

Ethical Awareness and Purchasing Behaviour Among Young Taiwanese Consumers: The Roles of Moral Rationalization and Habitual Consumption

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of ethical consumerism on purchase intentions and actual purchasing practices among young Taiwanese consumers. Specifically, the research explores the attitude–behaviour gap between ethical awareness and their actual consumption practices. A qualitative exploratory approach was adopted through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 15 young Taiwanese consumers, including 10 residing in Taiwan and 5 residing in Thailand. The collected data were analysed through thematic and cross-case analysis to examine participants’ perceptions of ethical consumerism, purchasing motivations, and habitual purchasing behaviour.

The findings reveal that although many participants expressed concern about ethical issues, ethical considerations were rarely the primary determinant influencing their purchasing decisions. Price, product quality, personal preference, and habitual consumption had a stronger influence on actual purchasing behaviour. The study also identified a significant attitude–behaviour gap, as participants often continued purchasing products from companies associated with unethical practices despite expressing negative attitudes toward those practices. Furthermore, many respondents demonstrated limited awareness of unethical business practices and frequently rationalised their consumption decisions through convenience, brand attachment, and perceived inability to influence corporate behaviour.

This study contributes to the literature on ethical consumerism by highlighting the role of habitual purchasing and moral rationalisation in shaping ethical consumption behaviour among young Taiwanese consumers. The findings provide insights into the complexity of ethical decision-making and suggest that ethical awareness alone does not necessarily lead to ethical purchasing behaviour.

JEL Classifications: M3, D12, M3

Keywords: ethical consumerism, attitude–behaviour gap, habitual consumption, moral rationalization, purchasing behaviour, young Taiwanese consumers

I. INTRODUCTION

This research examines the relationship between ethical consumerism and consumers' purchasing behaviour, with a particular focus on young Taiwanese consumers. Recent studies suggest that ethical concerns do not always translate into influencing consumers' purchase intentions and actual purchasing behaviour, particularly within emerging markets (Kutaula et al., 2024; Nayak et al., 2024).

The fashion industry ranks among the largest and most profitable industries worldwide. Advertising in the fashion industry frequently draws on constructions of femininity and masculinity to promote products and shape consumer perceptions (Timke and O'Barr, 2017; Akdemir, 2018; Mehta, 2024). However, such marketing practices may distract consumers from the unethical production practices of the industry, including unethical practices that may discourage consumers from purchasing these products if they were fully aware of them (Pando-Canteli and Rodriguez, 2021). These unethical practices may involve harm to humans, animals, and the environment, and are often associated with unethical corporate behaviour (Lee, 2024). Consumers may express their personal values and ethical concerns through purchasing decisions or by boycotting products associated with unethical practices. These actions are commonly described as ethical consumerism (Berkey, 2021; Gram-Hanssen, 2021).

The present study explores how consumers understand ethical consumerism and how ethical concerns influence their consumption decisions in practice. Previous studies have shown that consumers often express concern regarding ethical issues while continuing to purchase products from companies engaged in unethical practices (Bonifacio et al., 2024; Lee, 2024). This contradiction is commonly referred to as the attitude-behaviour gap. Therefore, this study contributes to the ethical consumerism literature by examining how ethical awareness, habitual consumption, and personal preference are related in young Taiwanese consumers. The study addresses the following research question:

- How does ethical consumerism influence purchase intentions and actual purchasing behaviour among young Taiwanese consumers?

The following sections establish the theoretical and empirical context of the study. The findings from the empirical investigation are then discussed, followed by the presentation of conclusions and theoretical and managerial implications.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines ethical consumerism among young Taiwanese consumers. The review then identifies purchasing behaviours pertinent to ethical consumerism. The literature review concludes by presenting a typology that provides a conceptual framework for analysing ethical consumerism in consumer decision-making.

A. Theory of Planned Behaviour

Theory of Planned Behaviour refers to intention towards an action one takes (Ajzen, 1991). However, it must be socially recognised, and the individual must possess both the ability and opportunity to perform it (Ajzen, 1991; Lim and Dubinsky, 2005). The TPB comprises three core constructs: behavioural attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). For example, behavioural attitude refers to the attitude towards consuming ethical products and how it could be perceived by others. In addition, more rational issues should be considered, such as identifying and purchasing ethical products, as well as the financial ability. (Djafarova and Fouts, 2022).

Mishra and Kaur (2025) suggested that subjective norms are further divided into two categories: face consciousness and group consensus. Face consciousness is the assessment of whether one's ethical consumption is socially approved by peers (Mishra and Kaur, 2025). Group consensus is achieved by ethically purchasing the products others desire to meet the needs of significant others (Mishra and Kaur, 2025). Perceived behavioural control is composed of two distinct dimensions: control beliefs and perceived facilitation (Ajzen, 1991). Control beliefs refer to an individual's subjective judgment of their ability to be an ethical consumer, while perceived convenience refers to an individual's subjective perception of facilitating or hindering factors affecting ethical consumption (Ajzen, 1991; Djafarova and Fouts, 2022). Subjective norms suggest that social interactions — including peer suggestions and group discussions — may indirectly shape individual attitudes and decisions (Djafarova and Fouts, 2022). Furthermore, individuals can consciously influence their personal behavioral attitudes and focus on reconciling or cooperating with others in the group (group norms). Additionally, individuals are driven to adhere to group norms based on the belief that others' behaviors are appropriate; many further perceive that conforming to these beliefs provides benefits and a sense of acceptance (Pool and Schwegler, 2007). For these reasons, Kutaula et al. (2024) indicate that taking these actions is often to present themselves as ethical consumers; to become part of their socio-economic structure (e.g., their specific group). Carrigan and Attalla (2001) argue that one of the main obstacles is identifying the ethical buying behavior of consumers. The expansion of knowledge may influence consumer decision-making and potentially pass this knowledge on to other consumers with negative attitudes toward ethical products (Mishra and Kaur, 2025). These issues place an additional burden on their judgment, including price, quality, and other factors. Consequently, consumers will find it difficult to make decisions and/or start purchasing ethically sourced products.

B. Ethical Consumerism

Ethical consumerism refers to consumers expressing their ethical concerns about products and organisations (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014; Šálková et al., 2024). This typically involves selecting products that meet specific ethical standards, or boycotting those that do not (Cho and Krasser, 2011; Sun, 2020).

According to Low and Davenport (2007), ethical consumerism has existed for over a century. The definition of ethical consumerism has evolved. Initially, ethical consumerism was more focused on environmental issues, specifically green consumerism (Papaoikonomou et al., 2012). Today, ethical consumerism refers to consumers' efforts to minimize harm to society and the ecological environment when purchasing goods and services, and to avoid products and services expected to have

negative social or environmental impacts (Deng, 2013; Faeg et al., 2022). These behaviors are often driven by their personal and moral values and beliefs (Carrigan et al., 2004). Green consumerism centres on the conscious protection of the natural environment throughout the purchasing, use, and disposal of products and services (Cho and Krasser, 2011; Papaoikonomou et al., 2012).

Ethical consumerism is typically formed through consumers' learning experiences, as well as their values and beliefs regarding products (Berki-Kiss and Menrad, 2022). Currently, consumer attitudes can be described by three main normative ethical approaches. First is consequentialism (also known as utilitarianism)—an approach oriented toward actions that bring about well-being. Second, there is deontological theory, which focuses on justice; third, there is virtue theory, which emphasizes the consumer's character or virtues (Fukukawa, 2003; Laczniak and Murphy, 2006; Russell-Bennett et al., 2013). Consequentialist theory focuses on producing the greatest good in the final outcome, which is considered an ethical action. Animal rights protection is an example (Laczniak and Muehling, 1993; Coghlan and Cardilini, 2024). Deontological ethics posits that rules bind consumers to an obligation or duty to protect the future of consumers, the environment, and animals (Plachciak and Zaremba-Warneke, 2021). Virtue theory is defined as acting in the manner that a socially responsible person would act in the same situation (Russell-Bennett et al., 2013; Poff and Michalos, 2023). Even with these theories, ethical consumerism can be defined in multiple ways, all of which have implications for consumers and organizations at different levels.

The concept of ethical consumerism lies in doing no harm to humans, animals, and the environment (Djafarova and Fouts, 2022). It is also generally based on the following standards. According to ethical assessment standards, inhumane conditions include illegal working systems or conditions, such as child labor and low-paid workers. Animal cruelty includes animal testing and factory farming. Environmental degradation encompasses pollution, loss of biodiversity, and other factors (Djafarova and Fouts, 2022). According to the research of Low and Davenport (2007), ethical consumers are interested in at least one of these topics when considering making an ethical purchase.

Internationally, consumers are becoming aware of social and ethical issues (Hosta and Zabkar, 2021). As a result, many people prefer to purchase and use socially and environmentally friendly goods and services (e.g., hormone-free food and fair-trade coffee), and refuse to buy products produced in unethical ways (e.g., genuine animal fur products, animal-tested cosmetics, and slave-produced products) (Šálková et al., 2024). In today's society, ethical consumerism is also manifested as consumers using their purchasing power to express their viewpoints (Cho and Krasser, 2011).

Given the growing awareness of ethical consumption and social responsibility, this study seeks to extend understanding of the ethical purchasing behaviour of young consumers. However, the issue of ethical consumerism has been subject to ongoing debate (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Cho and Krasser, 2011; Mukandoli, 2020). Studies indicate that acting as a good, socially responsible company influences consumer purchasing decisions, whereas unethical corporate behavior reduces product demand (Islam et al., 2021; Šálková et al., 2024). However, from a commercial perspective, there is little commercial return when consumers purchase ethically produced products (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Mukandoli, 2020).

C. Unethical Consumerism

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Unethical consumer behavior is defined as actions that violate generally accepted behavioral norms within an exchange context, and are therefore viewed negatively and the majority of consumers (Lugosi, 2019; Al-Msallam and Abdelhadi, 2022). Kaur et al. (2022) point out that an understanding of unethical consumerism leads to a more comprehensive understanding of ethical consumption among consumers. Unethical behavior is defined as pursuing self-interest instead of the common good (McGregor, 2006; Mayr et al., 2022).

Unethical consumerism encompasses a range of consumer purchasing behaviors. First, products produced through modern slavery, environmental destruction, and animal testing are purchased without a sense of guilt (McGregor, 2006; Al-Msallam et al., 2022). Secondly, the relentless purchasing of products manufactured using non-renewable raw materials (McGregor, 2006; Al-Msallam et al., 2022). For example, the overuse of plastics, fossil fuels, etc (Tolinski, 2011). Finally, some people refuse to understand or acknowledge that purchasing unethical products is equivalent to unethical behavior in the production process (McGregor, 2006; Paharia, 2020).

Unethical products can have a significant impact on the safety, health, welfare, and well-being of humans and animals (Marmat et al., 2020). It is recommended that consumers foster ethical consciousness and practice conscious consumerism. Because most unethical consumption behaviors are invisible, they cannot be immediately recognised by consumers. Consequently, the majority of consumers remain unaware of the potential consequences stemming from unethical consumption. Muncy and Vitell (1992) developed the Consumer Ethics Scale (CES) based on their empirical study. This scale categorizes unethical consumer behavior into four distinct types: actively benefiting from illegal activities; benefiting from questionable activities; no harm, no foul; and no deception. This scale is commonly used to measure unethical consumer behavior. Carrigan et al. (2004) indicated that when consumers are able to perceive the harm caused by unethical products, it helps them recognize the issues associated with such products. Furthermore, awareness of these negative consequences helps raise public consciousness, thereby reducing unethical consumption (Carrigan et al., 2004).

D. Proclivities of Ethical Consumers

Many ethical consumers are concerned with both the ethical management and ethical marketing aspects. Some companies engage in unethical activities, yet they often outperform many others in the same industry. Reebok publicly claimed and guaranteed that their soccer balls were not made using child labor, nor produced in sweatshops (Kopf et al., 2010; Altunışık, 2025). Consumers fail to realize that in the face of these issues, unethical companies may disguise themselves as ethical ones, covering up their wrongdoings by leading consumers to believe that minimum wages or legal working ages are generally lower in foreign countries (Kopf et al., 2010; Altunışık, 2025). In other words, firms often manipulate consumers into believing in their marketing strategies, since marketing covers a large portion of social responsibility (morality or ethics). Companies often cover up or never mention their wrongdoings (Paharia, 2020). Nevertheless, many consumers remain sceptical, believing that despite Reebok's assurances, the living conditions of child workers may not necessarily improve, as such employment may represent their sole source of income. For some consumers, this does

not mean that the children's living conditions will improve, as this may be their only earning opportunity (Kopf et al., 2010; Altunışık, 2025). Marketers may attempt to conceal their wrongdoing. Actions taken by marketers to please consumers may have long-term consequences for consumers and society (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001).

Research suggests that consumers may nonetheless hold favourable perceptions of companies despite their association with unethical behaviour. Therefore, to increase corporate profitability, marketers are often advised to provide ethical work practices throughout the company (Mascarenhas, 1995). Carrigan and Attalla (2001) argued that positive information about a company has less impact on changing consumer attitudes than negative information. Negative information about a company's unethical behavior leads consumers to boycott its products. Knowledge of an ethical company does not influence consumers' purchasing decisions, as positive information does not have a significant impact on them (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001). An increasing number of customers are taking ethical issues seriously, and consumers purchase and/or recommend products based on their ethical reputation (Cheung and To, 2021). Creyer (1997) found that a firm's level of ethical behavior plays a significant role in the purchase decision process. Many consumers today are willing to pay a premium for products from companies that act ethically, as they expect these companies to uphold moral standards. However, many consumers are still willing to purchase unethical products or products from unethical companies due to lower prices (Creyer, 1997; Lee, 2024). The reason is that the product features do not meet standards, nor do they align with the price consumers are willing to pay (Lee, 2024). Al-Msallam and Abdelhadi (2022) indicate that although consumers may wish to purchase organic products, limited financial resources often prevent them from doing so.

E. Purchasing Behaviour

If consumers are unable to understand the ethical issues behind product production—such as equality, rights, mutual benefit, and justice—they will not be motivated to make ethical purchases (Kuokkanen and Sun, 2020). Ethical consumers are conscious of at least one moral issue, yet they may be aware of a whole spectrum of ethical concerns. Shaw et al. (2005) identify a correlation between moral obligation and self-identity. In certain instances, ethical consumerism may be driven by individual choice, as ethical considerations play a significant role in self-identity (Shaw et al., 2005). Self-identity refers to an understanding of oneself formed based on one's group membership (Wheeler and Bechler, 2021). Group types define and mold the social identity of the group, along with the sense of belonging within the social world. For instance, individuals often adopt a vegetarian diet based on ethical values or due to being raised in a vegetarian family background (Beck and Ladwig, 2020).

Ethical consumer behaviour reflects a psychological response to emotionally significant stimuli and past experiences. Individuals establish their personal moral framework by assessing their obligations. This will reflect their personal values and beliefs regarding right and wrong (Beck and Ladwig, 2020). Sociological and psychological literature describes self-identity as one of the most influential factors influencing individual behavior. This is because it will enable them to enhance their status within their group. Therefore, certain self-identities are considered to be able to clearly identify the intention of specific purchasing behaviors (Shaw et al., 2005). According to

Ajzen (1991), self-identity is the foundation of many theories explaining an individual's behavioral intention. Within the context of Ajzen (1991) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), self-identity is often linked with and discussed in relation to behavioral intention (Lira and Costa, 2022).

F. Attitude-Behaviour Gap

There are many conflicting perspectives on ethical consumerism and marketing. Some studies suggest that a genuinely ethical consumer may not exist in practice, as perfect ethical consistency in consumption behaviour remains an unrealistic standard. Kuokkanen and Sun (2020) suggest that no ethical consumer acts consistently well. Some academic literature suggests that ethical consumers frequently punish companies for unethical behavior by boycotting them, while rewarding others through supportive purchasing (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Shaw et al., 2005; Kuokkanen and Sun, 2020). However, according to a study by Kaur et al. (2022), while many consumers recognize their obligation to protect other living beings and the environment (e.g., boycotting child labor products), they seem unaware that helping people in need can prevent these ethical issues (e.g., providing education and/or shelter for underage workers).

In contemporary society, people claim to be ethical consumers, yet the market share of ethical products in the industry is declining (Shaw et al., 2005; Hassan et al., 2022). Generally, active buying behavior is related to their purchasing decisions. However, according to Creyer (1997), there is a distinction between the factors driving consumers to purchase ethical products and their positive perceptions of the product or the company behind it. In fact, moral obligation is not the primary criterion for consumer purchase decisions; other factors may influence their decisions (Tustin and De Jongh, 2008). This discrepancy is referred to as the attitude-behaviour gap — a phenomenon in which consumers express concern for ethical issues but fail to reflect such concerns in their actual market behaviour (Moraes et al., 2012).

G. Habitual Purchase

Despite a lack of information to distinguish between ethical and unethical organizations, most consumers do not make social responsibility a primary criterion in their purchasing behavior. Even when individuals are fully aware of a company's unethical behavior, many consumers still choose to purchase products from unethical companies due to habitual practices (Zhao et al., 2020). For instance, an individual can choose or reject a product unconsciously, transcending self-awareness (McGregor, 2006; Bargh, 2022). Therefore, when an individual purchases a certain type of product during routine decision-making, they will continue to buy the same product even if they hold positive views toward ethical products (McGregor, 2006; Šálková et al., 2024). Limited consumer knowledge of corporate ethical behavior implies that social responsibility does not influence their purchasing decisions. Many habitual buying behavior patterns involve evaluating a consumer's purpose, purchasing behavior, and post-purchase evaluation. However, if a product fails to meet consumer expectations, it is unlikely to fall into the category of habitual consumption goods (Cho and Krasser, 2011). Habitual buying may be perceived negatively, as it does not involve thinking. However, stability can be realized through their routine decision-making processes. Habitual purchasing reduces

the stress and risk associated with complex decision-making (Shaw et al., 2005; Putri, 2020). If consumers habitually repurchase the same product, they are very likely to buy it again, regardless of whether the company acts unethically (Zhao et al., 2020). This behaviour is commonly referred to as habitual buying behaviour (Cho and Krasser, 2011; Zhao et al., 2020). Habitual decision-making is often governed by unconscious processes, ignoring other factors (Ramly et al., 2014). Many consumers purchase ethical products out of habit rather than purchase intention (Shaw et al., 2005; Putri, 2020).

Many frequently purchased products can be divided into two main categories: convenience goods and brand loyalty (Cho and Krasser, 2011). Convenience goods are often bought without pre-planning and are likely to be cheap products. Consumers often do not consider their buying intentions when making a purchase. For example, buying and smoking cigarettes despite knowing it's wrong. On the other hand, brand loyalty is different. Denise and Guzmán (2022) define brand loyalty as the consumer's preference-driven, repeat purchasing behavior towards a specific brand. A certain level of brand loyalty reduces consumers' involvement in decision-making and affects their ability to make different decisions (Denise and Guzmán, 2022).

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a phenomenological perspective to examine how ethical consumerism influences purchase intentions and actual purchasing behaviour among young Taiwanese consumers. A qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate for investigating the meaning of phenomena in the social world, rather than seeking statistical representativeness (Halinen and Törnroos, 2005).

The interview questions were designed to explore the underlying ethical beliefs of young Taiwanese consumers. To obtain a range of perspectives on ethical consumerism, face-to-face, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with young Taiwanese participants. A total of 15 participants were interviewed, including 10 participants residing in Taiwan and 5 participants residing in Thailand. The interview questions were designed to elicit rich and detailed information from participants. Before the main data collection phase, a pilot face-to-face interview was conducted. These exploratory open-ended interviews helped refine the research questions and deepen the researchers' understanding of how ethical consumerism influences purchase intentions and actual purchasing behaviour among young Taiwanese consumers, thereby strengthening construct validity and reliability.

A further 14 face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted in Taiwan and Thailand during the main phase of data collection. The 15 interviews provided information-rich data for analysis. To achieve theoretical saturation, the study followed Yin's (2003) approach of selecting fifteen interviews to develop emerging theoretical categories.

As the research question sought to examine how ethical consumerism influences purchase intentions and buying behaviour, semi-structured interview guides with open-ended questions were considered appropriate for exploring each participant's perspectives in depth (see Appendix A for the interview questions). Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was conducted face-to-face by the lead researcher. This enabled the researcher to gain insight into how consumers make decisions in relation to ethical consumerism. A simplified conceptual framework was presented to each

participant to contextualise the notion of actual purchasing behaviour. The researchers carefully ensured that the discussion remained neutral. The interview was conducted in a relaxed atmosphere. The interview format was designed to encourage participants to express their views openly and without constraint. All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed from the original recordings. Each interview was transcribed and then analysed after the transcription had taken place. During the analysis, the final transcripts were read repeatedly, and notes were taken by the researcher. Table 1 below is provided to show the basic information of the participants.

Table 1
Summary of Participants' Profiles

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Job Title
C1	Male	23	Postgraduate Student in Taiwan
C2	Female	26	Kindergarten Teacher in Taiwan
C3	Female	21	Undergraduate Student in Taiwan
C4	Male	19	Undergraduate Student in Taiwan
C5	Female	22	Undergraduate Student in Taiwan
C6	Male	30	Technology Company Engineer in Taiwan
C7	Female	20	Company Employee in Taiwan
C8	Female	20	Department Store Salesperson in Taiwan
C9	Female	23	Postgraduate Student in Taiwan
C10	Male	30	Trading Company Manager in Taiwan
C11	Female	27	Electronics Company Marketing Personnel in Thailand
C12	Female	25	Chinese Language Teacher in Thailand
C13	Female	28	Computer Company Manager in Thailand
C14	Male	30	Electronics Company Marketing Manager in Thailand
C15	Male	29	Automotive Components Manager in Thailand

IV. FINDINGS FROM THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

This section presents findings from the participant interviews (see Appendix B) to address the research question by examining how young Taiwanese consumers make ethical consumption decisions and whether such decisions reflect their ethical values in practice.

1. Ethical Consumerism

The research findings show that 3 respondents expressed they understood ethical consumerism, 8 indicated they did not, and 4 had heard of the term but did not truly understand its meaning. Although three respondents stated that they understood ethical consumerism, their definitions were not entirely accurate; they associated it with practices such as adopting a vegetarian or vegan diet, supporting fair trade, and prioritising human welfare in product choices.

All participants stated that they were uncertain about purchasing unethical products. Only 3 respondents were able to accurately identify brands deemed ethical, such as Starbucks and The Body Shop. Nevertheless, they had consistently purchased products from Gap, Nike, and Victoria's Secret, remaining unaware that these brands had been exposed for unethical behaviour.

“I am aware that Starbucks adheres to ethical standards, based on what I read in a magazine. However, I was unaware that Gap and Nike had been exposed for unethical practices. I have consistently shopped at both.” (C10)

“I believe The Body Shop follows ethical standards because I studied in the UK. I know they advertise against animal testing, so I consider it an ethical company. However, I didn't know that Victoria's Secret had been exposed for unethical behavior. I've been shopping there all this time.” (C11 and C13)

Based on these findings, participants may find it difficult to identify which companies are unethical and to realize that the products they are using are actually unethical. However, one participant (C13) mentioned that Revlon is an unethical company because they conduct animal testing. She explained that unethical consumerism stems from both a lack of brand awareness and a lack of trust in established companies.

All participants stated that they would not purchase a company's products if they discovered it engaged in unethical behavior. However, all respondents indicated that they had purchased products from Gap, Nike, McDonald's, and Victoria's Secret, but were unaware of the unethical practices previously exposed regarding these brands. This may suggest that participants had limited exposure to news coverage concerning unethical corporate behaviour.

Participants frequently indicated that they would boycott a company upon discovering it was not acting responsibly. However, upon encountering a familiar brand name, consumers tended to continue purchasing its products even when aware of associated unethical practices (e.g., McDonald's, Gap, and Nike). Participants' answers varied. The three companies were exposed for their unethical behavior. However, such awareness did not appear to alter participants' purchasing behaviour.

“Victoria's Secret has been, is, and always will be one of my favorite brands. I was so disappointed to hear about their unethical news, but I can't think of any brand to replace them. I think I'll just keep using it.” (C11)

“I've never thought about checking if the product I use is involved in unethical activities, because I like it and don't want to find an alternative.” (C1)

2. Customer Purchase Intention

Within the in-depth interview, the following question was asked: What are the main factors that influence your purchasing decisions? It is widely noted that price and quality are the most crucial factors driving consumer decision-making. Participants mentioned this throughout the interview. Twelve respondents indicated that price and quality are the key factors affecting their buying decisions.

“As far as I know, most ethical products, such as organic food and The Body Shop, are priced higher than ordinary brands. I am hesitant to

purchase such expensive items.” (C2)

Only 3 respondents mentioned that liking the product was a key driver for their purchase decision. Three of the participants mostly stated that if the products they liked met their standards, they would not be too concerned with other factors.

“I love unique and cool products, and if I really like something, I don't really care about the price. As a student, I do part-time work at food panda after school to save up for things I love.” (C4)

All participants stated that ethical consumerism was never a consideration in their purchasing decisions. Their decision to shop there is mainly driven by the quality or style of the brand's products.

“I was previously unaware of the company's business ethics. I'd like to purchase their products because my friends use them. For instance, my friends use iPhones, and I'd like to have one as well.” (C 3)

“I buy what I need; I've never thought about the issue of ethical consumption.” (C6)

It is difficult to define which companies are ethical nowadays. Most companies manage to hide their ugly side, or consumers just don't pay attention to unethical ones.

“Initially, I did not understand the meaning behind the cosmetic brands' slogans. However, after some searching, I discovered that the majority of cosmetic brands engage in animal testing.” (C12)

“I never realized cosmetics were tested on animals. I had never heard of cosmetic companies engaging in animal cruelty.” (C12)

‘All interviewees mentioned that consumers tend to focus more on negative information than positive information, and believe that negative information influences the consumer decision-making process.

“After seeing media reports about a company's food safety issues, I no longer want to buy their products.” (C5)

The findings suggest that many participants tended to generalise and rationalise ethical issues in ways that aligned with their personal standards. Issues and controversies can change an individual's perception of what is acceptable within host country norms and/or industry culture. Most respondents have never boycotted a product due to a brand's unethical behavior. Although no participant explicitly stated they would continue using a product if aware of its unethical production, many indicated that they would nonetheless persist in purchasing familiar products rather than switching to ethical alternatives - a contradiction that reflects the attitude-behaviour gap identified in the literature.

“Many people are still using this product, and I alone cannot change anything.” (C8)

“When I’m shopping, I don’t think about which product is more ethical. I just want to buy what I want.” (C6)

This demonstrates that numerous purchasing decisions are driven by habit, not by the company’s adherence to ethical standards. This indicates that consumers’ habitual behavior leads to brand or product loyalty.

Participants were asked, do you believe companies can be completely ethical? Participants are expected to agree with this issue, as a large number of them have indicated that they would boycott a product if they found the company to be unethical. However, two participants held a different view.

“No, I love the brand I’m using now. If it runs out in Taiwan, I’ll search for the same brand all over the world.” (C7)

“It’s all just marketing, I don’t believe any company is 100% ethical.” (C9)

This research indicates that the majority of participants exhibit personal preferences in buying decisions, driven by habitual behaviors or a simple affinity for the company or product. Several participants held the view that animals are incapable of expressing emotions, and therefore considered it acceptable for animals to endure suffering in the production process. According to Cai (2023), age is a more significant factor influencing consumer buying behavior, with different age groups often holding distinct ethical views. This point is particularly accurate for young consumers, who place significant weight on image, fashion, and price when making purchases. This is clearly shown in the statements made by the participants. They are more concerned with gaining approval from peers or themselves (e.g., McDonald’s McNuggets, L’Oréal products tested on animals but affordable; Nike is popular among peers).

Regarding the interview question, “Is there anything else you would like to share regarding ethical consumerism or your purchasing behaviour?” Participants show a preference for products they consider to be ethical and worthy of purchase. For example, they only care about buying organic food because consumers can visibly see the effects.

While participants were unable to accurately identify specific companies with ethical problems, they appeared aware of a few, likely informed by news or radio reports regarding unethical conduct. This does not influence consumer decisions or unethical buying behavior. Because they believe most companies have unethical work environments. Consumers will buy ethical products without hesitation if they are cheaper and of better quality. It seems that most ethically produced products are priced higher than what consumers are usually willing to pay. Furthermore, the quality of some products is disappointing. Because of this, consumers are often conflicted.

This study also found that some people lack knowledge of ethical issues and avoid discussing them. They have neither sympathy nor interest in moral issues. Due to such uninformed consumers, numerous businesses persist in unethical practices with impunity. This will encourage unethical companies to continue engaging in irresponsible

social behavior.

V. CONCLUSION

This study aims to investigate the motivations influencing ethical purchasing behaviour among young Taiwanese consumers. Previous studies on unethical consumerism suggest that unethical consumption is associated with several factors, including limited consumer knowledge and price concerns (Delistavrou et al., 2020; Kang and Kirmani, 2024). The findings of this study indicate an additional factor influencing consumer behaviour: consumers tend to prioritise their personal needs, product preferences, and habitual purchasing behaviours over ethical considerations. Although many participants initially stated that they would avoid products associated with unethical practices, they continued to prefer products that met their expectations regarding quality, familiarity, and price. Ethically produced products were often perceived as more expensive and, in some cases, lower in quality than consumers expected. As a result, participants frequently demonstrated conflicting attitudes between their ethical concerns and their actual purchasing behaviour.

Consumer purchasing styles vary according to individual lifestyles and consumption values (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Garg et al., 2023). Despite increasing awareness of ethical issues, consumers continue to participate in the market through both boycotting and boycotting behaviours in ways that satisfy their own self-defined standards (Deng, 2013; Beck, 2023). The findings suggest that many participants were reluctant to move outside their habitual consumption patterns. This is an important finding, as it indicates that providing ethical information alone may not significantly change consumer decision-making or prevent consumers from purchasing products associated with unethical practices. Consumers still prioritise meeting their own expectations regarding quality, convenience, and personal preference rather than evaluating the ethical standards of companies or products.

For many consumers, engaging in ethical consumerism is not straightforward, as ethical concerns are not the primary factor driving their purchasing decisions. One participant suggested that if ethically produced products were lower in price or offered better quality, consumers would be more willing to purchase them without requiring additional persuasion or information. Familiarity with product quality, pricing, and accessibility appears to play a significant role in encouraging long-term consumer loyalty. For example, many participants were unaware that companies such as The Body Shop are widely regarded as ethical brands. Consistent with Deng (2013) and Beck (2023), many consumers appear disconnected from broader social issues due to time constraints and convenience-oriented lifestyles. Participants frequently stated that it was easier to purchase products they were already familiar with rather than spend additional time evaluating ethical information. Although consumers who are interested in ethical products may actively seek information, the findings suggest that relatively few consumers are willing to engage deeply with ethical issues or discuss them further with others.

This study contributes to the understanding of ethical consumerism by exploring how habitual purchasing behaviour, product familiarity, and personal rationalisation influence ethical decision-making among young Taiwanese consumers. This study is, however, limited by its purposive sample, which focused specifically on young

Taiwanese consumers. Including participants with professional knowledge or experience related to ethical consumerism may provide different perspectives and potentially lead to different findings. Future research could further explore these aspects in broader consumer groups and across different cultural contexts.

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