

Dimensions of Ethical Consumer Behavior

¹Sana Fatmi, ²Prof. A.K. Malviya

¹Junior Research Fellow, ²Professor

Department of Commerce and Business Administration,

University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, India

Abstract – As the marketing research domain is increasing, getting a richer and deeper understanding of consumer behavior is becoming increasingly relevant. One such area of marketing research is consumer ethics and how it is displayed in a marketing scenario through consumer actions. This paper discusses the multiple dimensions of marketing ethics and the ways in which consumer display their ethical behavior in the market. It sheds light on different aspects of consumer ethic and ethical consumer behavior to provide more insight and add knowledge to the existing body of literature by reviewing multiple research papers and summarizing them here. This paper not only provides newer insights but also can be used as the base for further research on ethical consumer behavior.

Index Terms – Consumer Ethics; Ethical Consumer Behavior; Consumer Ethical Actions; Market Ethics.

1. INTRODUCTION

In academic research, there is an increase in the number of publications on the ethics of the consumer. Market ethics are the moral principles and values that direct the behavior of business houses, consumers, and other parties involved in commercial dealings. Trust-building, fair competition, and consumer rights protection all depend primarily upon ethical behavior within the market. Businesses that prefer transparent pricing practices, honest advertising, and ethical sourcing tend to foster enduring relationships with their clients, improve their reputation, and apparently win consumer loyalty for themselves. On the other hand, unethical actions, including making exaggerated claims, exploiting workers, or disregarding the environment, can result in negative public opinion and legal repercussions. According to Crane and Matten (2016), ethical marketing shows a company's larger duty to society and the environment in addition to being in line with legal requirements. Integrating ethics into business decisions is becoming a strategic necessity in today's conscientious consumer environment.

The study of ethical consumer behavior has grown in importance as concerns about corporate responsibility, labor exploitation, and environmental degradation are growing throughout the world. Today's consumers are active participants whose decisions reflect broader moral and social beliefs rather than just passive consumers of goods and services. According to Bray, Johns, and Kilburn (2011), ethical consumer behavior is making decisions based on factors including fair trade procedures, human rights, animal welfare, and environmental sustainability. Positive acts, like buying eco-friendly items or supporting ethical brands, and negative actions, like avoiding or boycotting businesses engaged in unethical practices, are the two main ways that this behavior manifests itself (Shaw & Shiu, 2002). The increased influence of consumer agency on market dynamics and business practices is reflected in these two reactions. Negative acts serve as protest instruments with the goal of holding corporations accountable, whereas positive ethical behavior supports and engages responsible business. Businesses, legislators, and marketers who want to support responsible production and sustainable consumption in accordance with the global development goals must comprehend these behavioral aspects (White, Habib, & Hardisty, 2019).

2. CONSUMER ETHICS AND ETHICAL CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Academic literature varies in its understanding of the concept of ethical consumerism. In general, two main lines of inquiry provide different viewpoints on what it means to act morally in consumer situations. The first focuses on consumer ethics, which studies the moral principles that govern consumer behavior, especially as they relate to

accountability, justice, and honesty. The second examines ethical consumer behavior, emphasizing decisions made by customers driven by moral considerations like social justice, environmental sustainability, and corporate responsibility.

2.1. CONSUMER ETHICS

Consumer ethics examines how consumers view and respond to situations or behaviors related to potentially immoral purchases. Using a sales coupon that has expired, theft, getting too much change at the counter, and altering goods price tags are a few instances. The analysis of ethical consumption has long sought for an understanding how such pro-social and pro-environmental purchasing habits may be supported. Criticizing the economic approach to consumption Hansen and Schrader (1997) state “In view of the reality of modern societies, it is neither possible nor ethically justifiable to make purchase decisions according to the individual maximisation of utility only”.

2.2. ETHICAL CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Ethics has a distinct meaning in the literature on ethical consumer behavior. It refers, broadly speaking, to the process by which consumers base their decisions on social and environmental factors, including the wellbeing of animals, people, and the environment. Early research, started by the 1970s "alternative consumers" movement, was restricted to the study of the green consumer. The idea of ethical consumer behavior has been expanded since the 1990s by adding additional concerns pertaining to societal wellbeing. These days, a growing body of multidisciplinary literature from the fields of sociology, ethics, social psychology, anthropology, human geography, and economics examines the dynamic and ever-changing phenomena of ethical consumer behavior. This is untrue for ethical consumer behavior, despite the fact that there is a wealth of empirical data and numerous literature studies on consumer ethics.

Although they are theoretically different, consumer ethics and ethical consumer behavior are closely connected aspects of consumer behavior. The moral standards that direct people's conduct as consumers of goods and services—particularly with regard to integrity, accountability, and equity in the marketplace—are known as consumer ethics. Shoplifting, fraudulent returns, digital content piracy, and the misuse of promotional offers are some of the problems it encompasses (Vitell, 2003).

Ethical consumer behavior, on the other hand, is concerned with the decisions that consumers make in light of moral considerations like animal rights, fair work standards, and environmental sustainability. Customers actively seek out and support businesses that are consistent with their personal beliefs, demonstrating a values-driven approach (Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2010). Ethical consumer behavior stresses positive and deliberate ethical decision-making, whereas consumer ethics frequently assesses bad or dubious behavior. When combined, these ideas influence the larger conversation about ethics and accountability in consumer culture.

3. WHO ARE ETHICAL CONSUMERS?

One of the major trends of the 1990s was the emergence of the ethical consumer, which was sparked by debates about genetically modified organisms and child labor. The ethical market is not generally recognized, nevertheless. There hasn't been much thorough research done to evaluate the potential for using the market to promote social and environmental issues, the commercial opportunity this brings, and the dangers facing companies that choose to disregard this significant trend.

The phrase "ethical consumer" has multiple connotations and is prone to misunderstanding; in this context, it refers to consumers who make decisions about goods and services based on ethical or environmental factors. "Ethical" refers to a range of topics, including social issues like labor standards and animal welfare, moral issues like fair trade, and more selfish health concerns that are driving the rise in sales of organic food. The multidisciplinary method of The Ethical Consumer, which incorporates economic, psychological, and interpretive approaches to social research, is its main strength. There are several environmental as well as social concerns that are found to act as drivers of ethical consumer behavior. These drivers include sustainability concerns, animal welfare, fair labor practices, etc. Some of the key

variables in shaping ethical consumption identified by the literature are consumer values, norms, demographic characteristics, etc. (Sesini et al., 2020).

A growing trend in society is the ethical consumer, who sees a clear connection between consumerism and social issues. Human rights, animal welfare, environmental degradation, and working conditions in the Global South are issues that ethical shoppers are concerned about. Ethical shoppers show their dedication to a just society by their purchase choices.

Because this reflects the diversity in the market, it may be claimed that ethical customers by definition cover a multiplicity of responsibilities or virtues. Customers clearly care about ethics in all their forms, from precise product attributes to corporate rules at large, albeit some are more interested in one than the other. Although consumers have definite opinions on many issues, such as human rights, they cannot yet agree on what defines a responsible corporation.

3.1. TYPES OF ETHICAL CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Ethical consumer behavior manifests in numerous ways, reflecting the diverse values and priorities of individuals and communities. It encompasses a wide variety of behaviors. Three main types of ethical purchase behaviors can be summarized as follows:

Source: Tallontire A., Rentsendorj E., Blowfield M.



3.1.1. Positive Ethical Purchase Behavior

Customers who actively support goods, services, or businesses that share their ethical ideals are said to be engaging in positive ethical purchasing behavior. Buying locally produced items, cruelty-free cosmetics, eco-friendly packaging, or fair-trade goods are examples of this. Customers act in this way in order to leverage their purchasing decisions to support environmental or social concerns (Bray, Johns, & Kilburn, 2011).

3.1.1.1. Supports Ethical Practices: Ethical consumers support brands and goods that uphold the values of social responsibility, sustainability, and fairness. Customers can support desirable outcomes like fair salaries, safe working conditions, and environmental stewardship by purchasing things made ethically.

3.1.1.2. Encourages Industry Change: When consumers consistently opt for ethically sourced and produced products, they create market demand for such goods. This encourages businesses to adopt ethical practices to remain competitive, leading to industry-wide changes and improvements in labor standards, environmental sustainability, and corporate responsibility.

3.1.1.3. Promotes Transparency and Accountability: Ethical purchase behavior encourages companies to be transparent about their supply chains, manufacturing processes, and labor practices. This transparency enables consumers to make informed choices and hold companies accountable for their actions, fostering trust and integrity in the marketplace.

3.1.1.4. Fosters Consumer Empowerment: Customers who behave ethically when making purchases are better equipped to use their purchasing power to effect positive change. Consumers may support causes they care about, like human rights, fair trade, and environmental protection, and help create a more just and sustainable society by matching their spending to their ideals.

3.1.2. Negative ethical purchase behavior

Conversely, negative ethical purchasing behavior entails avoiding or boycotting goods or companies that are thought to transgress moral principles. Refusing to purchase goods from businesses that abuse labor, use animals for testing, or damage the environment is one way to do this. Such actions are frequently driven by a desire to change business conduct and stop funding unethical activities (Shaw & Shiu, 2002).

3.1.2.1. Buycutting - This phrase refers to the practice of selecting and purchasing some goods and services above others based on social considerations (Ozcaglar-Toulouse et al., 2006). It is sometimes referred to as affirmative or positive buying which indicates shopping for ecologically friendly products instead of conventional ones to demonstrate and encourage environmental awareness and support.

3.1.2.2. Boycotting – Boycotting particular brands or items is another form of unethical consumer behavior. Customers can voice their social issues as well, by abstaining from specific activities or by not making a purchase. This happens either because the companies that commercialize the product have an unethical social record (company-oriented boycotting) or because their products are unsustainable (product-oriented boycotting). The investigation of related meanings and motivations is one aspect of the research on this kind of behavior. It has been observed that there is an absence of emotional guilt response in the ethical context of boycotting (Braunsberger and Buckler, 2011). This research suggests that boycotting behavior is a vehicle for self-expression and intrinsically satisfying behaviors. Boycotters manage to express their uniqueness by distinguishing themselves from the crowd and making a difference in the society.

3.1.2.3. Voluntary simplicity/ Ethical simplifiers - Ethical simplifiers, as defined by the movement for ethical consumer advocacy, are consumers who prefer to reduce their consumption and simplify their lifestyle. Researchers believe that people vary in terms of ethical wisdom, which has a substantial impact on their acceptance of ethical behaviors. (e.g., Bray et al., 2011). Consumer research has examined the intentions behind and significance of everyday acts of ethical simplicity. This ethical lifestyle permeates all aspects of the consumer as well as other behaviors, for example running a home, bringing up a child, managing finances, etc.

3.1.2.4. Slow food moment - Although it originated in Italy in the middle of the 1980s, academics have only lately begun to recognize it as an additional example of ethical consumer behavior. This kind of moral consumer behavior is centered on endorsing substitutes that aim to preserve regional culinary customs, safeguard biodiversity, and impede the growth of fast-food chains. The Slow Food movement is centered on promoting substitutes that seek to stop the growth of fast food and maintain regional culinary customs and biodiversity.

3.1.3. Consumer Actions

Consumer actions like lobbying involve individuals or groups advocating for policy changes or reforms that align with their ethical values and concerns. Lobbying can take various forms, including contacting elected representatives, participating in advocacy campaigns, joining advocacy organizations, and engaging in grassroots activism. Here's how lobbying can be a consumer action in the context of ethical consumer behavior:

3.1.3.1. Policy Advocacy - Consumers can lobby policymakers and government officials to enact laws and regulations that promote ethical practices in industries such as labor rights, environmental protection, and consumer safety. For example, consumers may advocate for legislation to improve working conditions in garment factories, ban harmful chemicals in consumer products, or require companies to disclose information about their supply chains.

3.1.3.2. Corporate Accountability - Customers have the power to pressure businesses to implement corporate responsibility and ethical business practices. This could entail pressuring businesses to fix problems in their operations and supply chains, such as violations of human rights, environmental contamination, or unfair labor practices. To hold businesses responsible for their conduct, customers might employ strategies including boycotts, public pressure campaigns, and shareholder activism.

3.1.3.3. Consumer Advocacy Organizations - Advocacy groups that promote moral consumer problems have the backing of consumers. People can make a difference in systemic change by joining or contributing to groups

that address issues like fair trade, sustainable agriculture, or animal welfare. This will allow individuals to voice their opinions more loudly and participate in group advocacy activities.

3.1.3.4. Public Awareness Campaigns - Customers might participate in public awareness campaigns to spread the word about moral concerns and rally support for changes to the law. To disseminate information and create momentum for change, this may entail planning events, circulating petitions, composing letters to the editor, or utilizing social media.

3.1.3.5. Participation in Democratic Processes - By taking part in elections, supporting candidates who place a high priority on moral problems, and holding elected officials responsible for their actions, citizens can exercise their democratic rights. Consumers can impact local, national, and worldwide decision-making by choosing representatives who uphold moral laws and principles.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design, using thematic analysis to comprehensively assess and analyze the available literature on ethical consumer behavior. Thematic analysis identifies repeating themes, patterns, and insights from a diverse range of scholarly papers, articles, and reports, providing for a thorough grasp of key concepts and trends in ethical consumerism. A thematic literature review is the rigorous examination and integration of existing research on a specific topic or theme with the goal of identifying relevant patterns, developing trends, and significant gaps in the current body of knowledge. The primary goal of this technique is to give a complete study of the literature to inform and justify future research attempts. (Faryadi, 2018).

5. DATA COLLECTION

The data for this thematic analysis were gathered from a comprehensive assessment of peer-reviewed publications, books, conference papers, and industry reports on ethical consumer behavior. A total of thirty papers were chosen based on their relevance, timeliness, and contribution to the subject of ethical consumption. Databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ScienceDirect were utilized to find studies published in the domain. Key search terms included “Ethical Consumer Behavior,” “Sustainable Consumption,” “Consumer Ethics,” “Socially Responsible Consumption,” etc.

6. CONCLUSION

The majority of research on ethical consumption focuses on issues of consumer behavior, business ethics, and developmental efficacy. Researchers have examined, for example, whether and why consumers are willing to pay a premium for ethical or the discrepancy between consumers' positive attitudes toward ethical products and their actual purchasing behavior. The motivational, attitudinal, or cognitive drivers of consumption are the subject of several studies that concentrate on the antecedents of ethical consumer behavior. Furthermore, a limited number of studies considers emotions and emotion-related constructs as determinants of ethical consumer behavior.

Investigations of gender disparities have been conducted in relation to moral decision-making. According to certain research, women behave in a more morally upright manner than do males. According to other studies, gender has little bearing on moral behavior in the workplace. Results specific to gender were inconsistent after additional investigation. Even more, previous studies have shown that men behave more morally. It is therefore not unexpected that a number of authors claim that more research is necessary because the findings of gender-specific studies are inconclusive.

References

1. Braunsberger, K., & Buckler, B. (2011). What motivates consumers to participate in boycotts: Lessons from the ongoing Canadian seafood boycott. *Journal of Business Research*, 64(1), 96-102. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2009.12.008
2. Bray, J., Johns, N., & Kilburn, D. (2011). An Exploratory Study into the Factors Impeding Ethical Consumption. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 98(4), 597–608. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41476154>
3. Faryadi, Q. (2018) PhD Thesis Writing Process: A Systematic Approach—How to Write Your Literature Review. *Creative Education*, 9, 2912-2919.
4. Hansen U, Schrader U. 1997. A modern model of consumption for a sustainable society. *Journal of Consumer Policy* 20(4): 443–469.
5. Ozcaglar-Toulouse, N., Shiu, E. and Shaw, D. (2006), In search of fair trade: ethical consumer decision making in France. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 30: 502-514. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1470-6431.2006.00532.x>
6. Tallontire A., Rentsendorj E., Blowfield M.; „Ethical consumers and ethical Trade: A review of current literature”; Social and Economic Development Department, NRI; Natural Resources Institute; University of Greenwich 2001.
7. Giulia Sesini & Cinzia Castiglioni & Edoardo Lozza, 2020. "New Trends and Patterns in Sustainable Consumption: A Systematic Review and Research Agenda," *Sustainability*, MDPI, vol. 12(15), pages 1-25, July.
8. Vitell, S. J. (2003). Consumer ethics research: Review, synthesis and suggestions for the future. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 43(1), 33–47.
9. Crane, A., & Matten, D. (2016). *Business ethics: managing corporate citizenship and sustainability in the age of globalization*. (4th ed.) Oxford University Press. <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/business-ethics-9780199697311>
10. Carrington, M. J., Neville, B. A., & Whitwell, G. J. (2010). Why ethical consumers don't walk their talk: Towards a framework for understanding the gap between the ethical purchase intentions and actual buying behaviour of ethically minded consumers. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 97(1), 139–158.
11. Bray, J., Johns, N., & Kilburn, D. (2011). An exploratory study into the factors impeding ethical consumption. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 98(4), 597–608.
12. Shaw, D., & Shiu, E. (2002). An assessment of ethical obligation and self-identity in ethical consumer decision-making: A structural equation modelling approach. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 26(4), 286–293.
13. Bray, J., Johns, N., & Kilburn, D. (2011). An exploratory study into the factors impeding ethical consumption. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 98(4), 597–608.
14. Shaw, D., & Shiu, E. (2002). An assessment of ethical obligation and self-identity in ethical consumer decision-making. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 26(4), 286–293.
15. White, K., Habib, R., & Hardisty, D. J. (2019). How to SHIFT consumer behaviors to be more sustainable. *Nature Climate Change*, 9(1), 9–12.