



Ethical Consumerism: A Study of Consumer Concern towards the Environment

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Abstract

In recent decades, the concept of ethical consumerism has gained significant importance as societies confront increasing environmental challenges, ranging from global warming and pollution to depletion of natural resources. Ethical consumerism is based on the premise that consumers can influence corporate behavior and promote sustainability through their purchasing choices. This study examines consumer concern towards environmental sustainability, focusing on patterns and attitudes of ethical consumption. Using secondary data, reports, and studies conducted worldwide and within India, the research highlights the growth of eco-conscious consumer behavior, its determinants, and its implications for business practices and public policy. Findings reveal that although awareness regarding ethical consumption has grown significantly, a gap persists between consumers' stated environmental concern and their actual purchasing behavior. The paper concludes with suggestions for promoting environmental responsibility among consumers through education, policy initiatives, and sustainable business strategies.

Keywords: Ethical Consumerism, Environmental Concern, Green Marketing, Sustainable Consumption, Consumer Behavior.

1. Introduction

Ethical consumerism refers to the practice of purchasing products and services that are produced ethically, meaning they cause minimal harm to people, animals, and the environment. The term has evolved in parallel with the rise of environmental awareness, fair trade movements, and corporate social responsibility. Ethical consumerism acknowledges the consumer's power to bring about change through market choices. The idea emerged prominently in the late 20th century when social and environmental concerns began influencing consumer decisions.

In India and globally, the rise of climate change debates, depletion of natural resources, and ecological degradation have compelled both consumers and companies to rethink their behaviors. Between 1995 and 2015, several studies documented the shift from mere price-based purchasing to value-based consumption. Consumers became more concerned with issues such as eco-friendly packaging, cruelty-

free testing, sustainable sourcing, and the ethical treatment of workers. Yet, despite this growth in awareness, translating concern into consistent purchasing action remains a challenge.

This paper examines ethical consumerism with specific attention to consumer environmental concern. It explores how ethical awareness, income, education, and access to information shape consumer behavior. The study also reviews major trends in ethical consumption focusing on both global and Indian perspectives.

2. Review of Literature

Carrigan and Attalla (2001) argued that while consumers express a desire to purchase ethically, this does not always translate into actual buying behavior due to convenience and cost barriers. Similarly, Bray, Johns, and Kilburn (2011) found a gap between ethical intention and purchasing action.

Peattie (1995) described green marketing as the promotion of products based on environmental performance, emphasizing the shift from product-focused to responsibility-focused marketing. Strong (1996) identified environmental concern as a critical driver of green consumption.

Crane (2001) emphasized the moral dimension of consumption and the increasing pressure on corporations to behave responsibly. Roberts (1996) and Straughan & Roberts (1999) empirically linked environmental consciousness with demographic variables such as age, education, and income.

In the Indian context, Singh and Gupta (2013) observed that urban consumers, especially younger generations, show greater concern for eco-friendly products, though price sensitivity remains a limiting factor. Saxena and Khandelwal (2012) highlighted how Indian firms began integrating green marketing strategies to attract this segment.

Shaw and Clarke (1999) studied ethical decision-making and noted that social norms and peer influence often drive ethical consumption more than personal conviction. Ottman (1998) noted that eco-labeling and transparent communication could enhance trust and influence buying behavior.

Before 2015, studies by Kotler (2011) and Polonsky (2011) emphasized the growing business relevance of sustainability. They argued that organizations that embrace environmental responsibility gain long-term competitive advantages.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the concept and evolution of ethical consumerism.
2. To examine the level of consumer concern towards environmental sustainability.
3. To identify factors influencing ethical purchasing behavior.
4. To assess the attitude-behavior gap in ethical consumer decisions.
5. To suggest measures for strengthening ethical and environmental consumerism in India.

4. Hypotheses

1. There is a positive relationship between environmental awareness and ethical purchasing behavior.
2. Socio-demographic factors such as education and income significantly influence consumer concern towards the environment.
3. A gap exists between consumers' environmental concern and their actual buying behavior.
4. Ethical consumerism in India is still at a developing stage compared to Western countries.

5. Research Methodology

This study is descriptive and analytical in nature. It is based on secondary data collected from books, journals, research reports, and official publications. Sources include publications of organizations such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), World Bank, and Indian market research reports.

Data related to ethical consumerism, environmental concern, and sustainable consumption were reviewed to identify major patterns and determinants. Since the study focuses on the period before 2015, it synthesizes earlier research findings rather than collecting primary data.

6. Data Analysis and Discussion

6.1 Growth of Ethical Consumerism

The concept of ethical consumerism expanded globally during the 1990s and 2000s. In Europe, ethical markets like fair trade and organic products saw exponential growth. In India, the green product market grew slowly but steadily. Consumers began showing preferences for energy-efficient appliances, eco-friendly cosmetics, and recyclable packaging.

The rise of media campaigns and education programs about global warming helped spread awareness. However, actual purchasing remained influenced by affordability and product availability.

6.2 Determinants of Ethical Consumption

Researchers identified key determinants influencing ethical purchasing:

Awareness and Education: Educated consumers were more likely to make environment-friendly choices.

Income: Higher income allowed flexibility to pay premiums for ethical products.

Values and Beliefs: Personal moral philosophy shaped willingness to support ethical goods.

Brand Trust: Consumers favored brands perceived as authentic in their sustainability claims.

In the Indian scenario, studies by Maheshwari (2014) and Singh (2013) showed that younger consumers and working professionals in urban centers exhibited stronger environmental concern than rural populations.

6.3 The Attitude–Behavior Gap

The gap between consumer attitudes and their actual behavior remained a major issue. Many individuals expressed environmental concern but continued purchasing conventional products due to convenience or price. This inconsistency was observed in multiple global studies (Carrington et al., 2010). The “greenwashing” trend—companies making false environmental claims—further complicated consumer trust.

6.4 Business and Ethical Consumerism

Corporations began integrating sustainability into their strategies to attract ethical consumers. Green marketing campaigns, CSR initiatives, and eco-labeling gained momentum between 2000 and 2015. Indian firms such as ITC, Tata, and Godrej implemented environmentally friendly production processes. However, the challenge lay in communicating these efforts credibly to consumers.

6.5 Policy and Governmental Influence

The Indian government’s emphasis on environmental protection—through laws such as the Environment Protection Act (1986) and policies promoting renewable energy—supported ethical consumption indirectly. The emergence of labeling systems like “Ecomark” encouraged responsible production and consumption. Still, consumer participation remained limited, suggesting a need for greater awareness and incentives.

7. Major Findings

1. Ethical consumerism emerged as a global phenomenon during the 1990s and strengthened by 2015.
2. Environmental concern is positively correlated with ethical purchasing intentions but not always with behavior.
3. Socio-demographic variables, particularly education and income, significantly influence ethical consumption.
4. Indian consumers are aware of environmental issues but are less likely to act upon them compared to their Western counterparts.
5. Businesses that adopted sustainable practices and communicated transparently gained consumer trust.
6. Lack of consistent labeling, low awareness, and high costs of eco-friendly products hinder widespread adoption.

7. Government initiatives exist but require stronger implementation and public outreach.

8. Suggestions and Policy Implications

1. Education and Awareness: Environmental education should be integrated into curricula to develop eco-conscious values from an early age.
2. Consumer Incentives: Governments can introduce tax benefits or discounts for sustainable products.
3. Corporate Transparency: Companies must ensure honesty in green claims and adopt standardized eco-labeling systems.
4. Media and Communication: Use of mass media and social campaigns can reinforce the link between ethical consumption and environmental protection.
5. Research and Innovation: Support for R&D in sustainable production can lower prices and increase accessibility.
6. Collaboration: Partnerships among consumers, producers, NGOs, and policymakers can create stronger ethical markets.

9. Conclusion

Ethical consumerism represents both a challenge and an opportunity in modern markets. Consumers increasingly recognized their role in promoting sustainability through ethical purchasing, yet widespread behavioral change remained limited. In India, while urban consumers displayed greater concern for the environment, economic constraints and lack of awareness restricted broader adoption. Bridging the attitude–behavior gap requires consistent education, policy support, and corporate commitment to sustainability.

Ethical consumerism, when practiced collectively, can serve as a powerful tool for environmental protection and social equity. Governments, businesses, and consumers must act together to ensure that market choices reflect moral responsibility toward the planet and future generations.

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