consumption and production posed one of the greatest threats to mankind, one that requires immediate attention. As the Earth scrambled to find a sustainable solution, the first formal definition of sustainable development was given by the Brundtland Commission Report, officially titled "Our Common Future", in 1987. Sustainable development was defined as "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Accordingly, the United Nations adopted 17 interconnected sustainable development goals in 2015, with the intention of achieving them by 2030. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) serve as a guide for shifting global activity toward sustainable development. Although global production and consumption are significant drivers of the world economy, they have also led to the depletion of the planet's resources and natural ecosystems. Literature suggests that achieving the SDGs requires a reassessment of consumer behaviour (Haron et al., 2005),

as the rise of global affluence has led to a surge in consumer spending (Qalati et al., 2021). Growing consumption is a sign of both economic expansion and improved societal well-being. However, it also poses serious risks to public health, social justice, and environmental sustainability. (Johnson & Chattaraman, 2019; Kautish et al., 2022). Thus, the terrain of sustainable development is complex, and consumers play a crucial role (Shiel et al., 2020). Therefore, a balancing act regarding consumption is of utmost importance. Many of our most pressing ecological, health, and social issues are also directly related to consumption (O'Rourke, Lollo, 2015). This has inspired numerous parties, including the government, educational and scientific institutions, regulatory bodies, and relevant international organisations, to integrate sustainable consumption into their corporate and strategic planning levels (Wang et al., 2019). Glavič (2021) defines sustainable consumption as the use of goods and services that enable future generations to meet their needs while minimising negative environmental impacts. SDG-12 calls for "Responsible consumption and production". If sustainable development is an overarching goal, then a subset of it may be termed responsible consumption. It not only incorporates tenets of sustainable development but also has an ethical aspect within its purview. The concept of responsible consumption is pertinent since it acknowledges the influence of consumers in making informed purchasing decisions. Ethical consumption, in a way, empowers consumers to align their values with purchase so much so that it translates into a responsible action. Apart from consuming green practices like supporting fair labour, reducing waste and preserving or recycling resources are essential for sustainable development. Consumers' ethical decision making is related to responsible consumption.

One of the most significant antecedents for elucidating consumers' decision-making about purchases has been identified as the attitude towards consuming a product (Honkanen, P. et al., 2006). According to existing studies, to ensure long-term sustainability, current

consumption levels and patterns must be altered (Liu et al., 2017). One of the key highlights of environmental sustainability in today's world is the shift in consumers' attitudes (Halder et al., 2020). In recent times, it has become apparent that with the rise in awareness of environmental degradation, people are making more ethical purchasing choices. As such, ethical consumption has evolved as a significant aspect of the broader concept of consumption (Szmigin, I., and Carrigan, M., 2005). Consumers often use their purchasing decisions as a means of expressing their ethical values (Toti & Moulins, 2016). According to Smart B. (2019), ethical consumption entails purchasing and consuming goods and services that have been produced ethically, which means that they do not infringe upon the rights, interests, or welfare of nonhuman creatures, people, or the environment. The realm of ethical consumption is broad, encompassing a wide range of goods and issues, from social well-being to ecological sustainability and fair trade, and it is deeply entwined with the social and economic environments (Rohmana, Y., 2021). Sustainable practices are frequently employed in the production of ethical goods, which mitigates their negative environmental impact. This can involve reducing waste and utilising eco-friendly materials (Šálková, D et al., 2024). The term "ethical consumer behaviour" refers to the deliberate choices made by customers to purchase or refrain from goods and services due to moral or ethical convictions, particularly in matters such as fair trade, human rights, animal welfare, and environmental preservation. In fact, one form of consumer behaviour that allows them to express their views about society is ethical consumption (Pinto, Borges, Herter, & Ferreira, 2020).

Ethical consumption practices encompass a broader range of consumer behaviours that demonstrate political involvement and democratic participation, rather than merely endorsing or refraining from particular products (Backović & Petrović, 2021). The critical role that socio-technical frameworks, which take into account technological developments, cultural norms, market dynamics, and regulatory mechanisms, play in understanding the underlying structural

determinants that impact people's patterns of ethical consumption (Karimzadeh & Boström, 2022). Conscientious consumer behaviour is shaped by the intricate interactions of structural frameworks, societal norms, and personal motivations that give rise to ethical purchasing.

Studies related to ethical consumption vary in their context. According to Ramya & Ali (2016), five factors —psychological, social, economic, cultural, and personal — impact consumers' purchasing decisions. Again, Paudel et al. (2018) state that sociocultural and economic factors have a significant impact on this type of purchasing behaviour. Aritzia et al. (2014) mention the influence of global capitalism and societal culture on ethical consumption. (Sakai, M,2019). Some researchers investigating ethical consumption claim that behaviour may not always be consistent regarding purchases. It is observed that, although many consumers wish to act in an environmentally responsible manner, many of them fail to do so. A discrepancy exists between consumers' beliefs, intentions, and actions regarding ethical consumption (Hanss et al., 2016; Nguyen et al., 2019; Domsa & Ihalainen, 2022). Studies indicate that many times, consumers, through the act of ethical purchasing, deal with a number of environmental issues, such as pollution and global warming, or support the social community. Also, Carrington et al. (2010) imply that ethical purchase intentions are predominantly governed by elements such as personal values, moral norms, mental processes and internal ethics.

According to Carrington et al. (2015), socially integrated customers across a range of life priorities prioritise purchases in different ways. The pattern of consumption often differs contextually, thereby contributing to the development of multifaceted and varied consuming identities.

Gap in the study

Concerning the literature on ethical consumption, it has been found that there has been a disproportionate concentration on individual features of items, such as organic products, or on psychological factors like altruism, in trying to understand the motivations behind ethical behaviours. Ethical consumption can exist under varied contexts, and in each case, the factor motivation may vastly differ. Additionally, the concept of ethical consumption is complex and contested. Innate value of an individual contributes to a great extent. A conceptual demarcation of tangible and intangible factors may help in the process, which are not so prevalent in existing literature. This calls for developing a conceptual framework that helps to bring clarity to the notion and bridge the gap. Hence, this study aims to address the intention-purchase behaviour gap by reviewing different contexts in which ethical consumption has been studied in the existing literature.

Methodology:

The method used in this study is a literature review. Secondary data is from the Semantic Scholar database. Articles from published journals are searched in Semantic Scholar using the keywords “ethical consumption” and then screened based on publication year, with a range of 2015-2025. The type of publication is limited to “business”. On the basis of similarities, the publications are thus grouped and analysed to understand the factors behind ethical consumption. The list of publications utilised for analysis is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: List of publications for analysis

Sr	Publications	Countries	Factors
1.	Kushwah, S., et al (2019)	India	Image, Value & Risk
2.	Robichaud, Z., & Yu, H. (2021)	Gen Z	Product interest, Subjective norms
3.	Zollo, L et al., (2018)	US	Intuitions
4.	Wei S, Liu F, She S and Wu R (2022)	China	Altruistic and Egoistic values
5.	Weaver, T., Ellen, P.S., & Curasi, C. (2024)	US	Product provenance, ethical, and moral identity
6.	Xiao, G., Ma, H., & Lee, H. (2024)	China	Power distance & collectivism
7.	Fei, S., Zeng, J., & Jin, C. (2022).	China	Social trust, participation, and reciprocity
8.	Ogiemwonyi, O., & Jan, M.T. (2023)	Malaysia	Idealism, Relativism, moral obligation, and environmental ethics
9.	Cui, G., Zeng, J., & Jin, C. (2022)	Multiple countries	Cultural values (Collectivism & individualism)
10.	Nguyen, T.M., Le, D.M., Hoang, T.H., & Ha, M.T. (2022)	Vietnam	Alienation, altruism, and environmental concerns
11.	Ghali, Z.Z. (2021)	Tunisia	Lasting involvement, Environmental concern, Social Value
12.	Otika, U.S., Ugwunwanyi, A., & Olise, M.C. (2021)	Nigeria	Equity, health, Economic structure, Consumption and production pattern, Biodiversity
13.	Govind, R., Singh, J.J., Garg, N., & D'Silva, S. (2019)		Explicit and implicit attitude
14.	Ganglmair-Wooliscroft, A., & Wooliscroft, B. (2019)	Austria	Well-being and happiness
15.	Wooliscroft, B., Ganglmair-Wooliscroft, A., & Noone, A. (2014)	New Zealand	Hierarchy of ethical consumption behaviour
16.	Suphasomboon & Vassanadumrongdee (2022)		Emotional value, functional value
17.	Lee, J (2021)	Korea	Consumption Values
18.	Deesilatham, S. (2025)	Thailand	Emotional values
19.	Arman & Mark-Herbert (2024)		Social influence

Conceptual Framework

Studies often find a relationship between value and consumption (Schwartz, S. H.,1992). Value attributes related to consumption behaviour have been investigated and categorised in various ways in the literature. According to intuitionist scholars, decision-makers use an a priori information processing system, which is quite efficient. This idea aligns with social cognitive research, and the study suggests that a priori cognitive processes are moral intuitions (Zollo, Pellegrini, and Ciappei, 2017). Hence, moral intuition can act as an antecedent that can influence ethical values and behaviour. Again, intuitions stem from prior experiences and information, and it is argued that a priori knowledge gained from experience leads to ethical consumer sentiments (Pellegrini et al., 2016; Zollo, L., Pellegrini, M. and Ciappei; C., 2017)

Social capital theory posits that the social structures or networks of human relationships can partially explain a range of social phenomena. Studies suggest that trust and norms are part of social capital. Social norms, such as reciprocity, relate to helpful acts, collective efficacy, and types of social support (Makridis & Wu, 2021). Individual performance, like ethical consumption, is greatly influenced by consumers' social capital (Fei, S., Zeng, J., & Jin, C., 2022)

People's ethical or firm-level priorities are greatly influenced by ethical beliefs, such as idealism and relativism (Zou & Chan, 2019). According to recent assertions, idealistic people have a greater moral responsibility to avoid immoral items, which strengthens their ethical principles. They are more inclined to adopt environmentally friendly practices and have very high moral standards. On the other hand, in the case of relativism, individuals think that moral activity is correlated and can be considered moral if the benefits outweigh the drawbacks.

Evidence suggests that when people engage in pro-environmental behaviour, relativistic individuals are more sensitive to their gains (Ogiemwonyi et al., 2023).

Additionally, ethical consciousness clarifies the connection between a consumer's overall psychological structure. Studies find that cultural values, a key psychological aspect, influence ethical consumption. Broadly speaking, it can be categorised into individualism and collectivism. Literature finds that although both individualism and collectivism shape human consumption, they motivate consumption patterns in different ways (Cui, G., Zeng, J., & Jin, C., 2022; Hui, C.H.; Triandis, H.C., 1985). Individualism is a self-centric concept, often emphasising the short-term advantages over the long-term disadvantages. Even though the advantages are gradual, collective inclinations frequently centre on group interests (Triandis, H.C., 2001). However, in both cases, it has been found to motivate eco-friendly consumption (Cui, G., Zeng, J., & Jin, C., 2022)

Again, as mentioned by Wei S, Liu F, She S, and Wu R (2022), ethical values, including altruistic and egoistic values, also influence ethical consumption. Altruism is a selfless pursuit where people act without anticipating personal benefits and, as such, act ethically. On the contrary, consumers with egoistic values also tend to consume organically and are more likely to engage in ethical consumption (Wei S, Liu F, She S, and Wu R, 2022; Schwartz, S. H., 1968).

Alienation is another psychological factor that impacts ethical consumption. Studies find that ethical consumers are less alienated and are more prone to social consciousness (Nguyen, T.M., Le, D.M., Hoang, T.H., & Ha, M.T., 2022), Anderson Jr, WT, Cunningham W.H., 1972)

Ethical consumers also consider product attributes to make an informed purchasing decision. As pointed out by Weaver, T., Ellen, P.S., & Curasi, C. (2024), product biographies are a convenient way to understand the meanings and ideas behind a product, which enables

consumers to make informed decisions. By understanding the production and distribution of a product, consumers can identify its ethical aspects. By combining academic findings from several fields, including economics, sociology, psychology, marketing, and consumer behaviour, Sheth et al. (1991) developed the theory of consumption values to understand consumer decision-making behaviour. The tangible, useful, and practical consumption value of a product, related to price, quality, and utility, is defined as functional value (Lin & Huang, 2012; Lee, J., 2021). The usefulness that is emotionally evoked by the product or service is known as emotional value. Goods and services are linked to either positive or negative feelings or emotional responses, such as security, comfort, fear, or guilt (Lee, J,2021). The perceived benefit that results from an alternative's affiliation with one or more particular social groupings is known as social value. People want to be accepted by socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic groups that are categorised either favourably or unfavourably. (Lin & Huang, 2012; Sheth et al., 1991; Ajzen, 1991). Existing literature emphasises that consumption values contribute to ethical consumption (Suphasomboon, T., & Vassanadumrongdee, S., 2022; Ghali, Z.Z., 2021). Hence, factors that motivate ethical consumption can be broadly categorised into product attributes and value attributes. Based on the literature review, the conceptual framework is provided in Figure 1.

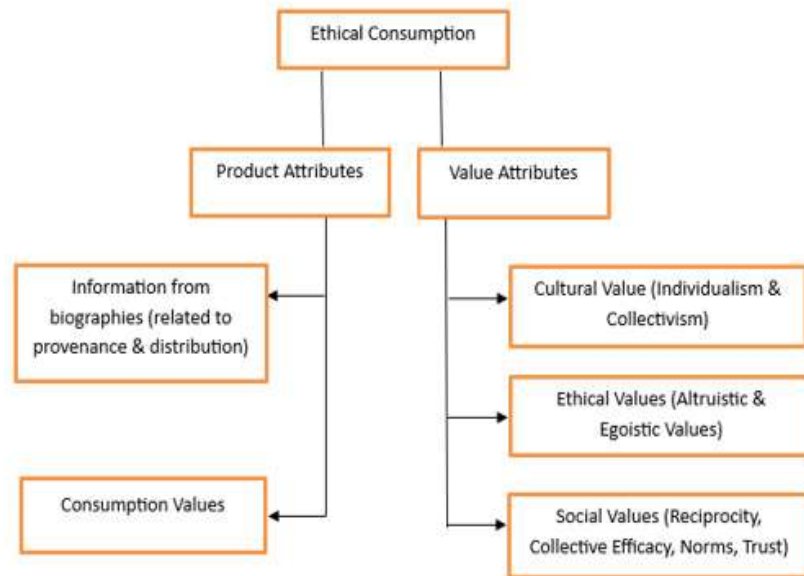


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for ethical consumption

Discussion

The demand for a more sustainable overall structure to address the world's current environmental and social issues is growing at a faster rate. Overproduction and consumption have led to unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. In order to improve the situation, mindful consumption must be required, and as such, SDG12 stresses "Responsible Consumption". Although consuming green is undoubtedly one effective way of sustainable consumption, there are other facets of responsible action by consumers. Literature finds that one of the important components of responsible consumption is ethical consumption. This is because it takes into account the beyond simple practices of buying to consider the moral impact of purchases by consumers on people and the planet. The literature review, conducted to identify the motivating factors behind ethical consumption, examines two broader aspects: one related to the product and the other to the consumer's psyche. Since ethical consumption encompasses elements such as green consumption, supporting ethical brands, and products

manufactured through fair practices, as well as animal welfare, product provenance, or biographies related to their origin, they can help consumers make more informed ethical purchases. The study underscores the importance of selfless values of consumers, which help in developing pro-environmental behaviour. It often helps in developing green purchase intent, thereby contributing to responsible purchasing. Again, for any purchase, the functional value of the product becomes important. One of the most prevalent models to explain consumer choices is the Theory of Consumption Values (TCV) (Sheth et al,1991). Fundamentally, the TCV asserts that five values—functional, emotional, social, epistemic, and conditional values—have an impact on a person's ultimate decision. Understanding consumer behaviour is a complicated process. The unidimensional definition of value hardly explains the multifaceted character of consumer behaviour. However, a simultaneous interaction of factors, both physical and intangible, contributes to developing ethical intent that leads to responsible consumption. The study, therefore, tried to understand the ethical aspects of consumption through a holistic approach. It thus considers both the product and value attributes.

Conclusion

Sustainability-related studies have come up at an incredible pace in the past decade, particularly after COVID-19. Simultaneously, consumers have gradually become aware of the impact of overpopulation, which has led to environmental degradation over time. Since sustainable development requires a balancing act, only consuming green does not suffice. So, further exploration of responsible consumption is required. Hence, ethical consumption becomes an important aspect in research. Existing literature finds ample evidence of the existence of ethically conscious consumers. However, there exist gaps in our understanding of the subject. Owing to this, researchers often fail to explain why, despite being aware of sustainability, many consumers do not practice it. This acted as a motivation for this study.

Hence, exploring the concept of ethical consumption and studying the factors that influence it became a crucial part. The study's main conclusions include the wide variety of reasons why people engage in ethical consumption. Some customers are driven by personal benefits, such as emotional pleasure and contentment. In contrast, others are motivated by altruistic factors, including a desire to support socially conscious and environmentally friendly activities. These results demonstrate the intricate relationship between values, product attitudes, and priorities that affect ethical consumer behaviour. It also emphasises that ecologically friendly consumption is significantly influenced by the consumption values of the product, which encompass both functional and non-functional values. Social norms and cultural aspects play a key role in shaping purchase intent.

Contribution to industry

This study is relevant in today's business world as well. Businesses must prioritise transparency, accountability, and ethical considerations in their operations and communication strategies to effectively engage with ethically concerned customers. This will enable consumers to make informed decisions about their consumption. Businesses can increase consumer trust and credibility, enhance their brand's reputation, and foster long-term market success by demonstrating a commitment to ethical and sustainable business practices.

Limitations

The study has primarily utilized Semantic Scholar as the database to build the conceptual framework. There are other databases where publications relating to ethical consumption are found. However, the inaccessibility of such a database has restricted researchers from exploring further, and so the sample data utilised here is limited. A more exhaustive investigation may help to generalise the findings.

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