

# 3. Tackling the rational decision-making in ethical consumption

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 SALEH MD ARMAN

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8970-7963>

Poznań University of Economics and Business  
Saleh.Arman@phd.ue.poznan.pl

 MILENA RATAJCZAK-MROZEK

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4432-5459>

Poznań University of Economics and Business  
Milena.Ratajczak-Mrozek@ue.poznan.pl

## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The aim of this chapter is to investigate how consumers' rational decision-making influences their ethical consumption intentions and behaviour. In addition, this systematic literature review reveals research gaps of the existing studies and propose future research propositions based on three themes: reasons for the ethical consumption intention-behaviour gap, psychological factors in ethical consumption, and promoting ethical consumption.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This chapter is based on a systematic literature review using the PRISMA framework. It includes a thematic analysis followed by a bibliometric coupling of 23 documents from the Scopus database.

**Findings:** The study identifies three thematic clusters on rational decision-making and ethical consumption. These cover multifaceted reasons for the intention-behaviour gap (cost-benefit rationalisations, cultural norms, neutralisation tactics), psychological drivers of ethical consumption (guilt, pride, habit, brand strategies), and collaborative promotion strategies (community initiatives, stealth reformulations, cultural narratives). The study also reveals research gaps where current models overemphasise rational cost-benefit frameworks and underrepresent emotional and cultural dynamics. Furthermore, these models lack empirical validation of neutralisation strategies and bounded rationality across diverse contexts.

**Originality and value:** This study maps how psychological drivers shape consumer rationality in ethical consumption behaviour and how rational decision processes influence the intention-behaviour gap. It also identifies key literature gaps and propose research propositions and future research directions to enhance consumers' ability to leverage rational decision-making for more consistent ethical consumption.

**Keywords:** ethical consumption, intention-behaviour gap, rationality, rational decision-making.

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## Introduction

Consumer decision-making is an interplay of complex interactions between personal needs, social influences, and cognitive heuristics, often prioritising immediate gratification over systemic consequences (Kopetz et al., 2012). Ethical consumption serves as a vital bridge between individual rationality and collective sustainability, transforming routine purchases into conscious contributions toward environmental preservation and social equity (Arman & Mark-Herbert, 2021). Ethical consumption refers to purchasing products and services that are produced in a manner that is socially and environmentally responsible (Ganglmair-Wooliscroft & Wooliscroft, 2019). Consumers who engage in ethical consumption make choices that reflect their values and concerns about labour rights, environmental sustainability, ecological footprint, and corporate social responsibility (Carrington et al., 2010). Examples of ethical consumption are availing shared vehicles (Maeng & Cho, 2022), purchasing fair trade coffee (Dekhili & Ertz, 2024; Lee et al., 2018), using second-hand products (Arman & Mark-Herbert, 2024; Xie et al., 2025), prioritising repairing over new item purchases (Gasulla Tortajada et al., 2024; Parajuly et al., 2024), and being concerned about animal welfare (Beck & Ladwig, 2021; Toyota & Tan, 2024).

Ethical consumption is said to contribute to a more sustainable and equitable world (Sebastiani et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2024). However, while the ethical consumption patterns demonstrate ethical priorities, their wide dissemination among consumers ultimately depends on understanding how consumers navigate competing rational frameworks in decision-making processes (Carrington et al., 2010; Zollo, 2021). This requires appealing to the concept of rationality, whereby decisions are made and problems addressed using logic, reason, and sound judgment (Kmita & Nowak, 1970). Rooted in classical economic theories, this concept has evolved to encompass not only pure logical processes but also the integration of cognitive limitations and moral considerations in consumer choices. Building on this evolution, this approach integrates instrumental utility maximisation—optimising outcomes like cost savings and convenience—under constraints. It also includes bounded rationality, which involves satisficing rather than full optimisation (Simon, 1979). Plus, it incorporates value-guided reasoning that weaves ethical norms into preferences (Weber, 1930). As a result, this concept views ethical values—such as fairness and environmental stewardship—as valid parts of utility.

Despite growing interest in ethical consumption, limited research specifically integrates rational choice frameworks to explain and ultimately mitigate the ethical consumption intention-behaviour gap. Therefore, the study aims to explore how consumers' rational decision-making influences their ethical consumption

intentions and behaviour. In addition, this study also aims to reveal the research gaps of the existing literature and suggest future research propositions. To address this, a systematic literature review provides a rigorous, replicable approach to synthesising multiple perspectives, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of rational decision-making in ethical consumption (Paul et al., 2021). The research questions guiding the review are as follows:

1. What themes emerge on rational decision-making and ethical consumption?
2. What are the future research propositions for tackling the research gaps of the existing studies?

To address the research questions, the study employed bibliometric analysis followed by a thematic analysis to reveal the interrelated themes of rational decision making and ethical consumption and how rational decision-making relates to the ethical consumption intention-behaviour gap. Such a hybrid review is widely practiced in studies in the area of consumer behaviour to extend the research field, for example, consumer behaviour and sustainability (Hael et al., 2025), green consumer behaviour (Naini & Reddy, 2025), and consumer behaviour in online shopping (Figueiredo et al., 2025).

The contribution of this chapter is as follows: firstly, it reveals the extent of consumers' rational decision making in ethical consumption by exploring how psychological factors influence this decision making. Secondly, the study identifies the discrepancies in rational decision-making choices in the current literature. Thirdly, it presents research propositions derived from the research gaps of the existing study, contributing novel theoretical insights and implying practical pathways for policymakers and marketers to foster ethical consumption behaviours.

The outline of this chapter has the following structure: After this introduction, this next section presents the theoretical background of rationality and the intention-behaviour gap of ethical consumption. The third section explains the methodology, after which the results derived from bibliometric analysis are presented, followed by thematic content analysis. These include research gaps and research propositions based on the directions of future research. The final section offers concluding remarks.

### **3.1. Rationality in decision-making and ethical consumption**

Rationality plays a pivotal role in consumer behaviour, particularly regarding the intention-behaviour gap in ethical consumption, thus highlighting the challenges that arise when consumers attempt to translate their ethical intentions

into actual purchasing behaviours. Rationality entails making decisions and addressing problems using logic, reason, and sound judgment (Kmita & Nowak, 1970). According to Max Weber (1930), rationality denotes the quality of being based on reason, logic, and empirical knowledge, leading to predictable and calculable behaviours and systems. His theory of rationality categorises decision-making into four types: practical rationality (means-end calculations), substantive rationality (decisions based on values and beliefs), affectual rationality (emotion-driven choices), and traditional rationality (decisions influenced by customs and norms). This definition provides a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of rationality that extends beyond mere logical calculation to include diverse influences on decision-making in complex consumer contexts. According to Simon (1979), rationality is not a pure maximisation of utility or profit but rather the process of making decisions that are considered satisfactory or adequate given the constraints faced by decision-makers. This approach emphasises gathering relevant data, evaluating alternatives, and making decisions that align with set goals and objectives, thereby aiming to optimise outcomes (Mi et al., 2025). In essence, these evolving perspectives on rationality underscore its critical yet constrained role in making decisions.

Numerous rational decision-making frameworks help understand the complexities of ethical consumption. One well-known model is the Theory of Planned Behaviour, developed by Ajzen (1991). This posits that an individual's behaviour is driven by their intentions, which are influenced by attitudes toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). The Theory of Planned Behaviour is well well-accepted framework, with extended variables in recently published papers, such as perceived utility (Garmendia-Lemus et al., 2024), AI literacy (Wang et al., 2025), circular economy (Arman, 2025), knowledge and environmental risk perception (Camarata et al., 2024), or combined with other theories, e.g., self-determination theory (Wang et al., 2024), value-belief-norm theory (Fauzi et al., 2024), and rational choice theory (Idris et al., 2016). In summary, these frameworks, particularly the adaptable Theory of Planned Behaviour and its modern extensions, provide robust tools for dissecting the rational underpinnings of ethical consumption and the persistent challenges in aligning intentions with actions.

Understanding the interrelationship between rationality and ethical consumption is crucial, since it provides insight into how consumers make decisions based on their values and social expectations. Ethical consumption is the practice of making purchasing decisions based on ethical standards, prioritising products that align with moral values about societal and environmental impacts (Carrington et al., 2010, 2014). This includes choosing fair trade, sustainable, or cruelty-free products and supporting actions that promote social responsi-

bility in consumption (Arman & Mark-Herbert, 2024). However, rational decision-making pursued by ethically minded consumers does not always convert ethical consumption intentions into behaviour; thus, an intention-behaviour gap occurs (Carrington et al., 2016). This intention-behaviour gap denotes the discrepancy between consumers' intentions to purchase ethically and their actual purchasing behaviours (Casais & Faria, 2022). It highlights how consumers' expressing a desire to buy ethical products based on their beliefs and values does not always translate into corresponding actions or purchases (Hassan et al., 2016).

Although up-to-date research indicates that it is critical to understand the psychological and contextual factors influencing ethical consumer behaviour, there is insufficient systematisation of the interconnected themes of rational decision-making and ethical consumption. Thus, more research is required on how these two factors are interlinked in the way consumers make decisions.

### 3.2. Research method

To conduct the systematic literature review, the study employed the PRISMA 2020 protocol presented in Figure 3.1 (Page et al., 2021). Scopus was used to search for appropriate research papers, since this database is widely used by business and management scholars (Gupta & Srivastava, 2024). The analysis was limited to English-language peer-reviewed articles. The search query included a wildcard "rational\*" to cover relevant studies. Additionally, it covered close terminologies related to rational decision making, "reasoned action", "cognitive reasoning", and "rational choice". The search query also covered "ethical consumption". The initial query generated 61 articles. The final exclusion, based on the abstract analysis of 42 articles, was made when the main research theme of the paper did not correspond with the current study's objective (Bhardwaj et al., 2024), e.g., a paper discussing consumer-driven CSR. Finally, the study selected 23 articles for the bibliometric analysis and thematic analysis.

The science mapping of bibliometric analysis examines the intellectual relationships within a field through bibliometric coupling analysis (Maseda et al., 2022). The study employed bibliographic coupling to identify themes within rational decision making and ethical consumption, with VOSviewer software used to determine the interrelated themes (Bukar et al., 2023). This software produced a thematic map divided into three thematic clusters. Each cluster represents distinct aspects of ethical consumption, rationality, and the intention-behaviour gap, illustrating the connections between these concepts. The list of papers in each cluster is presented in Table 3.1.

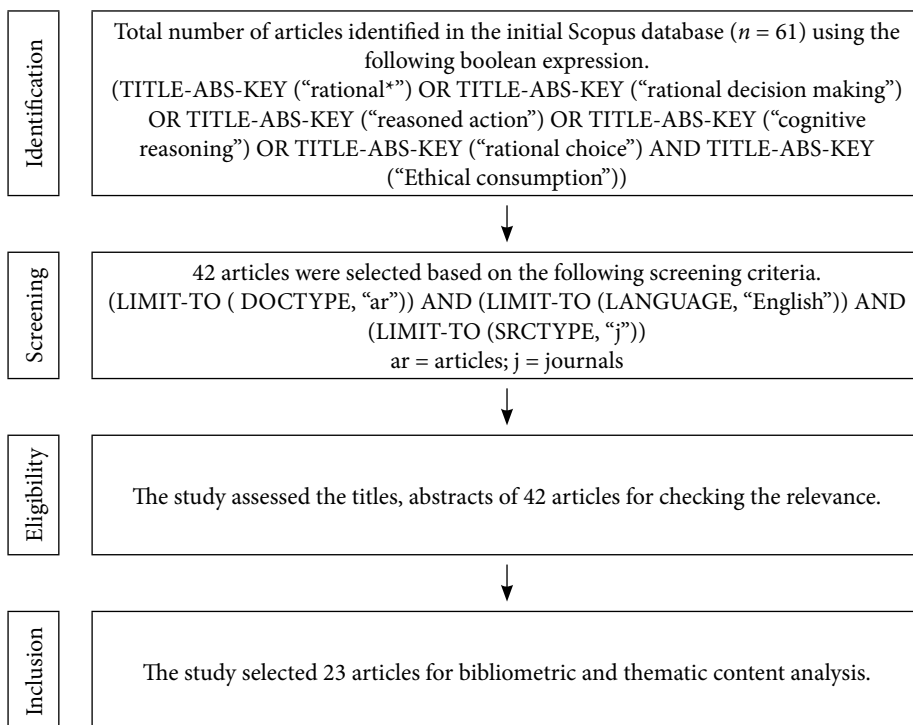


Figure 3.1. PRISMA 2020 protocol

Source: own work.

Table 3.1. Distribution of 23 articles in three clusters on rationality in ethical consumption

<b>Cluster 1 (8 items)</b> <i>Reasons for the ethical consumption intention-behaviour gap</i>	<b>Cluster 2 (9 items)</b> <i>Psychological factors in ethical consumption</i>	<b>Cluster 3 (6 items)</b> <i>Promoting ethical consumption</i>
Deng (2015) Eckhardt et al. (2010) Foti & Devine (2019) Karimzadeh & Boström (2024) McGregor (2008) McGregor (2022) Schütte & Gregory-Smith (2015) Schlaile et al. (2018)	Antonetti & Maklan (2014) Chatzidakis (2015) Cheng et al. (2023) Hiller & Woodall (2019) Jain et al. (2023) Nicholls & Lee (2006) Oh & Yoon (2014) Roubal (2022) Zollo et al. (2018)	Argüelles et al. (2017) Daya (2016) de Bakker & Dagevos (2012) Edmond (2023) Evans et al. (2017) Hirth et al. (2022)

Source: own work.

### 3.3. Results and discussion

#### 3.3.1. Theme 1: Reasons for ethical consumption intention-behaviour gap

The first thematic cluster identified in the analysis covered the reasons for the ethical intention-behaviour gap linked to rationality. The widening of the gap between ethical consumption intentions and actual behaviours is shaped by a complex blend of cultural, economic, cognitive, and societal factors that lead consumers to rationalise or justify choices that contradict their ethical values. Eckhardt et al. (2010) account for the ethical consumption intention-behaviour gap by noting that consumers justify ethical consumption gaps through economic, institutional, and developmental rationalisations shaped by cultural and socioeconomic contexts. This finding is also echoed by Foti and Devine (2019) and Schütte and Gregory-Smith (2015), who mention that consumers' pragmatic focus on cost-saving outcomes depends on rational financial calculations. However, these authors also note that existing research does not fully address how rationalisation tactics interact with cultural and socioeconomic factors to shape the ethical consumption intention-behaviour gap. These papers found that consumers prioritise cost-benefit analysis over ethical considerations. Deng (2015) and Schlaile et al. (2018) extend further reasons for the widening the intention-behaviour gap, which can occur due to cognitive limitations, informational complexity, and biases that constrain ethical decision-making. Moreover, Karimzadeh and Boström (2024) mention societal structures, cultural norms, and institutional systematic barriers that create mismatches between ethical intentions and action. However, these papers mention that prior consumer behaviour models inadequately integrate economic rationality (e.g., cost-benefit trade-offs) with ethical decision making in collectivist cultures, thereby limiting their ability to explain the intention-behaviour gap.

In addition, the intention-behaviour gap can occur if customers justify their unethical consumption behaviour. McGregor (2008, 2022) note that customers justify immoral or unethical consumption through neutralisation; the strategies used include denying responsibility ("It's not my fault"), denying harm ("It's not really that bad"), blaming others ("The company is to blame"), appealing to necessity ("I needed to do this"), or comparing to worse behaviours ("Others do much worse"). However, empirical studies have yet to validate how and when consumers deploy neutralisation strategies to rationalise or neglect ethical trade-offs in real buying situations.

In summary, cluster 1 highlights how various personal and structural factors—ranging from financial priorities and informational barriers to cultural norms—contribute to the persistent ethical consumption intention-behaviour gap explored in the current research. Thus, future studies should employ mixed-culture samples, as recommended by Deng (2015) and Karimzadeh and Boström (2024), to develop new theoretical frameworks—building on Eckhardt et al.'s (2010) and McGregor's (2008, 2022) critiques—that explicitly target closing the intention-behaviour gap. In addition, investigating how bounded rationality interacts with shared-responsibility models in information-asymmetric, globalised markets will reveal intervention points of consumers for aligning rational decision-making with collective ethical standards (Schlaile et al., 2018). Based on the discussion, we suggest the following research proposition:

*RP 1. Integrating mixed-culture insights and bounded rationality with strategically tailored contextual triggers (such as price framing and social-norm appeals) will close the ethical consumption intention-behaviour gap by reconciling consumers' rational cost-benefit analyses with collective responsibility cues.*

### **3.3.2. Theme 2: Psychological factors in ethical consumption**

The second identified theme explores how psychological factors interact with rational decision-making to influence whether consumers translate ethical intentions into actual purchasing behaviour. Antonetti and Maklan (2014) and Chatzidakis (2015) find that guilt and pride increase sustainable consumption by enhancing perceived consumer effectiveness and reducing rationalisation tactics that justify unsustainable choices. However, their results indicate limited understanding of how guilt and pride interact with rational cost-benefit calculations in ethical consumption decisions. In addition, Oh and Yoon (2014) mention that the existing rational decision-making models, e.g., the theory of planned behaviour, overemphasise cost-benefit attitudes of consumers and neglect emotional (e.g., guilt) and altruistic drivers of ethical consumption. Their study emphasises how ethical consumption is not merely driven by rational calculations but is also influenced by emotional and societal values. In a similar vein, Zollo et al. (2018) highlight both rational (theory of planned behaviour) and non-rational (socio-intuitionist) frameworks to explain the role of moral intuition in ethical consumption. They suggest that moral intuitions shape consumers' motivations and preferences, often causing a gap between their environmental attitudes and actual purchasing behaviours. Specifically, while

consumers may feel a moral obligation to choose sustainable products, their choices can be swayed by convenience and social influences.

Cheng et al. (2023) emphasise rational purchasing factors (price, quality, convenience) as psychological factors for ethical consumption. They mention that ethical consumption uses the same cost–benefit thinking as regular shopping: what people believe about price, time/effort, and quality changes how doable and acceptable it feels, which then shapes their intention to buy ethically. However, they inadequately address sustainability communication strategies. Hiller and Woodall (2019) note that habitual practices are pragmatic for developing ethical consumption behaviour. In addition, Jain et al. (2023) highlight that rationality is a key element of responsible consumption, which emphasises mindful resource use, alongside ethical consumption that upholds fair-trade standards. On the contrary, Nicholls and Lee (2006) claim that clear ethical attitudes and knowledge about fair trade can constitute a bridge between intention and behaviour only by stronger brandbuilding rather than mere information provision. However, the moral intensity and belief formation towards brand building is underexplored. Collectively, these findings suggest that ethical consumption requires not only rational incentives and informational clarity but also attention to emotional drivers and brand strategies that effectively motivate ethical action.

The analysis suggests that future research should investigate hybrid interventions that combine emotional triggers (pride and guilt) with rational information to overcome cognitive barriers and close the intention–behaviour gap in ethical consumption (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014; Chatzidakis, 2015). Scholars should explore the dynamic interactions among consumers in evolving market contexts and cultural settings (Cheng et al., 2023; Jain et al., 2023). Finally, future studies should explore how rational factors such as price sensitivity interact with emotional and altruistic motivations to bridge intention–behaviour gaps and support the development of integrated theoretical models (Oh & Yoon, 2014; Roubal, 2022; Zollo et al., 2018). Based on the following, we propose the following research proposition:

*RP 2. An integrated theoretical framework that combines psychological triggers with rational decision-making processes will more accurately predict ethical purchase behaviours than existing models that overlook emotional factors.*

### **3.3.3. Cluster 3: Promoting ethical consumption**

The last theme identified in the analysis reveals diverse perspectives on the ways communities, consumers, and companies contribute to ethical consumption

promotion linked to rational decision-making. Argüelles et al. (2017) examine how community-based economic initiatives encourage consumers to purchase organic options in food and energy, which are beneficial for personal benefit and social good. However, they mention that such initiatives are struggling to gain corporate support, and corporations only focus on profit, despite a superficial commitment to ethical consumption. Such practices often trigger accusations of greenwashing. Daya (2016) points out that ethical practices in daily activities foster rational decision-making, focusing on ethical consumption. She mentions that daily ethical practices include using reusable shopping bags in grocery shopping, purchasing handmade crafts from local artisans, and making conscious choices about local production and sustainable sourcing of the raw materials.

In addition, for promoting ethical consumption, two distinctive viewpoints regarding rationality should be noted: the first concerns the rationality of consumers, while the second relates to the rationality of companies. De Bakker and Dagevos (2012) point out that successful consumer engagement helps companies to take rational decisions to design and deliver ethically produced products and services. Evans et al. (2017) and Hirth et al. (2022) examine how companies in the food industry can influence sustainable systems to promote ethical habits among consumers. They discuss the company's rational decision-making processes in shaping consumer behaviours toward food choices and minimising food waste, ultimately highlighting the importance of corporate responsibility in fostering ethical consumption.

Overall, these findings highlight the critical role that collaborative efforts across individuals, communities and companies play in promoting ethical practices and fostering rational decisions by consumers. Future studies should design community-based economic initiatives by building transparent governance and credible corporate partnerships (Argüelles et al., 2017). Such partnerships can help prevent companies from designing greenwashing strategies. It is advisable that researchers test pragmatic strategies—such as stealth product reformulation, culturally resonant narratives, and self-regulation tools—to nudge consumers toward sustainable choices without relying solely on explicit moral appeals (de Bakker & Dagevos, 2012; Edmond, 2023). By embedding sustainability cues in everyday contexts, as suggested by Daya (2016), these approaches can foster deeper cultural shifts and more consistently promote ethical consumption behaviour. These future studies lead to the following research proposition:

*RP 3. Integrating stealth product reformulation with culturally resonant narratives and self-regulation mechanisms within community-based initiatives will promote ethical consumption behaviour more effectively than traditional moral-persuasion campaigns.*

## Conclusions

This study critically discusses the importance of ethical aspects in consumer rational decisions, which facilitates the successful transfer of ethical consumption intention to behaviour by minimising or closing the intention-behaviour gap. It underlined psychological factors impacting rational decision making and determining the intention-behaviour gap by developing ethical consumption behaviour. These arguments show that incorporating ethical considerations into rational decision-making helps reduce the intention-behaviour gap in ethical consumption. Such a reduction promotes sustainable solutions from the consumer's perspective.

The study also has practical implications. It urges companies to develop community-based initiatives focused on ethical and sustainable activities where more stakeholders can contribute effectively to business strategy formulation and implications. In turn, such inclusions can mitigate the risk of pursuing greenwashing strategies. Moreover, this practice can help individual customers to nurture their daily ethical consumption habits by transforming everyday shopping into an act of support for local economies, recognition for the producers, and shared identities. Such community-based initiatives to support ethical consumption should also be promoted by policymakers. Rationality in ethical consumption involves a considered balance of personal values, long-term benefits, and social implications. Therefore, integrating ethical considerations into rational decision-making allows consumers to support more sustainable and fair economic practices, representing a more holistic approach to utility and satisfaction.

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