



SCHOOL OF
ECONOMICS AND
MANAGEMENT

From Commitment to Disengagement

Exploring the Reasons Behind Cessation of Ethical Consumption
Practices

By

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Abstract

Title: Understanding Discontinuation – Exploring the Reasons Behind Cessation of Ethical Consumption Practices

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Purpose: The purpose of this thesis is to delve into the complex dynamics of ethical consumption by exploring the experiences of individuals who were once dedicated to an ethical lifestyle but subsequently struggled to maintain it.

Theoretical Framework: Theory of Ethical Consumer Intention Formation by Sun (2019) was the main theoretical lens that structured our findings.

Methodology and Empirical Data: This study adopts a qualitative research design along with an abductive and exploratory approach. Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted, shaping the subsequent analysis and discussion.

Conclusions: Ethical consumption cessation is intricate and individualised. Factors such as lack of resources, changing priorities, identity formation and social belonging, consumer scepticism, and finally societal and structural challenges each contribute to this phenomenon.

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1 Introduction

This chapter initiates with an exposition on the background and significance of the subject matter, laying the groundwork for subsequent discussions. Following this, a thorough problematization is undertaken to underscore the criticality of the subject and pinpoint a gap in the literature. Subsequently, the research question is articulated, accompanied by the study's aim. Furthermore, the chapter explores the delimitations of the research, elucidating its scope and boundaries. Finally, an overview of the thesis structure is provided, offering a roadmap of the following chapters and their interconnectedness.

1.1 Background

Today, society is witnessing a significant transformation towards a greater emphasis on ethical consumption and sustainable production practices (Oh & Yoon, 2014). In recent years, a succession of significant events has acted as catalysts, intensifying the global focus on these issues. These incidents encompass a wide array of impactful occurrences, such as devastating wildfires in regions like the U.S. and Australia, the rise of influential movements led by figures like Greta Thunberg, and exposés uncovering unethical labour practices within industries such as fast fashion (Hackenberg, 2021).

This heightened emphasis on ethical consumption and sustainable production extends across multiple domains, including governmental initiatives. With all member countries of the UN committing to the global goals for 2030, there is a concerted effort towards sustainable development across social, economic, and environmental spheres, as outlined by the United Nations (n.d.). This growing awareness is reshaping the broader business landscape, compelling companies to embrace ethical management practices. These practices not only

involve advocating for environmental preservation but also entail offering products and services that align with areas such as social responsibilities (Oh & Yoon, 2014).

Efforts to promote ethical consumption extend beyond governmental and corporate spheres, encompassing individual actions and societal trends. This emphasis on personal accountability underscores the significance of individuals making informed and responsible decisions (Arnould et al. 2023). While various forms of ethical consumption have historical forerunners, the phenomenon has gained considerable prominence over the last decade. However, its relevance can be traced back even further, although in different forms (Carrigan et al. 2023).

There have been calls for responsible consumer behaviour dating back to the 1970s (Arnould et al. 2023). This period witnessed a notable shift in consumer attitudes, moving away from a focus on personal desires and material possessions towards a newfound emphasis on values (Carrigan et al. 2004). Ethical consumers and their practices, who were once relegated to the fringes of society, have now become an integral part of mainstream culture. This transformation is evident in the increasing number of individuals who actively seek out products that resonate with their deeply held ethical values (Carrigan et al. 2004; Carrington et al. 2010).

During the late 1990s, the field of marketing began to focus on a burgeoning consumer segment known as "the ethical consumer." This group distinguished itself by boycotting companies they deemed irresponsible or unethical and instead actively sought to support businesses that adhered to ethical principles and practices (Carrigan et al. 2023). More specifically, this segment includes individuals who not only show a willingness but also actively engage in modifying their lifestyles, consumption habits, and purchasing decisions to align with their ethical values (European Commission, n.d.). This approach to ethical consumerism is founded on the principle that consumers are not simply buying a product or service, they are endorsing the entire process behind its creation (Kirchhoff, n.d.).

The term "ethical" itself is inherently subjective, encompassing diverse interpretations among different individuals and can mean various things to different people. Often, it involves a deep

concern for environmental issues and sustainability, focusing on the impact of production and consumption on the planet. Additionally, ethical considerations frequently extend to social issues such as workers' rights and fair trade, ensuring fair wages and safe working conditions. Animal welfare is also a significant aspect, emphasising the humane treatment of animals and the avoidance of practices that cause harm (Carrington et al. 2010). Over time, numerous successful campaigns led by ethical consumers have contributed to the development of new labels and standards, including dolphin-safe tuna, fair-trade coffee, cruelty-free products, sweatshop-free clothing, and conflict-free diamonds (Britannica, nd.). However, there is a growing acknowledgment of the challenges people face in embracing ethical and sustainable consumer practices in contemporary society (Carrigan et al. 2023) and despite their efforts, ethical consumers continue to face numerous challenges.

Ethical consumption has transitioned through different phases and evolved over time, yet its enduring relevance underscores its profound importance in contemporary society. It remains a focal point of interest, shaping not only consumer behaviours but also societal attitudes. (Newholm & Shaw, 2007).

1.2 Problematization

While the realm of ethical consumption has been extensively explored, the experience of being an ethical consumer remains complex and unpredictable (Carrigan, et al. 2023). Certain areas of investigation have received significant attention over the decades such as exploring the various reasons influencing whether consumers choose to engage in ethical consumption or not (Eckhardt et al. 2010; Freestone & McGoldrick, 2008), often examining why consumers do not follow through on their intentions or desires to consume ethically, a specific and well explored area called the attitude-behaviour gap. Furthermore, there has been a call towards implementing strategies to bridge this gap (Prothero et al. 2011; Nandy, 2023) and recently, focus has shifted towards looking at the structural constraints that individuals face, and not just the individual (Carrington et al. 2016; Coffin & Egan-Wyer, 2022).

Despite the extensive body of research dedicated to the subject, understanding the ethical consumer remains elusive and continues to be an area of inquiry that lacks sufficient clarity. Most research typically investigates the general consumer perspective rather than focusing specifically on individuals who explicitly identify as ethical consumers, thus missing this unique perspective. Additionally, existing studies tend to narrowly concentrate on either individual or systemic factors, thereby overlooking the multifaceted nature of individuals and ethical consumerism. Consequently, researchers have failed to pay adequate attention to the experiences of individuals who initially adopt ethical consumption practices but later abandon them. The moment of cessation presents a crucial opportunity, signalling a significant shift worth further exploration. By examining the experiences, reflections, and circumstances of ethical consumers, valuable insights can be uncovered to enhance our understanding of ethical consumption. Hence, the absence of research in this particular area represents a notable gap in the existing literature.

This study seeks to contribute to our understanding of ethical consumption by exploring the complex challenges and evolving dynamics experienced by individuals who initially adopt ethical consumption but subsequently struggle to maintain these practices. By doing so, the study transcends the mere exploration of why individuals engage or not in ethical consumption, shifting focus to ensure the long-term continuation of such behaviours. This shift represents a crucial step towards nurturing enduring ethical consumption within society. Exploring the nuanced experiences of individuals grappling with the complexities of sustaining ethical consumption is essential and by doing so, this study strives to illuminate the perceived barriers, both individual and structural, that contribute to the discontinuation of ethical behaviours. This comprehensive exploration will not only enhance the understanding of ethical consumption dynamics but also provide valuable insights into how individuals can uphold their ethical ideals in their daily lives and within the marketplace.

Furthermore, the practical implications of this research offer promising benefits for both society and managers striving to develop strategies that promote and maintain ethical consumption practices. By delving into the challenges and dynamics individuals encounter in upholding ethical behaviours, managers can refine their approaches to better resonate with consumer preferences and values. This alignment not only contributes to fostering positive

social and environmental impacts but also presents an opportunity to drive corporate growth by catering to the increasingly conscientious consumer base.

1.3 Aim and Research Question

The aim of this paper is to delve into the complex dynamics of ethical consumption. By examining the experiences of individuals who were once dedicated to an ethical lifestyle but subsequently ceased to maintain it, we gain unique insights into the complex dynamics of ethical consumption behaviour. This exploration has led to the formulation of the following research question:

Why do individuals discontinue their ethical consumption behaviours?

1.4 Delimitations

This study outlines several key delimitations to clarify the research's scope and boundaries. Through this process, the study aims to establish a comprehensive framework that defines the parameters of the investigation and offers transparency regarding the inherent constraints of the research.

It is crucial to emphasise that the primary objective of this study is to enhance our understanding of ethical consumers and therefore it is noteworthy to address that our research does not propose explicit strategies aimed at remedying the disparity between ethical ideals and consumer behaviour. With a more extensive timeframe, exploring strategies to bridge the gap between ethical ideals and consumer behaviour could perhaps have been integrated. Further, the study primarily centres on the experiences and perceived reality of individual consumers. Therefore, ethical behaviour is not directly measured, rather, the analysis relies on individuals' perceptions and self-reported behaviours to inform the findings.

Given the complexity of the topic, deliberate choices have been made regarding the theories and frameworks utilised in this study. Finally, while there are numerous theories related to ethical consumption, the study has selected those that are most relevant to the research questions and aim. This necessitates the exclusion of some theories to maintain focus and coherence in the analysis.

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

The thesis is structured into seven main chapters. The first chapter introduces the research topic, emphasising its importance through a problematization and outlines the research aim, questions, and delimitations. The second chapter reviews the existing literature on ethical consumption, presenting perspectives from both mainstream and critical marketing to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research field. The third chapter introduces the chosen theoretical framework, Sun's (2019) Theory of Ethical Consumer Intention Formation, which will be used as the main framework to analyse the findings. This framework will be complemented by other relevant theories, reflecting the exploratory approach of this thesis. Chapter four details the study's methodology, providing the reader with a comprehensive and detailed description of the methodological process, outlining every step and choice made throughout the research. Chapter five presents and analyses the findings based on the collected data, utilising the theoretical framework along with other literature identified during the analysis. The sixth chapter summarises the findings and discusses their relevance in light of previous research. Finally, chapter seven concludes the thesis by summarising the main findings, providing theoretical and managerial contributions as well as outlining limitations and recommendations for future research.

2 Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to review previous research in the field of ethical consumption and establish the theoretical basis for the present study. By reviewing the literature, the aim is to gain insights and delve deeper into the key themes and concepts which are central to this thesis. However, it is important to highlight the scarcity of literature specifically addressing the cessation of ethical consumption practices, a gap this research aims to fill. This is not considered a constraint, as the aim of this study is to gain a better understanding of the ethical consumer through their cessation behaviours. By exploring the complexities of the ethical consumer, a deeper understanding will be gained into the diverse perspectives that shape it. Initially, this chapter highlights the mainstream marketing perspective, shedding light on studies that have significantly shaped the literature on ethical consumption. Subsequently, the discussion transitions to the critical marketing perspective, which has gained increasing attention in recent years, offering a more nuanced understanding of the complexities within this field. Highlighting both mainstream and critical marketing perspectives provides a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of research in this area, thereby enhancing our understanding of the ethical consumer.

2.1 Mainstream Marketing

Prior research on ethical consumption spans throughout various disciplinary traditions, encompassing areas such as psychology, economics, philosophy, sociology, and political science, among others (Carrigan et al. 2023). Bray et al. (2011) assert that this field is inherently complex, highlighting numerous aspects of consumer behaviour that raise ethical concerns, with assessments and distinctions often being both subjective and complicated. Jackson (2005) notes that much of this research is rooted in mainstream marketing which

predominantly explores individual factors influencing behaviours and choices. Khan and Abbas (2022) complement these perspectives by underscoring several widely recognized factors influencing ethical consumption, such as environmental attitudes, trust, knowledge, values and subjective norms.

While many individuals aspire to make ethical and sustainable choices, the reality is nuanced, with various obstacles and inconsistencies influencing consumer behaviours and decisions (Carrigan et al. 2023). This complexity is apparent in the extensively studied attitude-behaviour gap within ethical consumption, which serves as a central focus for numerous studies and scholars. The attitude-behaviour gap shows that possessing ethical or environmental values and attitudes does not always translate into corresponding actions (Auger & Devinney, 2007). The difficulty also becomes evident as Moisander (2007) delves into the nuanced domain of green consumerism, unveiling layers of motivational complexity inherent in environmentally conscious consumption. She elucidates that such consumption behaviour can stem from dual motives: the individual objectives of the consumer and the collective, long-term goals of environmental protection. The allure of short-term benefits from non-compliance can pose a tempting alternative. Consequently, individuals are faced with complex situations where the pursuit of personal interests clashes with the broader objectives of environmental conservation. Balancing these conflicting desires requires careful navigation as individuals seek to reconcile their immediate needs with their aspirations for long-term environmental sustainability.

Bray et al. (2011) explore rationales found in the literature regarding individuals' ethical consumption behaviours, noting that scholars hold divergent views on this topic. Some researchers have focused on individuals' beliefs, highlighting that those with strong convictions tend to adhere more rigorously to their ethical judgments, thereby exhibiting higher levels of ethical consumption. Regarding situational factors, the need for information is highlighted as essential for individuals to make informed ethical choices. Additionally, the lack of trust in companies' claims diminishes the willingness to pay a higher price for ethical products, in some cases leading to questions regarding the impact of their actions. In another study, Carrigan and Attalla (2001) suggest that consumers are more inclined to choose ethical products when they do not have to compromise on price, quality or the effort they put into

finding and buying them. Additionally, Nicholls and Lee (2006) investigates factors that may impede ethical consumption choices. Some areas of focus include the limited availability of ethical products and consumer scepticism towards their efficacy. However, research in these areas remains relatively scarce, highlighting the necessity for further exploration and empirical investigation. This field has faced criticism for its oversimplification as it fails to comprehensively account for the multifaceted nature of ethical consumption and consumption in general, as noted by Bray et al. (2011).

Newholm and Shaw (2007) outlines literature on ethical consumption and underscore the underlying assumptions about human behaviour upon which these models and theories are constructed. Some of these are built on the assumption that emphasises the rational consumer, where information plays an important role in ethical consumption. The authors state that the accepted view of the consumer as rational have allowed for decision-making models to develop, be widely accepted and frequently used. This perspective posits that consumers engage in a process of perceiving needs, gathering information, integrating it with attitudes and social perceptions and forming behavioural intentions. Newholm and Shaw present another view within the mainstream marketing realm that extends from the concept of rationality while also deviating from it. This perspective argues that consumers cannot be solely defined by rationality and advocate for an approach that acknowledges the intricate nature of identity. Kozinets and Handelman (1998) argue that individuals approach ethical issues in a manner closely tied to their self-identity, suggesting that ethical considerations enable individuals to achieve "moral self-realisation," where morality is integral to their sense of identity.

2.2 Critical Marketing

In recent years, there has been a growing body of literature emphasising the need to move beyond individual-centric perspectives in the study of ethical consumption and adopt a more systemic approach. Carrington et al. (2016) offer a critical perspective on mainstream marketing's portrayal of consumer sovereignty. They highlight how this perspective emphasises individual responsibility for driving systemic change through consumption and

autonomous decision-making, a concept they scrutinise for its implications on broader societal structures. They advocate for a more critical examination of the systemic influences at play in contemporary society. According to them, a thorough understanding of the factors influencing ethical consumption necessitates consideration of broader systemic perspectives beyond individual agency. Such broader factors may be the retailers, producers, and brands that have significant impact in shaping consumption choices. They contend that the discourse of individualization strengthens the notion that individuals are responsible for societal issues. This concept, referred to as consumer responsabilization, places accountability on consumers for the negative impacts of capitalism, emphasising their role in effecting change and moving away from solely attributing blame to broader systemic issues. The authors suggest that the widely acknowledged "attitude-behaviour gap," which views consumers as autonomous agents and holds them accountable, empowering them to influence systemic change through individual consumption behaviours, requires critical examination from a perspective that does not view the consumer as inherently agentic.

Expanding these insights from Carrington et al. (2016), Coffin and Egan-Wyer (2022) shed light on the market structures that shape ethical and unethical consumption practices. They introduce a new concept called the "cap", instead of the "gap", highlighting the barriers individuals encounter in making informed decisions. This nuanced alteration serves to underscore how capitalism creates an environment where ethical consumption entails significant investments in financial resources, time and effort by consumers. By shifting the focus from the "gap" to the "cap," it elucidates the systemic pressures that impede consumers in their pursuit of a more ethical lifestyle. This reinforces the shift from individual responsibility to addressing the systemic hurdles inherent in ethical consumption. Moreover, Cluley and Dunne (2012) state that consumers may unwittingly desire to shop to assert superiority over others, highlighting some of the internal obstacles related to the cap.

2.3 Chapter Summary & Reflection

The literature review adeptly navigates the complex landscape of ethical consumption across various disciplines, delving into the intricate dynamics of ethical consumer behaviour. It sheds light on the prevailing focus of past research, which predominantly examined either the interplay of individual motivations or systemic influences. Taking into account the view of Bray et al. (2011) on oversimplification it becomes evident that analysing the subject solely through the lens of one perspective, such as that of the rational consumer, is insufficient for achieving a comprehensive understanding. Moreover, the critical marketing perspective also exhibits limitations in its ability to fully investigate and elucidate the entirety of individuals' experiences. Therefore, the need for a more nuanced approach becomes apparent, one that not only recognizes but also embraces the multifaceted aspects of consumer behaviour within an ethical context.

The literature review highlights ongoing challenges in understanding the ethical consumer, revealing diverse perspectives and explanations depending on the analytical lens employed. Despite extensive exploration, gaps persist in understanding the ethical consumer, as well as why some consumers discontinue ethical practices, as research has predominantly focused on other facets of the subject.

3 Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, the objective is to present the theoretical framework selected for the analysis of empirical data. This paper adopts Sun's Theory of Ethical Consumer Intention Formation (2019) as its theoretical framework. This choice is motivated by the framework's unique integration of both individual and structural elements, a combination rarely found in other models or frameworks on this subject. In this study, this integration is recognized as a crucial component for achieving a comprehensive understanding of ethical consumers and their behaviours. Sun's framework will be utilised to understand the reasons why some individuals cease to engage in ethical consumption practices

3.1 Theory of Ethical Consumer Intention Formation

Sun's (2019) Ethical Consumer Intention Formation theory represents an expanded iteration of the well-established Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), originally formulated by Ajzen in 1991. According to the original TPB, there are three primary dimensions that influence an individual's intentions to act in a specific way: attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norm and perceived behavioural control. The TPB was originally developed within the field of psychology and has seen widespread application in the domain of consumer behaviour, as well as ethical consumption behaviour. Despite its widespread use and popularity, Sun believed that the model did not fully capture the extent and complexity of ethical consumers and their purchase decisions. For example, one limitation of the TPB is its emphasis on explaining general behaviour, rather than specifically addressing ethical behaviour, which for Sun made it insufficient for comprehensively explaining ethical behaviour.

Sun introduced new components as well as modified existing ones to advance the understanding of ethical consumer behaviour, aiming to both predict and explain it comprehensively. This extension emphasises the importance of adopting a nuanced approach to fully grasp ethical consumption, providing a detailed framework for its examination.

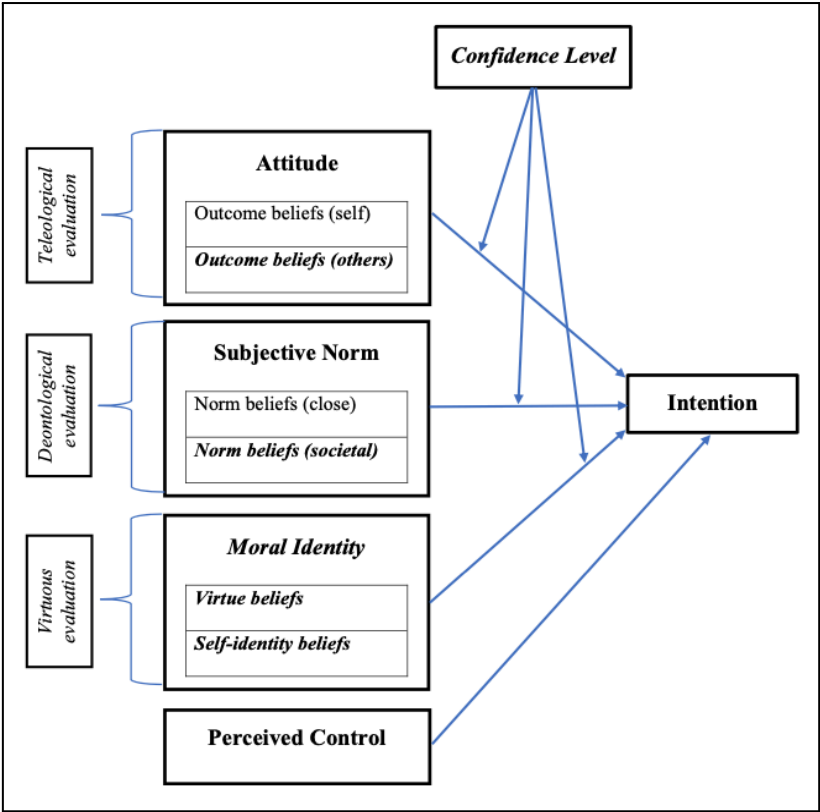


Figure 1: The re-extended theory of planned behaviour
(new elements are bolded and italicised)

Sun's model introduces a significant change by modifying the concept of attitude, shifting its focus from individual impact to considering the broader societal implications of purchase choices. This adjustment offers a nuanced understanding of how consumer actions can affect society in multifaceted ways. Within this framework, consumers engage in a dynamic evaluation process, considering the advantages and disadvantages of making different choices. The new model recognizes that ethically minded consumers likely assess both the personal implications of a product and its broader impact on others. An important component in the personal implications is credibility and whether customers trust claims made by brands and their products. Sun argues that credibility is a critical component that cannot be ignored, especially in the context of ethically minded consumers. These consumers are often

concerned about whether a brand or company can deliver on its promises regarding the anticipated benefits and outcomes of their products. Additionally, they are interested in whether the companies are genuinely committed to fulfilling these promises. Credibility is thus crucial in ethical consumption, as it shapes consumers' perceptions of a product's trustworthiness and influences their purchase decisions.

Sun's model enhances the concept of norms by including not only those from immediate social surroundings but also high-level norms that influence individuals. Norms from one's social surroundings can significantly impact certain individuals, driving them to seek approval from their social circle and leading to changes in behaviour based on the actions and expectations of those around them. In immediate surroundings there are specific normative expectations that people may adhere to, which can shape their consumption choices and ethical behaviours. Sun's revised framework goes further by integrating ethical norms within subjective norms and emphasising broader societal and structural influences. This includes the overarching values, beliefs and expectations prevalent in society at large, which play a crucial role in shaping ethical behaviour. By incorporating these high-level norms, Sun's model acknowledges the profound impact of societal and institutional norms on consumer behaviour, suggesting that individual ethical consumption choices are not made in isolation but are influenced by a complex interplay of immediate and broader social factors. This shift in perspective underscores the importance of considering both micro-level social dynamics and macro-level societal influences when examining ethical consumption

The concept of moral identity is emphasised, which refers to the degree to which an individual perceives themselves as a moral being and the significance of morality in shaping their identity. In the revised version two key concepts are highlighted: virtue beliefs and self-identity. Virtue beliefs refer to the positive qualities that can be cultivated through consumption practices. Considering virtues helps consumers determine what is morally right for them and how they can make better choices. Self-identity involves how individuals see themselves in social contexts and is closely tied to social identity, which signifies belonging to a social group. Sun suggests that self-identity is essential in ethical consumption as it drives consumers to select products that resonate with their moral and social identities. To sum up, individuals who strongly identify with moral values and virtues are more likely to prioritise

ethical attributes in their decisions. Within each of these three elements, internal cognitive processes are at play, involving individuals' internal reflections, moral reasoning and ethical evaluations. These processes play a crucial role in shaping individuals' attitudes, beliefs and intentions regarding ethical consumption. Specifically, these processes encompass virtuous evaluations, deontological evaluations, and teleological evaluations.

Level of confidence is introduced as a key component in the new model, no longer treated merely as a background factor. Confidence pertains to an individual's belief in their ability to successfully carry out the behaviours required for ethical consumption, occurring in conjunction with the three components discussed above. Sun identifies several reasons why consumers might lack confidence in their ethical purchasing decisions. Firstly, the lack of information can create uncertainty, making consumers doubt their ability to make informed judgments. Without clear and reliable information, it becomes challenging for consumers to evaluate whether products truly meet ethical standards. Secondly, consumers often feel uneasy about their own abilities to make good decisions, aware that biases and spontaneous decisions can undermine their intentions. This self-doubt can hinder their confidence in making consistent ethical choices. Thirdly, consumers tend to be sceptical and cynical towards the business world. This scepticism can lead to critical attitudes toward ethical products, as consumers may distrust the claims and motives behind products and services. They may question the authenticity of ethical labels and the true commitment of companies to sustainable and ethical practices. Consumers who harbour doubts about their beliefs and judgments regarding ethical purchases may still view ethical products favourably, however, these doubts can create significant barriers, preventing them from translating positive attitudes into actual purchase intentions.

The concept of perceived behavioural control has also been modified in Sun's model, emphasising its critical role in ethical consumer behaviour. Perceived behavioural control pertains to an individual's belief about whether they possess the necessary resources and opportunities to engage in a particular behaviour, such as purchasing an ethical product. This includes tangible resources like time, money, and accessibility, as well as intangible factors like knowledge and self-efficacy. When consumers lack essential resources, their ability to follow through with their intended ethical behaviours is significantly impaired. For instance, a

consumer who values certain types of products but cannot afford them is less likely to purchase them, regardless of their ethical intentions. Conversely, higher levels of perceived behavioural control substantially increase the likelihood of action. When consumers feel confident that they possess the necessary resources and opportunities, they are far more likely to translate their ethical intentions into concrete behaviours

Sun emphasises that not all components of the model are consistently engaged, and the linear structure is not always adhered to. Depending on the context, only two or three components may be involved while others play a less significant role. This updated framework aims to enhance our understanding of consumer behaviour in ethical contexts by acknowledging this variability and providing a more comprehensive view. The extension underscores the need for a nuanced approach to achieve a thorough understanding of ethical consumption, offering deeper insights into the multifaceted nature of consumer decision-making in ethical contexts.

4 Methodology

This section of the study serves to delineate the research design, offering a comprehensive rationale for its appropriateness while providing context for the methodology employed. It encompasses detailed discussions on data collection and analysis procedures, ensuring transparency in the research process. Additionally, an evaluation of study quality is undertaken, addressing critical aspects such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Finally, ethical considerations are thoroughly examined, underscoring the commitment to upholding ethical standards throughout the research process.

4.1 Research Approach & Philosophy

This research adopts a qualitative research method to gain understanding of consumers' experiences regarding their discontinuation of ethical intentions. As indicated by Björklund and Paulsson (2014), researchers choose a qualitative approach to gain a thorough understanding of a problem, event, or situation, as is the objective of this study. Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) delineate a vast array of designs for qualitative data, stressing the imperative of aligning these choices with the research objectives and the insights they afford. Such decisions demand a comprehensive understanding and should also be justified during the research process.

Central to every research philosophy is ontology, which concerns the assumptions regarding the nature of reality. The spectrum of ontological positions is extensive, encompassing realism, nominalism, and intermediaries like internal realism and relativism (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). In qualitative research, scholars tend to lean towards the nominalistic and relativistic end of the continuum where it is acknowledged that observers may hold diverse

perspectives, leading to different interpretations of truth, according to Easterby-Smith et al. This aligns with the foundational principle of this study, which prioritises the unique experiences and circumstances of each participant, recognizing the diversity inherent among them.

Epistemology, akin to ontology, navigates intricate paths, and delves into the nature of knowledge and our methodologies for acquiring it (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). The epistemological position of this thesis takes inspiration from a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology, critiquing modern natural science, prioritises the exploration of lived experiences, placing subjective encounters at the forefront of research (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017). This philosophical perspective seeks to comprehend phenomena accessible through the lens of lived experiences (Allwood & Erikson, 2021). This perspective is evident in the study's emphasis on exploring the experiences and emotions of various individuals in the context of the complex phenomena of ethical consumption.

According to Söderbom and Ulvenblad (2016), these perspectives inherently follow a subjectivity in one's research, which involves considering multiple interpretations and perspectives on a subject rather than adhering to a single truth. Söderbom and Ulvenblad argue that subjectivity is often interpreted as biases and preconceived notions that individuals hold, but in research, it refers to the analysis of "real" conditions that the researcher examines. They further explain that a part of this is reflective research, which is built on two pillars: interpretation and reflection. This implies that researchers must be mindful of their influence on the research, and empirical data must be interpreted to gain a complete and deep understanding of the material. This paper adheres to an understanding of how subjectivity can influence one's work. However, in accordance with Söderboms and Ulvenblads reasoning, this is not perceived as a weakness but rather as a strength and an indispensable element for attaining the objectives outlined in the thesis.

Further, this research started with an inductive reasoning, which according to Söderbom and Ulvenblad (2016), means that the researcher begins with an empirical basis, where one acknowledges the subjective aspect of reality. In this approach, data collection is succeeded by analysis and interpretation to enhance comprehension of a specific phenomenon. For this

study, interviews were conducted to collect data, aiming to analyse patterns and themes. During the interview stage, it became apparent that a modification of the theoretical framework was necessary, which led to a shift in reasoning from an initial inductive approach to a subsequent abductive one. Söderbom and Ulveblad (2016) explains that abductive reasoning combines elements of both induction and deduction, integrating the objective and causal reasoning of deduction with the hypothesis testing and subjective reasoning of induction. Söderbom and Ulveblad emphasise that abduction involves a reciprocal relationship between theory and empirical evidence during the research process, where each informs and reshapes the other. Consequently, theory evolves alongside empirical findings, fostering discoveries that may not have arisen otherwise.

Further, it became apparent that maintaining receptivity to new insights was essential for comprehending the subject, aligning with the principles of an exploratory approach. Elman et al. (2020) suggests that this approach seeks to unearth novel and intriguing insights by navigating through a research topic. Given the inherent complexity of ethical consumption and the identified gap in the literature, the decision to initiate the exploration with Sun's framework allowed for further investigation beyond established boundaries. This approach ensured that the pursuit of new insights remained unrestricted, a crucial step in uncovering novel perspectives.

4.1.1 Approach to Conducting Interviews

There are different kinds of interviews and qualitative interviews differ significantly from their quantitative counterparts, often featuring less structure and prioritising the interviewee's perspective over the researcher's interests (Bryman, 2021). They are particularly suitable when understanding the frameworks or viewpoints individuals use to shape their opinions and beliefs regarding a specific topic or situation (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021).

Bryman (2018) underscores the qualitative approach's emphasis on the interviewee's perspective. This method allows the conversation to evolve naturally, encouraging respondents to reflect on their experiences and thoughts without the constraints imposed by highly structured interviews. The goal is to enable participants to freely express themselves,

providing richer, more nuanced insights. In alignment with these principles, this study employs qualitative interviews, specifically semi-structured ones. According to Bryman (2021), semi-structured interviews involve a set of predetermined questions and themes. However, they also provide ample space for interviewees to elaborate on their responses, thereby capturing the complexity of their experiences and viewpoints. This flexibility is crucial for understanding the diverse and dynamic nature of the participants' perspectives.

The initial phase of interview preparation involved crafting an interview guide manuscript (see Appendix 1), developed in alignment with the guidelines proposed by Kvale & Brinkmann (2021). These authors describe the guide as a tool to organise interviews, providing specific questions to ask and outlining themes and topics to cover. The guide's structure may vary based on research objectives, ranging from strict to flexible, depending on the interview type. In line with Kvale and Brinkmann's recommendations, the interview guide was meticulously structured to include delineations of topics and suggested inquiries to guide the interview process effectively, which, in extension, helps facilitate data organisation during the subsequent analysis phase. To ensure that the guide and interviews adhered to high standards and comprised effective questions, two pilot interviews were conducted to assess its efficacy. This process led to modifications and adjustments for subsequent interviews, based on an iterative process of refining the interview guide. Questions that were poorly formulated or did not generate useful responses were removed. Additionally, new questions were added, drawing from the effectiveness of existing ones that generated insightful responses, allowing for further exploration and elaboration on relevant topics.

A total of 11 interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 30-45 minutes. The majority of interviews were conducted through direct interpersonal interaction in tranquil environments with minimal distractions. However, some interviews were conducted digitally using platforms such as Zoom, primarily due to the interviewees residing abroad or facing logistical constraints preventing in-person meetings. The interviews that were performed digitally adhered to the same structure as those carried out in person. Bryman (2021) suggests that digital interviews should not detrimentally impact the connection between interviewer and interviewee. They are therefore considered a viable alternative when face-to-face

interviews are not feasible, as they offer the potential for achieving similar levels of connection and outcomes.

Moreover, during each interview, one of the authors of this paper led the discussion and had the main responsibility for asking questions, while the other took notes to facilitate follow-up questions and ensure important information was not overlooked. Following each interview, transcriptions were conducted to accurately capture the perspectives expressed by the interviewees. This process ensures fidelity to the participants' viewpoints and facilitates detailed analysis (Andreasone & Johansson, 2024).

4.1.2 Sampling Strategy & Survey Design

The participants for this study were recruited through a self-assessment survey distributed among the author's acquaintances deemed relevant for the study. This initial contact was made primarily via email and online messaging platforms. Those initially contacted were also encouraged to share the survey within their networks to reach additional relevant candidates. This sampling strategy combines two methods: target selection and snowball sampling, as described by Bryman (2021). While this combined approach effectively identified suitable participants, it also required careful consideration of its limitations regarding representativeness and potential biases.

Targeted sampling was employed to identify individuals relevant to the study by selecting participants based on specific criteria pertinent to the research objectives. Alvehus (2019) suggests that this approach can pose challenges, particularly regarding the potential for the selection process to become overly strategic, which could result in overlooking individuals who might be more relevant to the study. To address this concern, snowball sampling was incorporated into the sampling strategy.

Snowball sampling, a non-probability sampling method, involves researchers initially identifying and reaching out to individuals deemed potentially relevant for participation. These initial participants are then leveraged to recruit additional relevant participants through their referrals. Bryman (2021) highlights that this method is particularly useful when

probability sampling is not feasible, as it helps ensure the inclusion of participants who align with the study's objectives. However, non-probability sampling, including snowball sampling, has its limitations. One significant limitation is the potential lack of representativeness for the broader population. This approach might not provide a comprehensive cross-section of the population, potentially introducing bias into the sample. Nevertheless, non-probability sampling is frequently utilised in qualitative research contexts where representativeness is often considered less critical than in quantitative research.

Within the survey, participants were asked questions related to their involvement in ethical consumption practices. They were specifically asked whether their engagement in such behaviours had diminished, ceased altogether, or if they encountered challenges in maintaining these practices. Additionally, respondents were invited to express their willingness to participate in follow-up interviews and were prompted to provide contact information for further communication. Individuals who indicated both an experience with ethical consumption and a decrease, cessation or challenges in maintaining these practices were selected for participation in the interviews. The primary focus was to identify individuals who recognized shifts in their ethical consumer behaviour, relying on self-assessment. This approach aimed to capture a nuanced understanding of their experiences and the factors influencing their behaviour. While this methodology could present several challenges, particularly in terms of self-reporting biases and the subjective nature of self-assessment, the study's aim was not to evaluate the participants' ethical standards objectively. Instead, it sought to comprehend their subjective perceptions of the changes in their ethical consumption habits. This focus on personal experience and perception was crucial for gaining insights into the complexities and real-life challenges individuals face in striving to maintain ethical consumption practices amidst various constraints.

Examining the demographics of the interviewees, a noticeable gap emerged between male and female respondents to the survey described above, resulting in more interviews being conducted with females. This distribution was not deliberate but rather a reflection of the survey respondents. The unequal distribution between genders could be attributed to documented differences in the engagement and consideration of ethical consumption. Research suggests that women typically exhibit heightened levels of concern and sensitivity

in this domain, potentially influencing the observed pattern and displaying greater involvement in ethical consumption practices (Pinna, 2020; Morgan et al. 2016). Womens greater involvement could lead to a more significant response rate within this demographic, as they may find the survey topic more personally relevant. This heightened connection to the subject matter might play a role in the observed difference in survey responses.

An additional demographic worth noting pertains to the age distribution of the respondents. The predominant age group among respondents falls within the 24-28 range, mirroring the age group of the authors. This correlation is likely due to the survey's distribution through the authors' personal and professional networks, thereby capturing responses predominantly from individuals within this particular age range. The age distribution was not intentional but rather an unintended consequence of the survey dissemination process. Notably, it was observed that individuals over the age of 40 who participated in the survey primarily reported an increase in their ethical behaviour, which made their responses less relevant for the specific focus of this study.

4.2 Method of Analysis

According to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015), qualitative data analysis can effectively progress through three key stages: sorting, reducing and arguing.

During the sorting stage, the transcribed data was compiled into a single document and categorised based on its content. The goal was to identify the most frequently discussed topics among the interviewees. To facilitate analysis, these different topics were manually colour-coded to provide a comprehensive and visually clear overview of the data. This stage revealed a variety of themes that emerged from the interviews. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015) emphasise the importance of maintaining an open mind during the sorting stage of research. This entails being receptive to unexpected discoveries and avoiding preconceived notions. Such openness allows for flexibility in the analytic phase, enabling researchers to reconsider their perspectives. In light of the insights provided by Rennstam and Wästerfors, when conducting the sorting of material, efforts were made to remain open to new themes and

areas, striving to remain flexible to prevent overlooking any aspects of the text and thereby missing important information. This approach aligns with the abductive reasoning employed in this paper.

After the sorting stage, the material has to be reduced, according to Renstamm and Wästerfors (2015). While the sorting phase reveals various relevant aspects, not all can be included in the following analysis, therefore, the researcher must prioritise the most important information. At this stage, the chosen framework was applied to the material to identify and discern which themes to focus on, which to merge, and which to eliminate altogether. The determination of which themes to further investigate was driven by their relevance in accomplishing the research objective. Renstamm and Wästerfors assert the necessity of this reduction process and highlight the importance of its execution. A technique employed in this paper for reducing material involves categorical reduction, which entails excluding specific themes from the material. In the reduction phase of the analysis, the authors of the paper eliminated categories that, though intriguing, did not contribute to addressing the research question at hand. Renstamm and Wästerfors advocate for qualitative analysis to offer detailed depictions. This objective was pursued by sacrificing some interesting themes to focus on the most relevant areas and delve deeply into these.

The final stage, according to Renstamm and Wästerfors (2015) is arguing, because simply organising and excluding material is insufficient. One method of arguing involves theorising, in which researchers justify their material theoretically through some form of explanation and understanding of the studied phenomena. In applying this principle, the data collected from interviews has been thoroughly analysed, with subsequent interpretations framed within the theoretical framework or, alternatively, emergent theories incorporated during the analysis. The aim is to provide a robust argument that clarifies the nuances of the research findings and contributes to a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Moreover, every empirical result is argued in such a way that it becomes theoretical, thereby enhancing the theoretical discussion on the research topic. This aligns with Renstamm and Wästerfors' notion of advocating for one's material.

4.3 Quality of the Study

Bryman (2018) discusses the criteria for evaluating qualitative research, noting that while some scholars advocate for the application of validity and reliability criteria from quantitative research, others propose alternative standards. This paper adopts these alternative criteria, which comprise four categories: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) underscore two aspects of credibility necessitating specific attention, ensuring accurate representation of respondents' narratives and lifeworld, and enhancing the transparency of the research process. To uphold credibility, the researchers collaboratively interpreted and analysed data to faithfully represent participants' perspectives while mitigating unwarranted influence, aligning with Bryman's (2021) endorsement of such methods. While acknowledging subjectivity in qualitative research, the authors aimed to prevent personal biases from overshadowing interview experiences, ensuring an accurate portrayal of respondents' viewpoints. Moreover, the interviewees were provided with the final version of the study to verify the accuracy of their depictions of reality, aligning with the first aspect outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). In adherence to the second dimension, readers can trace the paper's development steps outlined in the methodology section, which will further be elaborate on in the subsequent discussion on transferability.

The criterion of transferability pertains to the extent to which the study's results and findings can be applied to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As per the authors' perspective, providing detailed descriptions of each stage of the research process enhances the potential for transferability of findings. For this study, transferability is ensured by providing comprehensive explanations of the study's setting and methodology, facilitating the application of results to various contexts (Bryman, 2021). Through detailed clarification of its contextual framework and research methodology, the study enhances its applicability to diverse settings. Within the methodology section, readers are systematically led through each undertaken step, along with the underlying rationale. This structured approach ensures coherence and transparency in the research process.

Dependability, similar to reliability in quantitative research (Bryman, 2018), is established through comprehensive descriptions of the research process. This is achieved by providing detailed accounts of each phase, including the formulation of research questions, the selection of interviewees, and methodological choices for analysis. Given the research approach of this paper, prioritising transparency in the study becomes crucial, to make sure that the results are seen as believable. Transparency facilitates the evaluation process, thereby bolstering the credibility and reliability of the study's findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, as stated above, readers can thoroughly track the progression of this paper.

By acting with integrity and objectivity, the researchers have ensured conformability without allowing personal biases to consciously influence the process. Precautions have been taken to minimise the risk for bias, although eliminating all forms of subjectivity is challenging in qualitative research (Bryman, 2018) and it is imperative to perceive this aspect not as a detriment but rather as an inherent strength within qualitative research, as emphasised by Söderbom and Ulvenblad (2016).

4.4 Ethical Considerations

In research conducted through interviews, several ethical issues emerge, particularly concerning the inherent challenges of exploring individuals' private lives and subsequently presenting this information to the public, according to Kvale och Brinkmann (2021). These ethical considerations penetrate the entire research process, extending beyond participant interactions to encompass every facet of the study. Given this, it is imperative to emphasise the necessity of proactively addressing these issues from the outset. Four primary areas where ethical issues commonly surface include: obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, considering consequences for participants, and the researcher's role. The authors continue by recommending that these issues be outlined in an ethical protocol to ensure adherence to ethical guidelines throughout the research.

To establish a comprehensive understanding and mutual agreement regarding the research parameters, a pre-interview discussion was initiated with each participant. During this

conversation, participants were verbally engaged to confirm their acknowledgment and agreement with the research terms and conditions, as advocated by Kvale and Brinkmann (2021). These discussions encompassed a clarification of the overarching objectives of the study, along with an exploration of potential risks and issues that might emerge for the participants. Furthermore, participants were reminded of the voluntary nature of their involvement and assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without incurring any adverse repercussions.

Emphasis was placed on safeguarding the anonymity of participants throughout the research process. Participants were reassured that measures would be taken to ensure that no identifying information would be revealed or shared with anyone outside of the research team. Furthermore, discussions were held regarding the handling of recorded and transcribed materials. Participants were explicitly informed that only authorised individuals, such as the supervisor or examiner overseeing the study, would potentially have access to this information. When it comes to the role of the researcher, it is important to be mindful of how you might affect the interviewee in different ways, both negative and positive. By adhering to the ethical considerations above, the researcher can create the optimal environment for making the participants feel comfortable and protected in their participation.

5 Findings & Analysis

In this chapter, the collected data is analysed to answer the research question: Why do individuals discontinue their ethical consumption behaviours? While Sun's framework provides valuable insights, it was found to be insufficient in certain instances to fully encompass the breadth and depth of the empirical material. Consequently, additional sources of information have been integrated to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the data, aligning with the exploratory approach of this paper. The initial section of this chapter (5.1) focuses on analysing the empirical material through Sun's framework. To enhance clarity and facilitate comprehension this section is subdivided into distinct headings corresponding to the various components of the framework. Not all aspects of the interviewees' experiences could be analysed using Sun's framework, therefore, the subsequent section (5.2) will incorporate supplementary theoretical concepts to better analyse the material.

The interviews yielded a wealth of information spanning various areas, not all of which could be included in this paper. The reasons why participants initially engaged in ethical consumption were diverse, but some common themes emerged. Participants expressed various concerns that influenced their ethical consumption behaviours. Environmental concerns led some to avoid flying, while compassion for animal welfare and environmental issues prompted others to abstain from eating meat. Additionally, a heightened awareness of social issues, such as poor working conditions, motivated some participants to shop second-hand. The extent to which participants had discontinued their ethical consumption varied significantly. Some returned to their previous habits more than others, while some reported a decrease that was less pronounced compared to others. As previously stated, the emphasis was not on quantifying the extent to which participants reduced their ethical consumption. Rather, the focus was on their personal experiences and how they navigated their journey. For

many, ethical consumption remained a significant aspect of their lives despite not adhering to it as strictly as before.

5.1 Analysing the Cessation of Ethical Consumption Through Sun's Framework

By looking through the lens of Sun's (2019) framework, several aspects of the cessation of ethical consumption practices have been elucidated. Certain components emerged as more prominent and were subjected to thorough analysis, varying depending on the interviewees and their unique experiences. This variability aligns with Sun's assertion that the model lacks linearity and does not comprehensively cover every aspect at all times. The interviews thus highlight the flexibility and contextual nature of Sun's framework, illustrating how different facets of ethical consumption can assume varying degrees of significance based on individual perspectives and experiences.

5.1.1 Attitude

One of the key findings derived from the interviews revealed a noticeable shift in the participants' attitudes, potentially resulting in a re-prioritization of their ethical behaviours. Within this shift, a prevalent trend emerged wherein many participants demonstrated a tendency to prioritise their individual needs over broader societal considerations.

"I can put it this way, I went from being very environmentally conscious and living sustainably, which I partly try to do today, but not in the same way. Today, I would have flown to Stavanger instead of taking the bus. I can not do it anymore. It takes more energy than it gives." - Respondent 11

The respondent also conveyed feelings of annoyance, expressing that the effort invested no longer appeared to be worthwhile. They likened themselves to the perpetually needy friend whose distinct requirements frequently hindered full engagement in various activities.

Similarly, R4 conveyed a sense of doubt, indicating a belief that their ethical endeavours would have little impact on the broader world. This led them to question the purpose of persisting in their efforts. Moreover, they voiced a feeling of powerlessness in their ability to influence others' behaviours, further diminishing their motivation. As a result, they found themselves more inclined to prioritise immediate gratification, maintaining their usual travel habits and continuing to consume meat. Drawing on Sun's (2019) concept of attitude, this underscores the critical role of the importance of individuals assessing the ramifications of their choices among various alternatives, taking into account not only personal implications but also broader societal consequences. In this scenario, both R11 and R4 showcased a discernible realignment of their priorities, placing greater emphasis on their personal outcomes rather than considering broader societal implications. This transition signifies a shift towards prioritising individual interests and aspirations, departing from a previous focus on collective or societal welfare.

This change in attitude often originated from feelings of exclusion or exhaustion resulting from the challenges of making ethical choices. When discussing their previously more ethical diet, R3 highlighted that they have incorporated fish into their diet during social gatherings, such as dinners with friends or family, as consistently resisting non-vegetarian options can prove to be quite challenging. They mentioned that this adjustment has significantly eased their daily life. Similarly, R4 acknowledged their awareness of the adverse effects and environmental implications associated with meat consumption. Despite this awareness, they admitted to struggling with maintaining a vegetarian diet, now prioritising taste and convenience over the ethical considerations of meat consumption. Another aspect was mentioned by respondent 10, who noted a relaxation in their approach to making ethical decisions attributed to insufficient support from their surroundings or society, consequently prompting a shift in attitude towards their behaviour. R10 and R4's experiences underscore the critical role of societal support in upholding ethical behaviour, emphasising the external constraints they face. R10's emphasis on societal support draws attention to the influential societal structures and norms that shape the perceived ability of making ethically sound choices.

R1 offered insights into their approach to purchasing beauty products with questionable ethical standards. Despite acknowledging the negative social sustainability implications of buying inexpensive clothing and beauty items, R1 now places a higher priority on their appearance. They expressed challenges in maintaining a certain standard in their current life circumstances without negatively impacting others through their purchases. The respondent reflected on this behaviour and said that they might just be more selfish today, thereby showing how their priorities have changed. Furthermore, R1 discussed changes in their dietary habits, transitioning from a strict vegan diet to a more pescetarian approach. Despite this shift, they remain acutely aware of the unethical treatment of animals in the food industry. However, R1 appears to have found a better balance in their current diet. These observations align with Sun's (2019) assertion that consumers inclined towards ethical choices undergo continuous evaluation and reevaluation of their behaviours, particularly regarding their impact on others. R1's experiences highlight the dynamic nature of ethical consumption practices and the complex interplay between personal values, societal pressures, and individual circumstances.

5.1.2 Subjective Norm

Several respondents offered valuable insights into the influence of their social environment on their ethical consumption practices. A compelling illustration of this phenomenon emerges from the experiences of Respondent 8. Having been raised in a context and surrounding that embraced vegetarianism, R8 felt a strong inclination to conform to these norms. However, upon relocating to a different country with divergent social customs, R8 encountered significant challenges in maintaining their vegetarian lifestyle. In this new cultural context where vegetarianism was less prevalent, R8 struggled to uphold their previously ethical behaviour. Similarly, Respondent 5 shed light on the impact of their social circle on their dietary choices. They emphasised how their peer group played a crucial role in sustaining their commitment to vegetarianism.

“I have friends who had strong opinions about it, many were vegans and talked a lot about it. Not that many talk about it anymore.” - Respondent 5

As discussions surrounding vegetarianism waned within their social circle, the motivation for adhering to this dietary choice also diminished for R5. It is possible that the lowered social pressure to maintain this lifestyle contributed to their decision to stop following their previous diet. Similarly, R11 abandoned their vegetarian diet as societal attention surrounding the lifestyle diminished. These instances exemplify how individuals like R5 and R11, along with several other interviewees, may encounter challenges in sustaining their ethical behaviours when they diverge from prevailing norms or when the allure of certain behaviours diminishes. Sun (2019) acknowledges the significant influence of personal norms and societal values within a given social context on ethical consumption decisions. From the perspective of Sun (2019), a potential explanation for the cessation of certain ethical behaviours could be attributed to individuals placing a high value on positive affirmation from their social group. This inclination may lead individuals to mirror the behaviours of their surrounding circle, resulting in both the adoption and discontinuation of certain behaviours accordingly. Another respondent that discussed the expectations from their social surrounding was respondent 2, who said the following:

“It feels like if you claim to be a sustainable consumer, you have to be well-informed, which makes it energy-consuming to maintain that level. Also, to avoid being criticised by others or feeling guilty, the boundary is pushed instead towards being one of those who just do not care at all.” - Respondent 2

Based on the sentiments expressed by the respondent above, it is evident how societal expectations and pressures can shape ethical consumption behaviour. The observation can be analysed through the impact of social norms on ethical behaviour, as emphasised by Sun (2019). Sun's framework integrates the role of societal and structural influences in norms, including societal expectations, in shaping ethical behaviour. R2 expressed the feeling that being identified as an ethical consumer comes with certain expectations from one's environment, which in turn compels the respondent to stay well-informed and consistently make ethically sound choices to evade criticism. This expectation, as explained by the respondent, can be emotionally draining and demand considerable energy to sustain. To avoid this criticism and the fear of not meeting certain expectations, R2 suggests that it might be easier to disengage entirely to avoid these burdens. Respondent 2's insights illuminate the

influence of societal expectations and pressures on ethical consumption behaviours. They highlight the exhausting nature of adhering to ethical norms, driven by a fear of criticism and the weight of meeting societal expectations. While structural influences may not always be readily apparent, situations like these offer glimpses of their underlying presence and impact.

Respondent 2 also elaborated on another instance where external expectations significantly impacted their consumption patterns. Upon starting university, R2 aimed to shape their identity in line with the perceived expectations of a psychology student, prompting adjustments in their consumption habits to align with this identity. However, as R2's confidence grew, they gradually felt less obliged to adhere to a specific framework, ultimately leading to a departure from ethical consumption practices. As outlined by Sun, an individual's normative beliefs play a significant role in shaping their behavioural intentions, particularly when there's a strong inclination to conform to social norms. This principle might be exemplified in the case of R2, where a growing sense of self-assurance diminished the need to conform to a particular norm. This transition ultimately led to the development of a distinct identity marked by consumption patterns that diverged from ethical considerations. As R2 gained confidence in their own values and beliefs, they felt empowered to make choices that reflected their individual preferences rather than conforming to external expectations.

Below, respondent 1 also offers insight into the complexities of ethical consumption by reflecting on the challenges of observing others prioritise personal desires over ethical considerations.

“It can be difficult to see others have a really nice home where they have not cared about second-hand or environmentally friendly options at all, people who buy new clothes and shoes every year and who travel. Ethical consumption does not necessarily have to lead to a worse quality of life, but I still feel when you look around and see others who only prioritise themselves and what they want, it can sting.” - Respondent 1

Respondent 1's sentiment encapsulates the intricate conflict between the instant gratification derived from engaging in unsustainable and unethical consumption practices and the potential long-term advantages associated with ethical consumption behaviours. Their perspective

highlights the nuanced balance individuals must strike between personal satisfaction and societal responsibility. Likewise, both R4 and R11 articulated a similar sentiment, expressing their reluctance to abstain from the enjoyment of consuming meat for the greater societal good. Despite acknowledging the ethical implications of their dietary choices, the allure of taste and satisfaction outweighed their commitment to ethical consumption practices. Both respondent 4 and respondent 5 expressed similar thoughts on their, today, less ethical consumption:

"It feels good to buy new things, and you get a kick out of consuming, and it is a challenge to give it up. After all, you live in a society that screams at you to consume." - Respondent 4

"You feel tempted, society tries to lure us into shopping unethically." - Respondent 5

Both respondents exhibit a profound awareness of the inherent clash between their aspiration for ethical living and the pressures they feel as consumers in today's society. They are both conscious of the myriad challenges posed by this discrepancy in their lives. This awareness, viewed through Sun's perspective on the impact of societal norms, highlights the persistent struggle to reconcile personal values with external demands. This, along with insights from other respondents, underscores the intricate interplay between ethical aspirations and the practical constraints of daily life. It emphasises how societal pressures can frequently undermine individuals' efforts to maintain their personal ethical standards.

5.1.3 Confidence Level

Numerous respondents expressed doubts about their ability to maintain consistent ethical behaviour given their current circumstances, signalling a growing sense of uncertainty. This sentiment is echoed by several participants who grappled with the challenge of sustaining ethical practices, shedding light on the complexities of integrating these principles into their daily lives. Participant 1 articulated:

"I cannot reduce my impact to zero and hyper-focus on different areas (...) It does not feel like a path towards a sustainable lifestyle in the long run." - Respondent 1

Similarly, Respondent 3 elaborated on the challenges they face in maintaining their ethical standards amidst the constraints of time and energy. They expressed a lingering aspiration to adhere to their ethical principles, as they once did, yet find themselves grappling with the realities of their current circumstances. R3 highlighted the considerable effort and commitment required to sustain multiple ethical behaviours concurrently, which they are currently lacking. As Sun (2019) emphasises, individuals who lack confidence in their abilities to carry out certain behaviours are more likely to struggle to translate their desires into actions, which appears to be the case for some of the respondents. Additionally, R8 does not believe in their ability to manage multiple focus areas simultaneously. They have acknowledged the practicality of concentrating on one area at a time, recognizing the overwhelming nature of juggling multiple priorities simultaneously, mirroring a lack of confidence and said:

"It is a matter of focusing on one area at a time because trying to do everything simultaneously feels difficult. Sometimes you are focused on one area, and other times on another." - Respondent 8

Another area where respondents revealed challenges and a diminished ability to maintain ethical behaviours was in various social settings. During a discussion about their previous exchange semester in a foreign country, R1 mentioned that if they made new friends, they would prefer not to decline food when invited to people's homes. This illustrates their anticipation of encountering challenges with their diet during certain situations. Similarly, as previously noted, R10 said that they made the decision some time ago to incorporate seafood into their previously vegetarian diet, partly to facilitate adaptation to work-related situations. Both of the respondents express, in these situations, low confidence when it comes to upholding their diet, mostly due to social pressures of different kinds. As Sun (2019) suggests, this tendency can result in a misalignment between attitudes and actions. Moreover, R3 conveyed concerns about potentially inconveniencing others and being perceived as burdensome in social settings if they were to insist on a vegan diet, ultimately causing them to abandon this commitment. This also indicates that the respondent is aware of their limitations in maintaining their dietary preferences.

Some interviewees grappled with a specific internal conflict concerning their ethical commitment. They harboured doubts regarding their capacity to effect change and lacked optimism about the future given the current rate of progress. This line of thinking led many participants to question the significance of their efforts to effect change in the world, resulting in decreased motivation and diminished confidence in their abilities. R3 expressed the need for a significant societal shift to support individuals striving to make more ethical choices. The respondent conveyed the difficulty of making necessary sacrifices, especially when they must be maintained as a constant struggle. Likewise, P10 remarked on their desire for broader societal changes to return to their previously more ethical behaviours, as the current situation made it challenging to sustain these practices independently. They further highlighted that the societal environment, characterised by an inability to facilitate better choices, inherently undermines efforts to sustain ethical behaviours. None of the interviewees explicitly asserted that achieving ethical living in today's world is entirely unattainable. However, most highlighted the substantial sacrifices necessary to pursue such a lifestyle and many emphasised the difficulty of navigating this path independently, given the scarcity of societal support systems for ethical living.

In some instances, it was possible to trace the origins of the interviewees' lack of confidence. For example, P1 recently saw a news report indicating that organic eggs contained a non-degradable chemical. This revelation intensified their feeling of lacking reliable information and control, even when trying to purchase what they believed were ethical products. The respondent said:

"I feel that I have very little control over a product's value chain. An independent body certifying it as ethical does say something which is better than nothing, but I can not say that I trust it completely. I need to know more details to do that." - Respondent 1

This aligns closely with Sun's first rationale for consumers' lack of confidence, which is often grounded in inadequate information. As illustrated by R1's experience, the absence of reliable and transparent data can cause uncertainty and undermine one's ability to make informed choices. Additionally, Respondent 4 underscored the necessity of having a dependable

mechanism to authenticate the accuracy of information and claims propagated by ethical brands. Such a verification system could bolster consumers' commitment to sustaining ethical purchasing patterns by instilling confidence that their actions indeed contribute to meaningful change. However, as it stands presently, this assurance remains elusive, leaving consumers grappling with uncertainty and doubt regarding the efficacy of their ethical undertakings.

Some of the participants also conveyed feelings of distrust regarding the information provided by companies, leading to a reduction in their purchases of ethical products or a complete cessation of such purchases. Sun attributes the third reason for this lack of confidence to consumers' scepticism and cynicism towards the business world in general, which results in distrust and critical attitudes towards ethical companies and their products. While Sun's theory addresses this aspect, it does not fully encapsulate the complexities expressed by the interviews, thus hindering a deeper analysis. Therefore, this aspect of Sun's theory will be revisited in a later paragraph (5.2.2), where it will be combined with other sources of information to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the subject's full complexity.

5.1.4 Moral Identity

During R4 and R11's teenage years, maintaining a vegetarian diet served as a symbol of ethical consumption and a fundamental aspect of their self-identities. For R4, being vegetarian transcended mere dietary choices, it symbolised identity and was closely intertwined with their sense of belonging in school. Respondent 4 expressed that being vegetarian was a strong identity marker, since it somehow clearly defines who you are and sends certain signals towards others. Similarly, R11 emphasised the important role of their vegetarian diet in shaping their identity during adolescence. Drawing from Sun's (2019) element of moral identity, which underscores the importance of self-identity in ethical consumption, R4 and R11 shed light on the important role that social belonging can have when it comes to upholding ethical behaviour.

Furthermore, as R11 and R4 progressed through life, their ethical dietary practices underwent transformation, potentially influenced by changes in their social circles as they grew older. However, despite this shift in behaviour, both participants expressed a sense of regret and

moral discord. R4 openly acknowledged feeling morally conflicted by their decision to deviate from ethical dietary practices, while R11 conveyed a deep sadness at the loss of their once-proud ethical identity, which they had previously proudly displayed to others. Sun (2019) describes that moral intention is influenced by a combination of factors, including confidence levels, attitude, subjective norm, and behavioural control, and does not occur in isolation. The respondents' experiences may reflect a discrepancy between their moral beliefs and other influencing factors, offering an explanation for their feelings of moral misalignment.

As noted, several interviewees exhibited a strong moral commitment and passion for making the best possible ethical and sustainable choices, despite a decrease in their ethical consumption behaviour. When talking about how much difference one's actions can make, R10 said:

"I want to be able to look at myself in the mirror. And I want to be able to talk to my children, and then my grandchildren, and say that once I understood how serious it was, I at least tried to do what I could." - Respondent 10

Even so, R10 indicated that their motivation had greatly diminished, despite maintaining a strong moral compass, primarily due to the lack of societal change and supportive initiatives. Similarly, Respondent 3 expressed a strong commitment to ethical, environmental and social values, indicating a sincere desire to uphold them. Nonetheless, they acknowledged that despite their best intentions, they struggle to maintain these standards as they would like. Sun's theory suggests that individuals who strongly self-identify with moral values and believe in virtues prioritise ethical considerations in their purchasing decisions. While many participants in the study conveyed what could be perceived as high moral values, they faced challenges in achieving their desired level of ethical behaviour.

5.2 Expanding the Analysis Beyond Sun's Framework

Examining the empirical data through the lens of Sun's (2019) theory has yielded valuable insights into specific topics obtained from the interviews. However, as mentioned, it falls short of fully elucidating the intricate landscape of ethical consumption. The exploratory nature of this research has facilitated the identification and exploration of additional factors influencing the discontinuation of ethical consumption behaviours. In the subsequent section of the analysis, new literature will be incorporated to enhance and deepen the understanding of these multifaceted dynamics. Both sections of this analysis comprise a synthesis of new sources and in combination with some aspects of Sun's framework.

5.2.1 Conflicting Values and Desires

One prominent topic which was frequently discussed among the interviews was the challenge of navigating conflicting values and desires within ethical consumption and lifestyle choices. While Sun (2019) touches upon this aspect through the concept of perceived behavioural control, the theory does not extensively explore the complexities of balancing different options against each other. Therefore, this dimension requires supplementation with additional research and theory to provide a more comprehensive explanation.

Many of the respondents struggled to uphold their ethical consumption due to lack of time and due to financial limitations. For instance, Respondent 7 expressed a strong desire to make informed and ethical choices but highlighted the difficulties posed by their status as a student, which necessitated managing consumption on a tight budget. These economic limitations significantly challenged R7's ability to maintain their desired ethical consumption patterns. Similarly, Respondent 2 illustrated how time constraints and poor planning often took precedence over ethical considerations, leading to the prioritisation of convenience over ethical behaviour during purchases. This respondent emphasised that the demands of a busy schedule frequently overshadowed their commitment to ethical consumption. In a similar vein, Respondent 3 highlighted the impact of time pressure and exhaustion, which led to spontaneous, less-considered purchases and neglecting recycling—behaviours that they would

otherwise uphold. Viewed through Sun's theory (2019), this can be interpreted as the respondents lacking the necessary resources, in these cases finances and time, to carry out a behaviour, thereby resulting in non-engagement. However, this might also involve more intricate dimensions and can be viewed from a perspective of choosing between different conflicting desires. On one hand, there is the desire to be ethical, but on the other hand, there is the pursuit of personal desires and the need to fulfil one's needs.

“I believe everyone feels that economic reasons stand in the way. For example, when it comes to flying or taking the train, one knows that flying is both faster and cheaper. And the same goes for clothes. Second hand is cheap, but it is also time-consuming to go through all the clothes, which is harder than going to a store with a style one knows is modern and people find attractive. And if, for example, one wants to shop on sites where the clothes are made with good quality, it is very expensive.” - Respondent 8

Respondent 8 provides a compelling illustration of the internal conflict between competing desires, such as the aspiration to uphold ethical practices and the simultaneous need to make choices that are convenient and less time-consuming. This balancing act highlights the complexity where individuals often find themselves at the crossroads of moral values and practical considerations. The concept of motives, as elucidated by Gherasim and Gherasim (2020), delves into the fundamental reasons that guide individuals towards specific actions. In the context of purchasing decisions, motives shed light on why consumers select particular products over others. Within the framework of motives lay the notion of conflicting motivations, as outlined by Baker et al. (2014). These conflicts arise when individuals are confronted with competing desires that are inherently incompatible with each other, as illustrated by respondent 8.

Respondent 6 conveyed frustration regarding the continuous effort required to locate suitable and satisfying alternatives while adhering to a vegan diet. They expressed that, despite finding alternatives, these options often lacked appeal. This sentiment was echoed by several other respondents who shared concerns about the limited availability of vegan alternatives in stores or restaurants. Such constraints necessitate individuals to weigh the trade-offs and implications of pursuing different goals simultaneously, which might lead to a reassessment of

their choices in light of practical challenges, as is the case for respondent 6. This cognitive evaluation, as described by Freestone and McGoldrick (2008), involves a systematic assessment of the benefits and costs associated with various purchasing options. Through this deliberative process, consumers meticulously evaluate and compare alternatives before arriving at a final decision. Many respondents in this study have thereby started to prioritise aspects such as time and energy as well as good taste over constantly struggling with making ethical choices.

5.2.2 Negative Feelings Towards Ethical Claims

Another prevalent theme observed in the interviews revolved around consumers' negative feelings and distrust towards companies' ethical claims. Sun's framework addresses certain aspects of this phenomenon, however, it does so in a somewhat limited manner.

R7 expressed a loss of trust in brands' environmental claims after becoming more aware of greenwashing tactics. Consequently, they now prioritise products that align with their current lifestyle and financial constraints, aiming to avoid contributing to what they perceive as hypocritical. Several other respondents shared similar negative experiences and expressed doubts regarding companies' ethical and environmental efforts. It is plausible that the distrust individuals harbour towards brands and companies, stemming from various reasons depending on the interviewee, may lead them to cease purchasing from these sources altogether.

“It is so hard to validify or validate whether those claims are true or not. Additionally, it is not within my power to check, I do not have the resources nor the information (...) which is needed to know for certain if something is or is not sustainable. Therefore my judgement of these products has sort of been placed on the back burner and I care a lot less now.” -

Respondent 7

R4 also mentioned that their negative feelings towards brands have led to a reluctance to pay premium prices for sustainably labelled products, as they feel discouraged by the belief that it ultimately does not make a difference. The mistrust of marketing efforts can be understood

through Thomas and Kureshi (2020) who mention that there has been a notable rise in the number of consumers expressing distrust towards marketers' actions. Furthermore, Morel and Pruyn (2003) argue that contemporary consumers have become more critical and self-aware, possessing what is termed as "persuasion knowledge," which enables them to understand marketing tactics and adopt a sceptical stance. Multiple respondents conveyed their ability to discern that companies' claims were primarily motivated by economic incentives rather than genuine concern for social or environmental issues. This observation resonates with Sun's (2019) assertion that such negative perceptions may stem from consumers distrusting the motives and true commitment of companies. Sun further emphasises that credibility is an important aspect to whether consumers trust brands' claims and is an important aspect of shaping consumer perceptions in ethical consumption.

"It looks very good when companies claim to be sustainable. There was a time when many brands claimed to be ecological and then they were not (...) Over time, one has realised the need to be critical. It is difficult to know what is true and not when it is trendy." -

Respondent 2

"... is the company that works the most on being climate-smart and all that, but it really feels like a joke, because they still manufacture in sweatshops in China and Bangladesh." -

Respondent 10

Additionally, R1 mentioned that due to their negative attitude, they have occasionally overlooked the ethical brands, recognizing this approach may not be the most effective tactic, a sentiment shared with R4 who above expressed not wanting to buy expensive ethical products, since they probably do not make any difference after all. R1 acknowledged that while some ethical brands may fall short, others might still be preferable to those that make no claims regarding ethical practices at all. According to Ulusoy and Baretta (2016), the expressed doubt from many consumers about ethical brands' green claims, lead to scepticism about the true benefits of these products. The experience of R1 and R4, among others, can further be understood through the findings of Morel and Pruyn (2003) who suggest that the negative impact of greenwashing can lead consumers to distrust the entire business sector, which in extension can cause them to overlook genuinely ethical brands. Examining the

respondents' statements through the lens of Morel and Pruyn (2003), it becomes clear that the distrust some consumers harbour can significantly impede their full engagement with market initiatives.

While being suspicious can protect consumers from falling for deceptive marketing practices, it also presents challenges by potentially causing them to overlook genuinely beneficial choices and opportunities. Much like the statement above from respondent 7 (page 41), respondent 3 also expressed strong scepticism toward brands' ethical and sustainable claims, having observed numerous instances of greenwashing had ultimately led to a loss of trust in most brands. This sentiment is echoed by Farooq and Wicaksono (2021), who assert that scepticism often arises from past instances of greenwashing, where companies have exaggerated their environmental efforts. Additionally, Ulusoy & Beretta (2016) underscore that scepticism also arises from doubts regarding the authenticity of eco-friendly labels and certifications, a concern voiced by R2 when expressing their unease. Ulusoy & Beretta further highlight how these labels are occasionally perceived as mere marketing tactics rather than genuine indicators of environmental responsibility.

In line with the above reasoning, both R3 and R6 believe that most companies engage in these practices primarily to maximise profits and gain a better image. Moreover, Participant 3 conveyed that constantly feeling tricked diminishes the motivation for ethical consumption.

"I believe it undermines the drive and energy needed to uphold one's ideals and goals when one constantly feels manipulated." - Respondent 3

Another interesting perspective shared by R4 was the clash between the desire to consume more ethically and support brands that work toward this goal, while also expressing strong irritation toward sustainable brands that aggressively promote their products and contributing to over consumption. R4 emphasised the challenge of balancing ethical consumption with discouraging excessive consumerism. This is similar to the paradox that Farooq and Wicaksono (2021) mentions, that consumers sometimes tend to be more negative when brands explicitly call themselves green or similar.

6 Discussion

This chapter will delve into the principal findings of this research, contextualising them within the existing body of knowledge on ethical consumption. It will commence with a discussion of the findings, elucidating the various reasons contributing to the cessation of ethical behaviour among the interviewees. The discussion of the findings will incorporate previous literature to determine whether our results align with or diverge from existing research. Following this, the chapter will conclude with a discussion regarding the implications of these findings.

6.1 Lack of resources

The findings shed light on a significant factor driving individuals to abandon ethical consumption practices: the perceived scarcity of essential resources, one being financial limitations. Many respondents expressed challenges in sustaining their ethical practices due to insufficient economic means. Some participants reflected on their past efforts to allocate more funds towards ethical consumption. However, as time progressed, they found that the expenses associated with maintaining these practices became increasingly taxing. Moreover, changes in one's financial situation, such as becoming a student and thereby suddenly having an even more limited economy makes it even more difficult to maintain the desired standard. These findings resonate with Carrigan and Attallas (2001) assertion that consumers are more inclined to purchase ethical products when they do not have to compromise on price. The high prices associated with ethical consumption did not initially deter the participants in this study. However, over time, these costs emerged as a significant factor preventing the sustained practice of ethical consumption.

Similarly, the constraints of time and energy, essential resources for maintaining ethical consumption practices, have emerged as significant challenges for many participants. Numerous respondents reported that the process of sourcing ethical products is both exhausting and time-consuming. Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the quality and availability of ethical products, for example in supermarkets, coffee shops, restaurants and second-hand stores. They also said that shopping for second-hand items often requires more effort than purchasing new items from conventional retailers. Likewise, individuals attempting to adhere to vegetarian or vegan diets frequently found themselves in a constant search for substitute products, which often resulted in less-than-satisfactory options. These findings resonate with Nicholls and Lee (2006), who identified the limited availability of suitable products as an obstacle to ethical consumption. Several respondents also highlighted the difficulty of juggling multiple priorities, noting the substantial time and energy required to maintain ethical behaviour across different domains. In this context, these factors have not served as initial barriers to ethical consumption but have significantly contributed to its cessation over time.

It also became evident that a lack of information negatively impacted the ethical consumption practices of some respondents. Several participants expressed a desire for more comprehensive and verifiable information, believing that access to such information would increase their motivation to persist in making ethical purchases. Bray et al. (2011) suggest that consumers require sufficient information to make informed ethical choices. While they emphasise the need for information to engage in ethical consumption, the findings of this study suggest that the need extends further. For the participants in this study, the lack of information was more about ensuring that their actions could make a tangible impact, which enhances the findings of Bray et al. by highlighting the importance of verifying the information to be able to sustain, and in their case engage, in ethical consumption.

6.2 Changing Priorities

The findings show that personal desires outweighed the commitment to ethical practices for many individuals. While many individuals aspired to do the right choice a significant number expressed a change in their priorities that affected their ethical consumption, towards personal satisfaction over ethical considerations. This change was often driven by a reluctance to personal sacrifice for ethical principles, as doing so would mean missing out on various life experiences. For some individuals, the sacrifice associated with ethical consumption involved refraining from meat, fish and dairy, food they enjoyed and considered essential for maintaining a balanced diet. Others encountered difficulties in upholding ethical practices within social settings, where their inability to consume the same foods as their colleagues posed unwanted social challenges and complicated interpersonal interactions. Many respondents also highlighted the challenge of not being able to consume the products they desired, whether due to personal satisfaction, needs, or the desire to maintain a certain image.

These reasons led to individuals now prioritising activities such as enjoying good food, travelling, and investing in their appearance over maintaining ethical consumption practices and considering the ethical implications of these choices. In alignment with Moisander's (2007) insights into the motivations of green consumers facing complex situations, this study's findings reveal that respondents in this case similarly grappled with the tension between their short-term desires and their aspirations to be ethical consumers. Moisander elucidates that while individuals may aspire to contribute to long-term environmental preservation through ethical consumption, they are also enticed by immediate gratification in the form of convenience, luxury, and social acceptance. This conflict highlights the delicate balance between these two competing outcomes. However, despite their initial intentions, the pursuit of immediate personal satisfaction often overshadowed the respondents' commitment to ethical consumption practices, ultimately leading to a cessation of such practices.

6.3 Identity formation & Social Belonging

Another noteworthy discovery was the important influence of individuals' social environments in both shaping and challenging ethical practices. While this aspect has received limited attention in prior literature, it emerged more prominently in this study than expected. Previous research has tended to emphasise theoretical or broad perspectives rather than delving into the lived experiences of individuals actively involved in ethical consumption, thus overlooking this crucial perspective and how they experience societal influences as ethical consumers. The influence of social norms was evident in several scenarios. Respondents shared their experiences of relocating and integrating into new environments, where exposure to diverse social norms prompted them to adjust their behaviour to better align with prevailing standards. Additionally, as respondents transitioned into adulthood and distanced themselves from friendships associated with an ethical identity, the shift in social influences often resulted in a decreased emphasis on ethical practices. In their quest for acceptance and a sense of belonging within their social circles, individuals often conformed to less ethical behaviours to avoid standing out, which, for many, simplified their day-to-day lives. From the interviewees' responses, one could also identify a, probably unconscious, process, wherein the identities of the interviewees were constantly shaped and reshaped through interaction with their social environment, which, for many, both initiated and influenced their decision not to continue with this behaviour. This corresponds with Khan and Abbas's (2022) assertion that norms exert considerable influence over consumption behaviours, particularly in the context of ethical consumption.

Morality also emerged as a significant theme in these findings, frequently addressed by the respondents. Despite some cessation of ethical practices, many still showed to have a strong commitment to morality, by expressing a strong desire to contribute to a better world and make a positive impact through their consumption choices. This underscores the integral role morality plays in shaping their sense of self and guiding their actions. This aligns with Kozinets and Handelman's (1998) perspective, which argues that ethical considerations are deeply integrated into individual morality and self-identity. They suggest that ethical consumption allows individuals to achieve "moral self-realisation," making morality an

intrinsic part of who they are. Bray et al. (2011) propose that individuals with strong ethical judgments are more likely to adhere to their ethical principles, resulting in higher levels of ethical consumption. The findings of this study neither contradict nor align with this reasoning, as no comparisons have been made regarding the extent of moral values. However, there are few indications suggesting that the moral values of the participants have diminished alongside their ethical behaviours. In fact, most of them still expressed significant concern about ethical issues.

6.4 Consumer Scepticism

As highlighted in the analysis, consumer scepticism initially did not emerge prominently at the outset of the study. Yet, as the research unfolded, it became evident as a significant factor contributing to the cessation of ethical consumption practices. While studies like Bray et al. (2011) propose that consumers may hesitate to engage in ethical consumption due to scepticism surrounding claims about ethical products and practices, it remained uncertain whether this scepticism persisted among individuals who chose to embrace ethical consumption regardless of such concerns.

Many respondents articulated how their distrust towards companies has intensified over time, particularly as they became more aware of instances such as greenwashing or unethical treatment of workers. This heightened awareness seems to have grown stronger progressively and may not have been a factor when they initially began engaging in ethical consumption. However, as time progressed, they felt their efforts were perhaps misplaced and would not make a difference anyway. It appears that scepticism toward companies may not be the primary factor driving individuals to cease engaging in ethical consumption. However, it certainly plays a role as a contributing factor, which has been intensified alongside other issues and barriers encountered. These negative attitudes seem to, in some instances, stem from challenges related to the scarcity of information and the difficulty in verifying companies' claims, as previously discussed. Some respondents seem to indicate that they perhaps would be more inclined to overcome their scepticism if there were secure methods for

verifying the provided information. Therefore, there seems to be a need to solve this issue and find a tool that can help consumers in the future.

6.5 Societal & Structural Challenges

Finally, the findings of this paper suggest that one of the major factors, influencing all of the already discussed issues to varying degrees, is related to societal and structural challenges. One notable challenge with this aspect is the inherent invisibility of structures, making it difficult to bring them into focus. With this in mind, the authors of this paper strongly argue that traces of these challenges can be seen through the answers provided in the interviews. These challenges can be elucidated by contextualising the findings of this research within the critical perspectives and research of Carrington et al. (2016) and Coffin and Egan-Wyer (2022), shedding light on and enhancing our understanding of these complexities.

Utilising the perspective proposed by Carrington et al. (2016) on consumer responsabilization, which highlights the tendency to attribute blame to consumers, it becomes clear from the sentiments expressed by the interviewees that expecting consumers to shoulder this responsibility is inherently challenging and often unfeasible. Even individuals genuinely striving to instigate change frequently encounter limitations, partly due to systemic constraints. For the participants in this study, these obstacles have led to a decline or discontinuation of their ethical involvement in the market, echoing the observations of Carrington et al. (2016).

The clash between aspiration for ethical living and relations of contemporary society, as seen as a big issue for many respondents, reaffirms the statement elucidated by Coffin and Egan-Wyer (2022) regarding the intricate interplay between ethical consumption desires and the complexities of a capitalist society. Some interviewees expressed feeling compelled to consume to fulfil a certain identity and way of life, making it difficult to resist unethical consumption. This aligns with Coffin and Egan-Wyer's observation that the "cap" extends beyond market constraints to encompass internalised expectations, which resonates with the

experiences of many respondents, contributing to their struggle to maintain their desired ethical standards.

Through the lens of Coffin and Egan-Wyer's (2022) research, one can gain insight into the web of challenges that capitalism has woven, hindering individuals in their pursuit of ethical values, despite their sincere dedication, as is the case for the participants in this study. The capitalist environment often presents formidable obstacles, which collectively impede the ability to engage in ethical practices. In light of the findings of this paper, this suggests that the prevailing economic system not only shapes and hinders certain types of consumer behaviours, but also significantly influences the feasibility of ethical living, adding to the findings of Coffin and Egan-Wyer.

7 Conclusion

In this concluding section, the key findings from the analysis and discussion are summarised, addressing the research aim and question. Additionally, the contributions of this thesis will be discussed, including its theoretical and practical implications. Finally, the limitations of the study will be discussed, along with suggestions for future research.

7.1 Main Findings

The aim of this study was to deepen the understanding of ethical consumption by examining individuals who have both engaged in and subsequently reduced or ceased their ethical behaviours . Investigating the reasons behind these consumers' decisions to discontinue their ethical behaviours provides valuable insights into how ethical consumers navigate the market landscape, thereby contributing to the existing literature on ethical consumption. This has been achieved by addressing the research question:

Why do individuals discontinue their ethical consumption behaviours?

The reasons for the cessation of ethical consumption are complex and contextual, varying from person to person, and not every factor is relevant to every individual. While certain influences might strongly affect one person's decision to abandon ethical behaviours, they may be irrelevant to another, underscoring the personal and situational nature of ethical consumption. The main reasons that contribute to the cessation are the following: lack of resources, changing priorities, identity formation and social belonging, consumer scepticism, and finally, societal and structural challenges.

Throughout the paper, the necessity of integrating both individual and structural perspectives when examining ethical consumption has become evident, providing a more holistic understanding of the ethical consumer and, more specifically, why some individuals cease their ethical consumption practices.

7.2 Theoretical Contributions

The first contribution of this thesis lies in its unique integration of individual and structural factors, an approach rarely seen in ethical consumption literature. By employing Sun's theory, the thesis bridges insights from both mainstream marketing and critical marketing, effectively merging individual perspectives with societal-level analysis. This dual approach not only highlights the interplay between personal choices and broader societal influences but also provides a richer and more nuanced understanding of ethical consumption.

Secondly, this thesis makes a significant theoretical contribution by shedding light on a perspective that, to our knowledge, has been largely overlooked in the ethical consumption literature. Previous research has frequently centred on investigating the multitude of factors influencing consumers' decisions to engage in ethical consumption or not, (Eckhardt et al. 2010; Freestone & McGoldrick, 2008), rather than examining the experiences of individuals who both initiate and face challenges in maintaining these practices. This thesis fills a crucial gap by bringing forward the factors that lead to this cessation of ethical practices, thereby expanding the scope of existing research. This expanded perspective not only enriches the literature but can also lead to practical implications for fostering and sustaining ethical consumer behaviour.

Finally, despite the extensive research conducted on ethical consumption, much of it has heavily relied on the Theory of Planned Behavior model (Sun, 2019) to analyse and understand the ethical consumer. However, this thesis takes a departure from the conventional approach by embracing a newly developed alternative theoretical framework. This shift in perspective has unveiled novel insights and knowledge within the discipline. We argue that social belonging and identity formation, including the nuances of group affiliation and

adherence to societal norms, are integral components that exert a substantial influence. This is a dimension that, to our knowledge, has been inadequately addressed in previous research on ethical consumption, leaving a gap in the understanding of consumer behaviour in ethical contexts. By integrating this alternative framework, our thesis not only expands the theoretical landscape but also introduces innovative avenues for comprehending consumer behaviour in the realm of ethical consumption.

7.3 Practical Contributions

Our findings highlight the myriad challenges ethical consumers face in maintaining their practices, echoing the sentiments expressed in previous research (Carrigan et al. 2023). It becomes evident that consumers cannot navigate these hurdles alone but require support from a variety of sources to uphold their principles effectively. Given the current state of our society and the imperative for sustainable development across various domains (United Nations, n.d.), emphasising the significance of supporting and incentivizing ethical consumers to persist in making ethical choices can be viewed as a crucial societal contribution. Consequently, the practical implications of this research are predominantly targeted towards entities with the capacity to assist consumers in achieving their objectives, mainly companies, organisations or institutions within our society. These stakeholders must enhance the tools available to support and guide consumers, empowering them to translate their aspirations into reality.

There are various approaches to address this issue, one of which involves assisting consumers in verifying the ethical claims made by companies. Based on the findings, it is apparent that customers want to better be able to evaluate products and their sustainability claims effectively. One potential solution is the development of reliable apps or websites where consumers can search for companies or products and receive information from a trusted third party regarding their ethical business practices. Progress is already underway in this field, as evidenced by the recent adoption of EU regulations aimed at establishing a digital product passport by 2030. This initiative will enable consumers to access comprehensive information about various commodities and their life cycles (GS1 Sweden, n.d.).

The practical implications for companies are closely linked to the imminent introduction of the digital product passport. In order to remain relevant in an ever-evolving society, companies must prioritise sustainable and ethical practices to meet both regulatory requirements and changing consumer preferences. As demands for transparency continue to escalate, businesses offering ethical products should enhance their support for consumers in navigating ethical purchasing decisions. This could involve providing more comprehensive information on product packaging, empowering consumers to make well-informed choices. Furthermore, companies targeting conscientious consumers and seeking to facilitate ethical purchases can enhance their offerings both in physical stores and online platforms by effectively showcasing ethical products. By directly catering to consumers who prioritise ethical shopping, businesses can better serve this market segment.

7.4 Limitations & Further Research

As the focus has been primarily on understanding the reasons behind cessation, little attention has been given to developing strategies to address or mitigate them. Further studies have the potential to advance research within the field by assessing the efficacy of various strategies. Implementing such studies can deepen the understanding of behaviour mechanisms and aid in identifying effective approaches for fostering positive change. Another limitation arises from the reliance on interviewees' subjective retelling of the challenges they faced at a specific point in time. The interview method inherently lacks the capacity to directly observe these challenges and gain insights into experiences that individuals may not be able to recall. Thus, a prospective avenue for further research involves conducting longitudinal studies that observe the behaviours of ethical consumers over an extended period. By adopting this approach, researchers can gain insights into patterns and nuances that may not have been captured within the confines of our study. The final limitation pertains to the context in which this study has been carried out. Given the inherent complexity of human behaviour in ethical consumption, future research could explore other contexts where participants exhibit greater diversity in demographics, cultural backgrounds, economic status, and social capital. By adhering to this approach, researchers could enhance the understanding of ethical behaviour and its nuances across various societal contexts.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Introduction

1. Welcome and explain the purpose of this interview
2. Ensure ethical aspects
3. Tell me about yourself, basic demographic information

Ethical consumption

4. What is your experience with ethical consumption?
5. How did you practise ethical consumption?

Behaviour before

6. What was your motivation for engaging in ethical consumption?
7. Was there anything that you thought was challenging by being an ethical consumer?
8. How did you evaluate and choose between different products claiming to be ethical/environmentally friendly? Did you have a way of picking the right products

What has happened?

9. When did this behaviour change and why do you think?
10. How did it feel to change behaviour? Any emotions and experiences in particular that you have reflected on if you weigh before vs. after?

Behaviour after

11. What values are important to you in consumption today?
12. What do you look for now in products? How do you choose what to purchase?
13. Has anything changed in social settings or is it the same as earlier?
14. What are your reflections on your experiences and insights gained after the discontinuation of ethical consumption?

Concluding remarks

15. Is there anything you have reflected upon during this interview that you want to address?

Appendix B

Table of interviewees with respondents number and age.

Interviewee	Age
Respondent 1(R1)	28
Respondent 2 (R2)	26
Respondent 3 (R3)	59
Respondent 4 (R4)	28
Respondent 5 (R5)	26
Respondent 6 (R6)	26
Respondent 7 (R7)	22
Respondent 8 (R8)	32
Respondent 9 (R9)	25
Respondent 10 (R10)	57
Respondent 11 (R11)	26