

REVIEW ARTICLE

Consumer ethics: A review and research agenda

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Abstract

Consumer ethics continues to draw the attention of academicians and practitioners as a significant economic and social issue globally. Consumer ethics refers to moral principles that govern a consumer's behaviour. This literature review seeks to enrich the discourse on consumer ethics through a comprehensive and detailed review of 106 articles, covering 21 journals from 2010 to 2020. Through an examination of theories, contexts, characteristics, and methodologies used in consumer ethics research, our review (1) presents a comprehensive and up-to-date overview of the research in this field and (2) sets a future research agenda to spur scholarly research. We found studies have primarily relied on a single theoretical lens such as the theory of marketing ethics, planned behaviour, and neutralization theory. Further consumer ethics research focuses on advanced countries, with a narrow focus on developing countries. We have diagnosed the need to examine boundary conditions impacting consumer ethics. Finally, we provide actionable inputs to combat unethical consumer actions as well as promote ethical consumption.

KEYWORDS

consumer behaviour, consumer motivation, ethics

1 | INTRODUCTION

Consumer ethics is a research domain that has practical relevance globally, with its negative and positive influence not only on business organisations but also on society and the environment (Carrington et al., 2020; Vitell, 2015). In the service context, consumer misbehaviour impacts a firm's bottom line and the service experience of other consumers. Also, it has an infectious effect on other consumers' behaviour (Schaefer et al., 2016). On the positive side, consumers' ethical actions, such as buying fair trade products lead to conditions that encourage ethical consumption and foster quality of life for different stakeholders like producers, retailers, and other consumers within the system (Carrington et al., 2020; Geiger-Oneto & Arnould, 2011).

It is noteworthy, that ethics from a consumer's perspective did not receive much attention until the 1990s (Ozgen & Esiyok, 2020). Nonetheless, work on consumer ethics gained traction due to the realisations that (a) consumers are an indispensable part of the seller-buyer dyadic relationship and, (b) supporting a truly ethical

marketplace is crucial for taking the marketing transactions beyond short-term discrete exchanges (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002; Rao & Al-Wugayan, 2005). In this regard, a better understanding of consumer ethics can help practitioners devise strategies that curtail unethical practices, and promote ethical concern (Arli et al., 2019; Chatzidakis & Maclaran, 2020). As a result, long-lasting and mutually satisfying customer-manager relationships are achieved. Marketing ethics researchers have thus shown interest in examining consumer ethical beliefs (henceforth CEBs) and consumer actions due to their ethical implications (Bray et al., 2011; Schlegelmilch & Öberseder, 2010).

Despite the significant attention of both industry and academia, little is known about the current state of consumer ethics research. There are no recent reviews on this topic. The available reviews are either outdated (e.g., Vitell, 2003), or lack comprehensiveness by being selective (e.g., Vitell, 2015). Moreover, in a period spanning more than a decade and half after Vitell's (2003) review, research in this field has advanced to a new level. There has been a subtle shift in focus from the "dark side" (i.e., questionable consumer behaviour) to the "bright side" (i.e., ethical consumption) of consumer ethics.

Additionally, there has been a renewed focus on understanding the attitude-behaviour gap (Joshi & Rahman, 2015). This calls for a review to trace the research roadmap of consumer ethics and the avenues to advance this study area forward. Against this background, our review aims to provide a comprehensive and latest picture of consumer ethics research. To fulfil this, we employ Theory-Context-Characteristics-Methodology (TCCM) framework (Paul & Rosado-Serrano, 2019) which captures both theoretical and empirical dimensions of a research field. This review thus attempts to synthesise consumer ethics research in the last decade by synthesising studies related to unethical and ethical consumer actions. Specifically, our review sheds light on the theories, countries, constructs, and methods that have been put to use in studying consumer ethics. Thus, the present review synthesises research on ethically questionable behaviour along with ethical consumption and attitude-behaviour gap. In this way our review gives a more comprehensive and broader account of consumer ethics research as compared to Vitell's review, where primarily the focus was on ethically questionable behaviour.

Consumer ethics is defined as "the moral principles and standards that guide the behaviour of individuals as they obtain, use, and dispose of goods and services" (Muncy & Vitell, 1992, p. 298). Recently, Vitell (2015, p. 768) highlighted that "in their one-on-one dyadic relationships, consumers have a responsibility to act ethically which usually involves the obtaining and perhaps use of goods and services but could also involve disposal. We might call this responsibility as consumer ethics."

Extant literature has categorised consumer ethics into two broad streams (Fukukawa & Ennew, 2010; Singh et al., 2018). One set of studies deal with context-specific nonnormative behaviour such as shoplifting (Leischnig & Woodside, 2019), insurance fraud (Lesch & Brinkmann, 2011; Warren & Schweitzer, 2018), and so forth. The second set of studies gives a more holistic description of ethically questionable consumer behaviour that differs in ethicality (Vitell & Muncy, 1992). In a landmark article, Muncy and Vitell (1992) classified various consumer actions (differing in ethicality) on the basis of legality, active versus passive customer involvement, and perceived harm. This classification included the following actions. The first is "actively benefiting from illegal action" which relates to the actions where the consumer actively and consciously engages in a questionable activity (e.g., drinking a cold drink in a store and not paying for it). The second is "passively benefiting" which relates to the actions where the consumer benefits from the mistake of the seller (e.g., receiving excess change and not saying anything). The third is "actively benefiting from deceptive but legal activities" which relates to the active involvement of consumers in acts that are not perceived as illegal by the majority of the consumers (e.g., not telling the truth when negotiating the price of an automobile). The fourth is "no harm no foul" actions that most consumers perceive as not causing direct harm to anybody (e.g., buying counterfeit products and copying/downloading software instead of buying). The fifth is "doing good/recycling" behaviour, involving altruistic and environment friendly consumer actions (e.g., purchasing only from companies that fairly treat their employees, and recycling cans/bottles, etc.).

Thus, this review presents a comprehensive account by including the work related to both streams of consumer ethics. This review contributes to the body of consumer ethics literature in the following ways. First, it gives an account of the theoretical support found in the literature. Second, it identifies the data collection methods, statistical tools, as well as the antecedent, mediator, moderator, and consequent variables examined in consumer ethics research. Finally, it outlines the research gaps and throws light on the agenda for future research.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. In the coming section, we discuss the review methodology adopted. Section 3 presents the synthesis and findings related to theoretical perspectives, contexts, constructs examined, data collection methods, and widely used statistical techniques in prior studies. Section 4 includes the discussion and the future research agenda is part of the penultimate section. Finally, we draw implications and summarise our findings in the conclusion section.

2 | METHODOLOGY

Systematic reviews can be approached in myriad ways (Paul & Criado, 2020). Theory based reviews (e.g., Gilal et al., 2019; Paul & Rosado-Serrano, 2019) theme based reviews (e.g., Hao et al., 2021; Khatoun & Rehman, 2021; Mishra et al., 2021; Paul & Dhiman, 2021; Paul et al., 2017; Rana & Paul, 2017; Rosado-Serrano et al., 2018), framework-based reviews (e.g.; Paul & Benito, 2018; Paul, Merchant, et al., 2021; Sodergren, 2021), review aiming for theory development (e.g., Paul, 2019; Paul & Mas, 2019), hybrid reviews (e.g., Dabić et al., 2020), bibliometric analysis (e.g., Ruggeri et al., 2019), and meta-analysis (e.g., Barari et al., 2020; Rana & Paul, 2020). We follow a framework based (TCCM Framework developed by Paul and Rosado-Serrano (2019) in this paper.

The research methodology adopted in this review is based on the systematic search criteria used in prior classic reviews (Canabal & White, 2008; Paul et al., 2017; Rosado-Serrano et al., 2018; Terjesen et al., 2013). Following the thumb rules set by editors (Paul & Criado, 2020), and SPAR-4-SLR protocols (Paul et al., 2021), we searched relevant literature in two dominant academic databases namely Web of Science and Scopus to ensure that all relevant and important articles were covered. The search process included using keywords "consumer ethics and consumer ethical beliefs"/"consumer ethics and ethical judgment"/"consumer ethics and ethical consumer"/"consumer ethics and ethical behaviour"/"consumer ethics and ethical behaviour." To ensure that the selection criteria met the objectives of the study subject limits of "Business, Management, and Accounting," "Social Sciences," "Psychology," and "Arts and Humanities" were applied. Using the above keywords, we downloaded over 200 relevant articles (WoS = 151; Scopus = 65). After reading these papers the authors with the help from an editor-in-chief of an A grade journal exchanged notes to exclude/include some articles. The number of articles was pruned to 119 after excluding those which were not directly related to consumer ethics. The following criteria were applied for the inclusion of papers in our review.

2.1 | Inclusion criteria for subsequent analysis

The validity of a chosen sample is a function of the criteria for qualifying studies (Glass, 1976; Krippendorff, 1989). We applied the following criteria for the inclusion of studies.

- Studies that focused on ethically questionable consumer behaviour and its drivers.
- Studies that focused on ethical consumer behaviour and its drivers.

Consumer ethics research is based on the concept of CEBs. These beliefs determine the degree to which consumers perceive specific ethically questionable behaviour as acceptable or unacceptable (i.e., ethical or unethical). CEBs have predominantly been examined as the outcome variable while serving as a proxy to intentions and behaviour (Steenhaut & Van Kenhove, 2006). Thus, CEBs have emerged as the hallmark concept in consumer ethics research (Le & Kieu, 2019). However, attitudinal scales such as the consumer ethics scale may fall short in predicting actual behaviour (Carrington et al., 2014; Sudbury-Riley & Kohlbacher, 2016). To address this attitude-behaviour gap, researchers have suggested incorporating behavioural measures in consumer ethics instead of just relying on ethical judgment (Carrington et al., 2016; Caruana et al., 2016). This review is based on evaluating articles that focus on attitudinal as well as behavioural measures of consumer ethics. Thus, we define consumer ethics as “examining and interpreting consumer beliefs and behaviour from an ethical lens.”

After reading the 119 articles, 30 articles were dropped, which did not meet the above criteria. Moreover, the individual journal websites were searched, and 17 more articles were identified that were not covered in the above 119 articles. Thus, the final sample consisted of 106 peer-reviewed journal articles in the English Language. 72% of these articles are from journals with 4*, 4, 3 ranking in the Association of Business Schools, UK, which shows most of the articles come from premier journals (Paul et al., 2017). The included articles can be regarded as a fair representation of the extant literature on consumer ethics.

3 | SYNTHESIS AND FINDINGS

Figures 1 and 2 below depict the publishing trend and research orientation of consumer ethics research in the last decade (2010–2020). The year-wise distribution shows a rising trend in the no. of studies over the years with 65% (69/106) of the studies appearing in the last 5 years, pointing toward the growing interest in this domain. In terms of research orientation, 91.5% (97/106) are empirical, of which 86 studies are quantitative, 8 qualitative, and 3 both quantitative and qualitative.

Table 1 below presents a synthesis of different journals that can help us to figure out essential outlets for publication in a specific research domain (Islam & Rahman, 2016).

Journal of Business Ethics is the leading outlet in disseminating consumer ethics research accounting for 46% (49/106) studies in our sample, highlighting the role of the journal's specialized section devoted to

Publication Trend Overtime

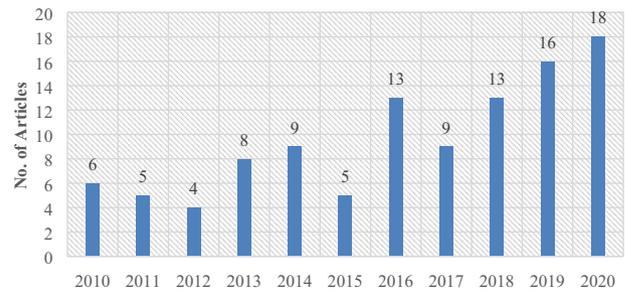


FIGURE 1 Publishing trend

Research Orientation

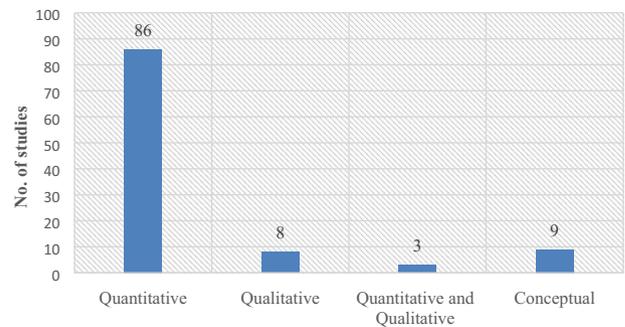


FIGURE 2 Research orientation

consumer ethics. *International Journal of Consumer Studies* (8 studies), *Journal of Business Research* (7 studies), *Psychology & Marketing* (6 studies), *Journal of Marketing Management and Business Ethics: A European Review* (4 studies each), *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Studies* and *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* (3 studies each) represent other contributing journals. Finally, research has been conducted in a wide variety of retail (e.g., apparel, grocery, fine jewellery) and service (e.g., academics, tax evasion, insurance, energy) contexts, signifying the widespread implications of this study field.

3.1 | Theoretical perspectives

There are several theoretical lenses used to carry out studies in the area of consumer ethics. This section gives an overview of some of the widely used theories in this domain (see Table 2 below).

3.1.1 | Hunt and Vitell's theory of marketing ethics (1986, 1992) is the most commonly used theoretical prism in consumer ethics research

This theory postulates that consumers' ethical judgment is based on their ethical ideologies when facing an ethical dilemma.

TABLE 1 Journals disseminating consumer ethics research

| Journals | Articles | References |
|---|----------|---|
| Journal of Business Ethics | 49 | De Bock and Van Kenhove (2010), Fukukawa and Ennew (2010), Lu and Lu (2010), Carrington et al. (2010), Schneider et al. (2011), De Bock and Van Kenhove (2011), Lesch and Brinkmann (2011), Patwardhan et al. (2012), Swaidan (2012), Zhao and Xu (2013), Chowdhury and Fernando (2013), De Bock et al. (2013), Cooper and Pullig (2013), Antonetti and Maklan (2014), Caruana and Chatzidakis (2014), Culiberg and Bajde (2014), Arli and Tjiptono (2014), Chowdhury and Fernando (2014), Vitell (2015), Lu et al. (2015), Liu et al. (2015), Koklic et al. (2016), Heath et al. (2016), Green et al. (2016), Shang and Peloza (2016), Vitell et al. (2016), Huang and Lu (2017), Pekerti and Arli (2017), Chowdhury (2017), Moraes et al. (2017), Graafland (2017), Gummerus et al. (2017), Gentina, Shrum, et al. (2018), Gentina, Tang, et al. (2018), Hwang and Kim (2018), Singh et al. (2018), Warren and Schweitzer (2018), Leischnig and Woodside (2019), Lee (2019), Hiller and Woodall (2019), Mai et al. (2019), Govind et al. (2019), Chang and Lu (2019), Chowdhury (2019), Chen and Moosmayer (2020), Arli et al. (2020), Zollo (2020), Gamma et al. (2020), Gentina et al. (2020) |
| International Journal of Consumer Studies | 8 | Bartels and Onwezen (2014), Culiberg (2014), Cho et al. (2015), Arli et al. (2016), Vitell et al. (2018), Arli et al. (2019), Ozgen and Esiyok (2020), Chatzidakis and Maclaran (2020) |
| Journal of Business Research | 7 | Carrington et al. (2014), Bian et al. (2016), Sudbury-Riley and Kohlbacher (2016), Grimmer et al. (2016), Osburg et al. (2019), Zou and Chan (2019), Ryoo et al. (2020) |
| Psychology & Marketing | 6 | Rosenbaum et al. (2011), Antonetti and Maklan (2016), Fukukawa et al. (2019), Viglia et al. (2019), Pinna (2020), Malik et al. (2020) |
| Business Ethics: A European Review | 4 | Wachter et al. (2012), Yacout and Vitell (2018), Escadas et al. (2019), Zhao et al. (2020) |
| Journal of Marketing Management | 4 | Hoek et al. (2013), Gregory Smith (2013), Punj (2017), Dootson et al. (2017) |
| Journal of The Academy of Marketing Science | 3 | Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy (2010), Olson (2013), Schamp et al. (2019) |
| Journal of Consumer Psychology | 3 | Newman and Brucks (2018), Goldsmith et al. (2018), Rotman et al. (2018) |
| Journal of Retailing and Consumer Studies | 3 | Chen and Huang (2016), Koay et al. (2020), Septianto et al. (2020) |
| Journal of Consumer Behaviour | 3 | Vassilikopoulou et al., (2011), Arli and Pekerti (2017), Escadas et al. (2020) |
| Journal of Marketing | 2 | White et al. (2012), Peloza et al. (2013) |
| Business Ethics Quarterly | 2 | Garcia-Ruiz and Rodriguez-Lluesma (2014), Pinto et al. (2020) |
| Management Decision | 2 | Zollo et al. (2018), Osburg et al. (2020) |
| Journal of Macromarketing | 2 | Chowdhury (2018), Chowdhury (2020) |
| Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice | 2 | Flurry and Swimberghe (2016), Adrita and Mohiuddin (2020) |
| Business & Society | 1 | Chun (2016) |
| Journal of Services Marketing | 1 | Neale and Fullerton (2010) |
| Journal of Consumer Research | 1 | Nikolova et al. (2018) |
| Marketing Theory | 1 | Chatzidakis (2015) |
| Journal of Advertising | 1 | Lu and Sinha (2019) |
| International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management | 1 | De Klerk et al. (2019) |

Moreover, personal, cultural, and situational factors influence consumer ethical judgment. In a study among Spanish consumers, Vitell et al. (2018) found that, while both intrinsic religiosity and spirituality were inversely related to attitude toward unethical consumer behaviour, but only spirituality was positively related to doing good. Chang and Lu (2019) concluded that relational

benefits, corporate associates influence ethical behaviour in retail. Flurry and Swimberghe (2016) examined ethical judgment in adolescents and concluded that while ethical judgment improves with maturity, materialism, and the love of money negatively influence it. However, parenting style and their religiosity inhibit unethical behaviour in adolescents.

TABLE 2 Theoretical perspectives in consumer ethics research

| Theory | No of Articles | Reference |
|---|----------------|--|
| Hunt and Vitell Theory (Hunt & Vitell, 1986) | 20 | Lu and Lu (2010), Schneider et al. (2011), Patwardhan et al. (2012), Swaidan (2012), Zhao and Xu (2013), Chowdhury and Fernando (2013), Arli and Tjiptono (2014), Chowdhury and Fernando (2014), Lu et al. (2015), Arli et al. (2016), Vitell et al. (2016), Huang and Lu (2017), Arli and Pekerti (2017), Chowdhury (2018), Vitell et al. (2018), Arli et al. (2019), Chang and Lu (2019), Zou and Chan (2019), Ozgen and Esiyok (2020), Chowdhury (2020) |
| Theory of Planned Behaviour and Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen, 1991) | 10 | Fukukawa and Ennew (2010), Culiberg (2014), Koklic et al. (2016), Chen and Huang (2016), Graafland (2017), Zollo et al. (2018), Fukukawa et al. (2019), Pinna (2020), Malik et al. (2020), Koay et al. (2020) |
| Neutralization Theory (Sykes & Matza, 1957) | 5 | Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy (2010), De Bock and Van Kenhove (2011), Rosenbaum et al. (2011), Bian et al. (2016), Fukukawa et al. (2019) |
| Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) | 3 | De Bock et al. (2013), Bartels and Onwezen (2014), Arli et al. (2020) |
| Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010) | 2 | Pinto et al. (2020), Gamma et al. (2020) |
| Practice Theory (Reckwitz, 2002) | 2 | Moraes et al. (2017), Hiller and Woodall (2019) |
| Self-concept Maintenance Theory (Mazar et al., 2008) | 2 | Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy (2010), Newman and Brucks (2018) |
| Carrington Model (Carrington et al., 2010) | 2 | Carrington et al. (2014), Grimmer et al. (2016) |
| Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins, 1998) | 1 | De Bock and Van Kenhove (2010) |
| Justice Theory | 1 | Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy (2010) |
| Just World Theory (Lerner and Clayton, 2011) | 1 | White et al. (2012) |
| Moral Development Theory (Kohlberg, 1969) | 1 | Zhao and Xu (2013) |
| Systematic Heuristic Model (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993) | 1 | Hoek et al. (2013) |
| Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987) | 1 | Pelozo et al. (2013) |
| Virtue Theory (MacIntyre, 2007) | 1 | Garcia-Ruiz and Rodriguez-Lluesma (2014) |
| Social Representations Theory (Moscovici, 1981) | 1 | Bartels and Onwezen (2014) |
| Issue Contingency Model (Jones, 1991) | 1 | Culiberg (2014), Culiberg and Bajde (2014), |
| Psychoanalytic Perspective (Freud, 1916) | 1 | Chatzidakis (2015) |
| Cognitive Development Theory (Kohlberg, 1969) | 1 | Flurry and Swimberghe (2016) |
| Attribution Theory (Calder & Burnkrant, 1977) | 1 | Shang and Pelozo (2016) |
| Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002) | 1 | Antonetti and Maklan (2016) |
| Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1980) | 1 | Gentina, Shrum, et al. (2018) |
| Social Bonding Theory (Hirschi, 1969) | 1 | Gentina, Tang, et al. (2018) |
| Interpersonal Deception Theory (Buller & Burgoon, 1996) | 1 | Warren and Schweitzer (2018) |
| Goal Theory (Moskowitz, 2009) | 1 | Newman and Brucks (2018) |
| Rational Choice Theory | 1 | Goldsmith et al. (2018) |
| Socio Intuitionist Theory (Haidt, 2001) | 1 | Zollo et al. (2018) |
| Vested Interest Theory (Crano, 1983) | 1 | Osburg et al. (2019) |
| Complexity Theory (Byrne & Callaghan, 2013) | 1 | Leischnig and Woodside (2019) |
| P-E Fit Theory | 1 | Leischnig and Woodside (2019) |
| Dual Model of Attitude (Wilson et al., 2000) | 1 | Govind et al. (2019) |
| Moral Foundation Theory (Haidt & Graham, 2007) | 1 | Chowdhury (2019) |

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

| Theory | No of Articles | Reference |
|--|----------------|---------------------------------|
| Self-concept congruity Theory | 1 | Malik et al. (2020) |
| Ethics Theory | 1 | Koay et al. (2020) |
| Deterrence Theory | 1 | Koay et al. (2020) |
| Motivation-Ability-Opportunity Model (Olander & Thøgersen, 1995) | 1 | Adrita and Mohiuddin (2020) |
| Rest's Model (Rest, 1986) | 1 | Escadas et al. (2020) |
| Gender Theory | 1 | Chatzidakis and Maclaran (2020) |
| Mindfulness Theory (Kabat-Zinn, 1982) | 1 | Gentina et al. (2020) |

3.1.2 | Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour (1985, 1991) is based on the premise that attitude translates into intentions and subsequent behaviour

This framework is useful in understanding consumer ethical decision-making (Chatzidakis et al., 2016), especially the factors that have a bearing on consumer intentions. According to Fukukawa et al. (2019), attitude, perceived behavioural control, perceived unfairness significantly, and positively impacted intentions to engage in ethically questionable behaviour. In another study in the Italian context, Pinna (2020) concluded that intentions to buy ethical products is the result of a complex interplay between internal (attitude, internal ethics, moral harm, perceived behavioural control) and external (impediments) factors along with the psychological traits of femininity and masculinity.

3.1.3 | Neutralization theory holds that consumers invoke rationalizations to dampen the effect of nonnormative behaviour and deflect self-blame and disapproval from others (Sykes & Matza, 1957)

Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy (2010) concluded that consumers justified their opportunistic behaviour by invoking "denial of injury" rationalization. In another research, Rosenbaum et al. (2011) identified three novel rationalizations employed by consumers to justify unethical retail disposition in addition to the five techniques proposed by Sykes and Matza (1957). Neutralization techniques also explain the processes underlying the use of double standards (De Bock & Van Kenhove, 2011) and provide insights into the justification individuals employ when committing unethical acts like software piracy (Koklic et al., 2016) and counterfeit consumption (Bian et al., 2016).

3.1.4 | Practice theory provides a novel way of understanding human activity (Reckwitz, 2002)

According to Schatzki (2001), practice refers to "a set of actions." This theoretical lens has been applied notably in the area of consumption

(Arsel & Bean, 2013) and in understanding how practice can bring about behavioural change toward sustainability (Rettie et al., 2012).

Specifically, Magaudda's circuit of practice framework (2011) was applied to comprehend consumer ethics in fine jewellery purchasing (Moraes et al., 2017). Moreover, examinations of daily habits can help to figure out drivers of ethical behaviour (Hiller & Woodall, 2019).

3.1.5 | Social identity theory postulates that individuals use their social identities to divide the world into "them" and "us," leading to in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)

Applying this theory, De Bock et al. (2013) found that consumers treat organisations as "out-group" and other consumers as "in-group" members. This evokes use of double standards whereby they judge an unethical behaviour committed by the company (representatives) more harshly than similar behaviour involving fellow consumers. Similarly, Arli et al. (2020) reported that extrinsic religiosity was linked to greater acceptance of questionable consumer activities at higher levels of ethnocentricity. Another study revealed that social identification is a significant predictor of consumer intentions since individuals identifying themselves with organic consumers show greater willingness to purchase products that claim to be ethically sound and environmentally friendly (Bartels & Onwezen, 2014).

3.1.6 | Construal level theory states that individuals use either abstract level construal that "focus on broad, general features and essences of issues" or concrete level construal that "focus on contextual specifics" (Pinto et al., 2020; Trope et al., 2007)

This theory has wide applications in influencing intentions, behaviour, and self-regulation (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Abstract level construal mindset moderated the impact of induced hypocrisy on the adoption of the energy efficiency portal (Gamma et al., 2020).

In another study, Pinto et al. (2020) empirically validated that for consumers with concrete level construal, ethical consumption is influenced by context and in-group/out-group cues. While for consumers with abstract level construal, moral values play a more significant role in ethical consumption and is less context-dependent.

3.1.7 | Theory of self-concept maintenance posits that unethical behaviour is a function of external (monetary gains) and internal (positive self-concept) reward

Individuals want to gain financial benefits through dishonest behaviour without compromising with their honest self-concept. Newman and Brucks (2018) found that consumers use moral balancing (moral licensing and moral cleansing) to define their future behaviour based on their past ethical or unethical behaviour. Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy (2010) concluded that contextual factors like customer firm relationship and firm size influence consumer's opportunistic claiming behaviour in the service recovery context.

3.1.8 | Carrington model primarily focusses "on the translation of purchase intentions into actual purchase behaviour"

Specifically, it explores why consumers with ethical intentions fail to purchase ethical products by examining the mediating effect of implementation intentions and the role of two moderators—actual behavioural control and situational context. Grimmer et al. (2016) investigated the moderating effect of purchase situation on the link between intentions and implementation intentions as well as implementation intentions and proenvironment consumer behaviour.

3.1.9 | Jones issue-contingent model details the stepwise process of consumer ethical decision-making

Culiberg and Bajde (2014) investigated consumption tax evasion from the consumer perspective and concluded that moral intensity has a profound impact on all the elements of the decision-making process. Likewise, Culiberg (2014) reported, enhancing moral intensity positively impacts both attitude and intentions to engage in recycling behaviour.

Apart from the above 8 dominant theories that have been applied, there are 31 other theoretical lenses such as *complexity theory*, *regulatory focus theory*, *just world theory*, *social bonding theory*, *socio intuitionist theory*, and so forth, that have been employed in consumer ethics research. While most of the research have tested these theories in isolation (e.g., Gamma et al., 2020; Leischnig & Woodside, 2019; Pelozo et al., 2013), but some studies have integrated two or more theories in their research framework (e.g., Malik et al., 2020; Wirtz & McColl-Kennedy, 2010; Zollo et al., 2018). Finally, 34%

(36/106) studies did not mention the application of any theory in their research.

3.2 | Context

3.2.1 | Countries

As regards context and background, most consumer ethics research is set in America, Europe, Asia, and Oceania (see Table 3 below). Overall, the United States has dominated research in this field accounting for 29% of all studies. Within Europe, the UK is the leading country (12 studies), whereas Belgium, France, Germany, and Portugal appear in an equal number of studies (three each). In total, 49 studies are spread across 17 European countries. Among the Asian countries majority of the studies are set in China (nine studies), and Indonesia (eight studies). Australia with 12 studies is the leading country in Oceania, while New Zealand features in one study. Finally, Egypt, South Africa, and the UAE represent Africa and the Middle East. However, India is considered in just one cross-national study by Vitell et al. (2016). The countries were identified based on the respondent's location and the first author in case the respondents' country was not disclosed (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012; Islam & Rahman, 2016).

A deeper analysis in terms of single, twin, and multiple country contexts, reveals that research is predominantly conducted in a single country context (e.g., Huang & Lu, 2017; Osburg et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2018; Viglia et al., 2019). In cross-country context, there are just seven studies involving two countries (e.g., Pekerti & Arli, 2017; Zou & Chan, 2019), and four studies set in multiple countries. (e.g., Koklic et al., 2016; Vitell et al., 2016). However, 9 out of the 11 studies in cross-country context appear in the last 5 years, which suggest recent emphasis on cross-national scrutiny. Nonetheless, lack of cross-national research can limit our understanding, as culture plays an important role in influencing consumer ethicality (Swaidan, 2012). Moreover, findings from single-country studies cannot be directly compared and only provide limited insights. This implies that more attention should be given to research in twin or multiple country contexts.

3.3 | Characteristics

Consumer ethics research has explored numerous constructs influencing consumer beliefs, intentions, and behaviour. Table 4 below, gives an overview of these variables categorised according to their role in the study, that is, antecedents, mediators, moderators, and output variables. Furthermore, the constructs are subcategorised as personal, emotional, cultural, deterrence factors, and so forth. Overall, 86 quantitative studies accounts for the total number of variables examined. This description provides theoretical insights that can help in theory advancement and development (following Chen et al., 2021; Paul & Rosado-Serrano, 2019).

TABLE 3 Global dissemination of consumer ethics research

| | | Single country context | Twin country context | Multiple country context | Total | |
|-------------|--------------|------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|-------|----|
| America | USA | 27 | 2 | 2 | 31 | 34 |
| | Canada | 2 | — | 1 | 3 | |
| | UK | 10 | — | 2 | 12 | 49 |
| | Belgium | 3 | — | — | 3 | |
| | France | 3 | 2 | 2 | 7 | |
| | Germany | 3 | 1 | 1 | 5 | |
| | Portugal | 3 | — | — | 3 | |
| | Italy | 2 | — | 1 | 3 | |
| | Slovenia | 2 | — | 1 | 3 | |
| | Spain | 2 | — | 1 | 3 | |
| | Finland | 1 | — | — | 1 | |
| | Greece | 1 | — | — | 1 | |
| | Netherlands | 1 | — | — | 1 | |
| | Norway | 1 | — | — | 1 | |
| | Romania | 1 | — | — | 1 | |
| | Switzerland | 1 | — | — | 1 | |
| | Turkey | 1 | 1 | — | 2 | |
| | Sweden | — | — | 1 | 1 | |
| | Hungry | — | — | 1 | 1 | |
| | Asia | China | 7 | 1 | 1 | |
| Indonesia | | 5 | 3 | — | 8 | |
| Taiwan | | 3 | — | — | 3 | |
| South Korea | | 2 | — | — | 2 | |
| Singapore | | 1 | — | 1 | 2 | |
| Bangladesh | | 1 | — | — | 1 | |
| Pakistan | | 1 | — | — | 1 | |
| Hongkong | | — | 1 | — | 1 | |
| India | | — | — | 1 | 1 | |
| Japan | | — | — | 1 | 1 | |
| Oceania | Australia | 8 | 3 | 1 | 12 | 14 |
| | New Zealand | 1 | — | 1 | 2 | |
| Africa | Egypt | 1 | — | 1 | 2 | 4 |
| | South Africa | 1 | — | 1 | 2 | |
| Middle East | UAE | — | — | 1 | 1 | 1 |

3.3.1 | Antecedent variables

The constructs examined as antecedent variables have been put into 9 different heads as depicted in Table 4 above. Personal (71 studies, 82.5%), social and interpersonal (27 studies, 31.4%), and emotional (22 studies, 25.6%) factors represent the top three investigated variables.

Among the personal factors, religiosity (Arli et al., 2020; Huang & Lu, 2017; Patwardhan et al., 2012), attitude/attitude toward business/attitude toward digital piracy (Fukukawa & Ennew, 2010; Koay et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2015) and materialism (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2013; Ozgen & Esiyok (2020) are widely researched. Other constructs include moral philosophies (Lu & Lu, 2010), spirituality (Vitell et al., 2016),

TABLE 4 Widely investigated variables in consumer ethics research

| Variables | No. of articles | % |
|--|-----------------|------|
| <i>Antecedent variables</i> | | |
| Personal factors | 71 | 82.5 |
| Social and interpersonal factors | 27 | 31.4 |
| Emotions | 22 | 25.6 |
| Firm related factors | 12 | 14 |
| Cultural factors | 5 | 5.8 |
| Coping factors | 4 | 4.7 |
| Deterrence factors | 4 | 4.7 |
| Intuitive factors | 3 | 3.6 |
| Others | 18 | 20.9 |
| <i>Mediator variables</i> | | |
| Personal factors | 23 | 26.7 |
| Emotions | 7 | 8.1 |
| Firm related factors | 4 | 4.7 |
| Social and interpersonal factors | 4 | 4.7 |
| Deterrence factors | 2 | 2.3 |
| Coping factors | 1 | 1.2 |
| Others | 9 | 10.5 |
| <i>Moderator variables</i> | | |
| Personal factors | 6 | 7 |
| Social factors and interpersonal factors | 6 | 7 |
| Firm related factors | 2 | 2.3 |
| Cultural factors | 1 | 1.2 |
| Coping factors | 1 | 1.2 |
| Others | 3 | 3.6 |
| <i>Output variables</i> | | |
| CEBs | 31 | 36 |
| Intentions | 23 | 26.7 |
| Positive (Ethical) | 17 | |
| Negative (Unethical) | 6 | |
| Behaviour | 28 | 32.6 |
| Ethical | 19 | |
| Unethical | 9 | |
| Others | 5 | 5.8 |

Note: Percentage is calculated based on 86 quantitative studies.

Machiavellianism (Arlı et al., 2019), and so forth. The constructs like social norms and perceived behavioural control (Fukukawa & Ennew, 2010; Fukukawa et al., 2019; Koay et al., 2020) and moral intensity (Culiberg, 2014; Koklic et al., 2016) are some commonly studied social and interpersonal variables. Social attachment, parent's religiosity, parenting style,

and peer support, and so forth. represent other factors in this category. Research exploring the role of guilt (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014; Chen & Moosmayer, 2020), pride (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014; Newman & Brucks, 2018), fear and anger (Septianto et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2018; Yacout & Vitell, 2018) account for 59% of the 22 total studies related to emotional factors. Moreover, emotions along with intuitive factors (e.g., intuition, implicit attitude) represent nonrational factors influencing consumer ethics (Yacout & Vitell, 2018; Zollo et al., 2018). Firm related factors like corporate associates (Chang & Lu, 2019), CSR (Newman & Brucks, 2018), product attribute (Olson, 2013), ethical claims (Hoek et al., 2013), firm size (Wirtz & McColl-Kennedy, 2010), and payment timing (Viglia et al., 2019), and so forth, are examined in 12 studies. Cultural factors such as collectivism (Huang & Lu, 2017), coping factors like neutralization techniques (Koklic et al., 2016; Rosenbaum et al., 2011), and deterrence factors namely fear of legal consequences (Koay et al., 2020), perceived risk (Dootson et al., 2017) are together studied in 13 research studies. Finally, values (Chowdhury, 2020), induced hypocrisy (Gamma et al., 2020), impediment (Pinna 2020), and so forth, are factors grouped under others category.

3.3.2 | Mediating variables

The mediation mechanism was part of the 50 studies out of the 86 articles under consideration. A total of 60% of the mediators examined are grouped under personal and emotional factors. Personal factors include moral philosophy (Zou & Chan, 2019), materialism (Gentina, Shrum, et al., 2018), ethnocentricity (Arlı et al., 2020), social goodwill (Pinto et al., 2020), Machiavellianism (Chowdhury, 2020), monetary attitude (Gentina et al., 2020), and attitude toward the environment (Adrita & Mohiuddin, 2020). Emotions like anticipated guilt, empathy, and happiness mediate the relationship between antecedents and outcome variables (Hwang & Kim 2018; Pelozo et al., 2013). Additionally, Escadas et al. (2020), examined how postdecision emotions mediate the relationship between ethical decision-making and "future ethical behavioural intentions." Firm-related mediating factors include relationship quality and outcome (Chang & Lu, 2019), trust in ethical advertising (Osburg et al., 2020), trust in product information (Osburg et al., 2020). Likewise, social and interpersonal factors such as benefits from the FB community (Gummerus et al., 2017), susceptibility to normative influence (Malik et al., 2020) coping factors like moral disengagement (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014), deterrence factors like perceived risk (Zhao et al., 2020) and other factors like perceived justice (Septianto et al., 2020), implementation plans (Grimmer et al., 2016) have also been investigated as mediators. Overtime a rise in exploring mediation mechanisms is evident, as 66% of the mediation-related studies were conducted in the last 3 years.

3.3.3 | Moderating variables

Boundary conditions may help determine why and when individual constructs influence the dependent construct (Chandni & Rahman, 2020; Hayes, 2018). The moderating variables have been grouped

into six categories. Examples of personal factors as moderators are construal level (Gamma et al., 2020; Pinto et al., 2020), ethnocentricity (Arlı et al., 2020), narcissism (Cooper & Pullig, 2013), and ability (Adrita & Mohiuddin, 2020). The moderating role of construal level and ethnocentricity was examined between guilt-ethical consumption and extrinsic religiosity-unethical behaviour, respectively (Arlı et al., 2020; Chen & Moosmayer, 2020). The next most frequently examined category of moderators includes social and interpersonal factors wherein the negative impact of dichotomous thinking on ethical consumption is attenuated due to the moderating role of the third person perspective (Lu & Sinha, 2019). Also, the impact of relativism on ethical judgment is diminished due to the moderating role of attention to social comparison information (Zou & Chan, 2019). Within the firm related factors, self-benefit appeal in advertising positively moderates the link between materialism and consumption (Ryoo et al., 2020), and postponed payment leads to a greater likelihood of default and cheating in the case of hedonic as compared to utilitarian goods (Viglia et al., 2019). Hofstede's cultural dimensions like power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and so forth (Vitell et al., 2016), and neutralization strategies (Fukukawa et al., 2019) represent cultural and coping moderators. Finally, moderators grouped under the others category are justice restoration potential and purchase situation (Grimmer et al., 2016).

3.3.4 | Outcome variables

The outcome variables examined in CE research can be broadly classified into beliefs (31 studies), intentions (23 studies), and behaviour (28 studies). The studies related to ethical beliefs have focussed on consumer beliefs, either, toward unethical actions varying in ethicality (e.g., Gentina, Shrum, et al., 2018; Huang & Lu, 2017; Singh et al., 2018; Swaidan, 2012) or toward unethical as well as ethical and prosocial actions (e.g., Chowdhury, 2020; Flurry & Swimberghe, 2016; Patwardhan et al., 2012). We begin by seeing how different variables shape beliefs toward unethical actions. Findings show that materialistic (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2013; Flurry & Swimberghe, 2016; Lu & Lu, 2010), Machiavellian (Arlı et al., 2019; Chowdhury, 2020), and extrinsically religious individuals (Arlı & Pekerti, 2017; Arlı & Tjiptono, 2014) develop positive beliefs toward unethical actions (i.e., do not see unethical actions as wrong). Similarly, consumers characterised by promotion focus (De Bock & Van Kenhove, 2010), relativism (Lu & Lu, 2010), narcissism (Cooper & Pullig, 2013), and cynicism (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014) are more likely to tolerate unethical consumer practices. Moreover, cultural dimensions like masculinity and power distance induce consumers to believe that unethical actions as acceptable (Swaidan, 2012). In contrast, there are a number of factors that promote negative beliefs about unethical actions. It includes personal features such as intrinsic religiosity (Patwardhan et al., 2012; Schneider et al., 2011), idealism (Lu & Lu, 2010), spiritual well-being (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2013), moral identity (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014), and attitude toward business (Huang & Lu, 2017). Other variables that result in similar effect are prevention focus (De Bock & Van Kenhove, 2010) and empathy (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014). Cultural factors negatively

linked to beliefs toward unethical behaviour include collectivism and uncertainty avoidance (Swaidan, 2012). Finally, inter-personal factors like parenting style and parent's religiosity also cause consumers to reject beliefs about unethical behaviour (Flurry & Swimberghe, 2016).

Next, we describe those factors that influence ethical beliefs toward prosocial action. Communal and personal dimensions of spiritual well-being (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2013), empathy and moral identity (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014) positively impacted consumer beliefs about recycling and doing good. Moreover, intrinsic religiosity and idealism had a significant and positive influence on beliefs about doing good, while materialism had a similar impact on the views related to recycling (Arlı & Pekerti, 2017; Arlı & Tjiptono, 2014). In contrast, a couple of factors like cynicism (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014) and loyalty and betrayal (Chowdhury, 2019) were inversely related to beliefs toward prosocial actions, namely recycling, and doing good.

Likewise, studies dealing with intentions can be grouped into those focussing on positive/ethical intentions (20 studies) like intentions to recycle (Culiberg, 2014) intentions to buy products that make ethical claims (Bartels & Onwezen, 2014) intentions to buy energy-efficient portals (Gamma et al., 2020) "willingness to choose ethical products" (Osburg et al., 2020; Ryoo et al., 2020), while examination of negative/unethical intentions (six studies) include piracy intentions (Koklic et al., 2016) intentions to pirate digital products (Koay et al., 2020), and so forth. Thus, first, we consider factors impacting ethical intentions followed by a description of variables that influence unethical intentions. For example, CEBs (Lu et al., 2015) and femininity (Pinna, 2020) have a direct, significant, and positive influence on ethical intentions. Collectivism and moral intensity indirectly influenced ethical intentions via attitude (Culiberg, 2014). Likewise, individualism also increased ethical intentions via ethical beliefs (Lu et al., 2015). Altruistic and biospheric values lead an increase in consumer willingness to buy ethical products through trust in ethical advertising and ethical purchase decision involvement (Osburg et al., 2019). Hypocrisy induced nudges in the presence of favourable boundary conditions like public domain (vs. private domain) and high construal (vs. low construal) also amplified ethical intentions. Finally, positive emotions and positive post-decision emotions resulted in a similar effect (Escadas et al., 2020). On the other hand, factors that are negatively related to ethical intentions include negative emotions and negative post-decision emotions (Escadas et al., 2020), masculinity (Pinna, 2020), and egoistic values via ethical purchase decision involvement (Osburg et al., 2019).

Similarly, factors influencing unethical intentions are categorised based on the direction of their impact. For instance, perceived unfairness and perceived benefits enhance unethical intentions such as piracy intentions and intentions to buy counterfeit (Fukukawa & Ennew, 2010; Koay et al., 2020). Moreover, readiness to take social risk, status acquisition, and susceptibility to normative and interpersonal influences (Koklic et al., 2016; Malik et al., 2020) and past behaviour (Zhao et al., 2020) also escalate unethical intentions. The review also revealed the factors that have a diminishing impact on unethical intentions. It includes variables like moral intensity and deterrence factors such as fear of legal consequences and perceived risk (Koay et al., 2020; Koklic et al., 2016). More importantly, attitude, perceived behavioural control, subjective norms, and

moral obligation are some common factors that positively influenced ethical and unethical intentions (Culiberg, 2014; Fukukawa & Ennew, 2010; Koay et al., 2020; Pinna, 2020).

Similarly, studies with behaviour as the dependent variables have focussed on ethical (19 studies) and unethical aspects (9 studies) of behaviour. Examples of the former include "ecologically conscious consumer behaviour" (Zollo et al., 2018) ethical consumption (Pinto et al., 2020) "pro-environment purchase behaviour" (Grimmer et al., 2016) "sustainable apparel consumption" (Cho et al., 2015). Examples of the latter include immoral behaviour (Goldsmith et al., 2018) "ethically questionable behaviour in retailing" (Chang & Lu, 2019), and cheating behaviour (Viglia et al., 2019). The promoters of ethical consumer behaviour include personal variables like attitude (Graafland, 2017), person orientation (Lee, 2019), and interdependent self-construal (Chen & Moosayer, 2020). In addition, emotions like guilt (Chen and Moosayer, 2020) firm related factors like ethical claims and labelling (Hoek et al., 2013), and inter-personal factors such as subjective norms (Graafland, 2017) are other essential facilitators of ethical conduct. Additionally, constructs namely eco-label knowledge (Adrita & Mohiuddin, 2020), prevention focus (Zou & Chan, 2019), purchase situation (Grimmer et al., 2016) and religiosity (Graafland, 2017) indirectly propel ethical consumer behaviour. Conversely, inhibitors of ethical behaviour include promotion focus (Zou & Chan, 2019), attribute trade-off (Oslon, 2013), and group stereotype (Antonetti & Maklan, 2016).

Finally, we segregated the variables that serve as motivators and dissuaders to unethical consumer behaviour. We begin our discussion with a brief account of motivators followed by dissuaders. In the retail context, one such factor that encourages cheating behaviour relates to buying hedonic goods coupled with postponed payment (Viglia et al., 2019). Similarly, personal characteristics like maximizing mindset (Goldsmith et al., 2018) and Machiavellianism (Zhao & Xu, 2013) also catalyse unethical conduct. Neutralization techniques (Rosenbaum et al., 2011), perceived prevalence and perceived outcome (Dootson et al., 2017) are other factors that increase unethical consumer behaviour. In contrast, firm related factors like social benefits, special treatment benefits, CSR, and service quality (Chang & Lu, 2019) served as barriers to unethical behaviour. Likewise, personal factors such as idealism and moral identity also curb unethical behaviour. Surprisingly, Dootson et al. (2017) concluded that the impact of perceived risk on unethical consumer behaviour was insignificant. In our review sample we also came across a few studies where other variables such as loyalty toward the Facebook community (Gummerus et al., 2017), and satisfaction with service recovery (Wirtz & McColl-Kennedy, 2010) have been investigated.

3.4 | Methodologies used in prior studies

3.4.1 | Data collection

This review is based on the data collection methods and analysis technique applied, drawn from 97 empirical studies as summarised in Figure 3 below.

The survey method (68 studies) is predominantly used for data collection. Within the survey method, the offline mode is more preferred in comparison to online mode, and three studies (Arli et al., 2016; Pekerti & Arli, 2017; Zou & Chan, 2019) have used both modes for data collection. While the use of experimental data has been limited to 16 studies, it is noteworthy that 12 of these studies have come up in the last 3 years, pointing toward a preference for experimental design. Interviews as a medium of data collection were adopted in nine studies. Finally, four studies have simultaneously adopted two methods, survey and experiment (Arli et al., 2020), survey and interview (Culiberg & Badje, 2014), or experiment and interview (Hoek et al., 2013; Wirtz & McColl-Kennedy, 2010).

3.4.2 | Analysis techniques

Consumer ethics researchers have applied several analytical methods. The most extensively applied techniques are regression analysis (32 studies, e.g., Escadas et al., 2019; Pelozo et al., 2013; Pinna, 2020) and SEM (31 studies, e.g., Chun, 2016; Chowdhury, 2018; Osburg et al., 2020). Besides, ANOVA/MANOVA has also been frequently used (18 studies, e.g., Rotman et al., 2018; Septianto et al., 2020; Shang & Pelozo, 2016). On expected lines, qualitative studies have largely relied on the interpretative analysis (eight studies, e.g., Carrington et al., 2014; Heath et al., 2016; Hiller & Woodall, 2019). Apart from the conventional methods, a few studies have employed specialized methods such as cluster analysis (Cooper & Pullig, 2013) conjoint analysis (Olson, 2013), factor analysis (de Klerk et al., 2019), fsQCA (Leischnig & Woodside, 2019), and grounded theory (Liu et al., 2015). Finally, studies on scale development by Sudbury-Riley and Kohlbacher, (2016) measuring "Ethically minded consumer behaviour", and another by Wachter et al. (2012) measuring customer "return orientation scale" have been grouped separately.

4 | DISCUSSION

Consumer ethics is a young discipline with a modest 30-year-old history. Notably, research in this domain has grown substantially since the year 2000. While the United States was a pioneer and a leading country in this domain, recent trends indicate steady global dissemination of consumer ethics research.

Concerning theoretical perspectives, 70 studies have indicated the use of one or more of the 43 different theoretical frameworks identified. The rest of the 36 studies did not specify the same. Hunt and Vitell's theory is the most widely applied, which, along with the theory of planned behaviour and neutralization theory serves as a theoretical lens in about 33% (35/106) of the above studies. These theories "share a rational cognitive perspective in which decision making is conscious, deliberative, intentional, and individually controlled" (Zollo, 2020). Religiosity, moral philosophies, emotions have been frequently examined as antecedent variables and represent

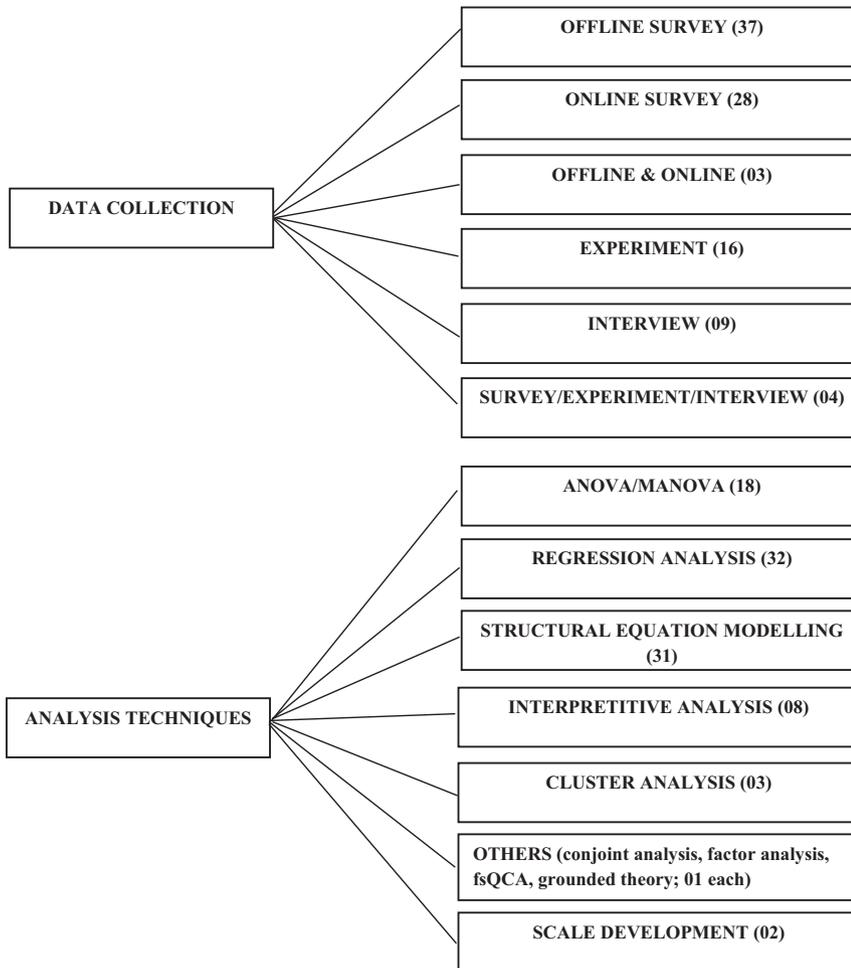


FIGURE 3 Data collection methods and analysis techniques

significant determinants of CEBs. Specifically, findings indicate that consumers high on intrinsic religiosity, idealism, collectivism, moral identity, and guilt-proneness have negative beliefs toward questionable consumer behaviour and hence greater tendency to reject such questionable practices. Likewise, consumers high on extrinsic religiosity, relativism, power distance, Machiavellianism, and so forth, show a higher likelihood to accept questionable behaviour. Prominent consequent variables explored are CEBs, intentions, and behaviour. The investigation of mediation and moderation mechanisms is limited to a few studies.

The use of qualitative, mixed methods for data collection and interpretive analysis techniques can supplement other frequently applied methods, especially to account for the emotional and symbolic factors that influence consumer ethical judgment. The application of cluster analysis can also help in effective consumer segmentation based on their ethical beliefs and more focused segmentation strategies.

5 | FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

Following the pattern of earlier reviews (Keupp & Gassmann, 2009; Paul & Rosado-Serrano, 2019; Paul et al., 2021; Terjesen et al., 2013), we highlight research gaps and propose future research agenda by

applying TCCM framework. Thus, we propose our road map for further research in terms of theory development, context, characteristics, and methodology in the upcoming sections. This review has tried to assimilate and strengthen the research base of consumer ethics. We have combined the established and more acceptable aspect of consumer ethics dealing with questionable consumer behaviour with the recent and emerging stream of ethical consumption (Brinkmann & Peattle, 2008). Thus, it is equally important to emphasise and explore the “dark” and “bright” sides of consumer ethics to take this field forward.

5.1 | Theory development (T)

Consumer ethical judgment is a function of deontological norms and teleological evaluations (Hunt & Vitell, 1986, 1992, 2006). However, the virtue ethics approach can be an essential theoretical lens to examine consumer ethics, as it offers distinct advantages over the ethical, ideological perspective (Vitell et al., 2016). Virtue ethics is concerned with imbuing important traits in individuals that help a person lead a righteous life and focus on the means and consequences of consumer action (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014; Garcia-Ruiz & Rodriguez-Lluesma, 2014; Dooston et al., 2017).

Further, consumer ethics research has primarily emphasised on the variables that lie within the public sphere (cultural and situational). But the role of factors such as the family that are part of the private domain is far less acknowledged (Bray et al., 2011; Heath et al., 2016). In contrast, the care ethics perspective treats ethical decisions as made by “interconnected persons in the context of family, friendship and social groups” instead of “independent and mutually indifferent individuals” (Held 2006, p. 13). This approach of viewing individuals as relational and emotional instead of independent and rational can also significantly enhance our understanding of consumer ethical behaviour in various contexts (Heath et al., 2016; O'Malley & Prothero, 2006, 2007).

Finally, consumer ethics research is primarily based on rationalist models (Ajzen, 1985, 1991; Hunt & Vitell, 2006), which despite its contributions, do not account for the role of emotions and intuition in ethical decision-making (Gregory-Smith et al., 2013; Shaw et al., 2005; Yacout & Vitell, 2018; Zollo et al., 2018; Zollo, 2020). Haidt's (2001) intuitionist model posits that nonrational element (i.e., emotions and intuition) play a crucial role in ethical decision-making while moral reasoning is less prominent. Focussing on the role of emotions and intuition in ethical judgment, may help answer the “complex and multifaceted questions” related to ethical consumption (Chowdhury, 2017). Likewise, the psychoanalytic perspective posits that unconscious (rather than conscious) guilt is the primary regulator of human behaviour (Chatzidakis, 2015). This viewpoint observes “that everyday morality is less rational, less instrumental and firmly embedded in a variety of developmental and psychodynamic processes” and thus presents an alternative mechanism to examine consumer ethics (Chatzidakis, 2015, p. 90). In sum, consumer ethics should be viewed through a multi-theoretical perspective that takes into account the rational and nonrational elements.

5.2 | Context (C)

Research in consumer ethics has improved our understanding of various consumer unethical and ethical practices and their drivers. However, more research in varying industry/national contexts is needed to advance this study domain further.

We observe that majority of the work has been done in developed and democratic countries (Ryoo et al., 2020) while emerging economies remain underrepresented. Hence, ample opportunities exist particularly in Asian (Lu & Lu, 2010), African, Middle East (Al-Khatib et al., 2005), Central and Eastern Europe, and Latin American countries to acknowledge the similarities and differences in consumer ethics. Moreover, we found just 10.4% (11/106) studies in cross-country context. Therefore, future studies should pay more attention to cross-national studies to better understand the role of cultural diversity on consumer ethics.

With reference to specific unethical acts namely shoplifting and fare-dodging Leischnig and Woodside (2019) reported interesting insights. While some offenders disapproved such acts, whereas some non-offenders were found to approve them. Additional research

warrants addressing this anomaly. Likewise, extant literature has reported that consumers are green for some activities/contexts but not others (Carrington et al., 2010; Gergory-Smith et al., 2013; Green et al., 2016; Hiller & Woodall, 2019; Moraes et al., 2017). Future studies should, therefore, check the validity of research models applicable to a specific prosocial activity (e.g., recycling) in other behavioural contexts such as green buying (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014; Patwardhan et al., 2012). The use of neutralization techniques can also help in addressing this issue of malleable morality (Fukukawa et al., 2019). Additionally, moral licensing can also help predict inconsistency in consumer ethical and prosocial behaviour, where a specific ethical activity (recycling) licenses the consumer to buy less green or non-green alternatives (Oslo, 2013; Newman & Brucks, 2018).

Moreover, examining the role of different online communities in influencing ethical consumption (Gummerus et al., 2017) and new forms of cheating behaviour related to digital currencies like bitcoins (Viglia et al., 2019) could be part of future research efforts.

5.3 | Characteristics (C)

5.3.1 | Antecedents

While research in consumer ethics has grown, Schlegelmilch and Öberseder (2010, p. 13) observed: “there still appears to be too little conceptual and empirical work focussing on the influence of socio-demographic variables (e.g., migration background or religion) and psychographic variables (e.g., materialism or individualism) on consumers' ethical judgment.” Additionally, antecedents categorised as coping, intuitive, deterrence factors have been sparingly explored. It is therefore, suggested to include both rational and nonrational constructs like moral attentiveness (Wurthmann, 2013), envy, generosity and compassion (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2013), self-accountability (Peloza et al., 2013), self-concept (Arli & Pekerti, 2017), ethical blindness (Palazzo et al., 2012) and self-esteem (Gamma et al., 2020) in upcoming research. Moreover, the role of variables such as religiosity, culture can be examined in contexts/countries other than those already examined (Arli et al., 2019; Graafland, 2017; Vitell et al., 2016, 2018).

5.3.2 | Mediators and moderators

Focus on mediation and moderation mechanisms will advance methodological rigour, giving novel insights into contradictory results (Kahiya, 2018). While examination of mediators has increased in the last 3 years, nonetheless there is a need to study the mediating role of various emotional (e.g., guilt, empathy), social and interpersonal (e.g., social attachment, social identity) firm-related (e.g., customer- firm relationship), cultural (e.g., long term orientation) and coping (e.g., neutralization techniques) factors to explain the processes through which various antecedents impact ethical beliefs, intentions and behaviour of consumers.

As work on the moderating mechanism has been scarce, examination of boundary conditions in upcoming studies is warranted. Investigating the boundary conditions can lead to meaningful insight into the relationship between consumer ethics and its antecedents. For instance, examining the moderating role of mindfulness, trust in advertising, power distance, neutralization techniques, and so forth, merit investigation. Similarly, exploring the boundary conditions can better explain the inconsistent relationship between religiosity and consumer ethics (Arlı & Tjiptono, 2014; Arlı et al., 2020; Cooper & Pullig, 2013). Additionally, peer pressure, social comparison, and of demographic factors such as age, gender, and so forth, can also be examined as moderators in unethical consumer behaviour context (Chowdhury, 2019; Viglia et al., 2019).

5.3.3 | Outcome

While CEBs have been predominantly examined as an outcome variable, studies examining the consequences of CEBs have been nonexistent. We found just one research wherein the impact of CEBs on green buying intentions was examined (Lu et al., 2015). Examining the actual behaviour in addition to intentions and ethical judgment as a dependent variable remains a significant challenge for researchers (Arlı et al., 2020; Chowdhury & Fernando, 2013; Pinto et al., 2020). Specifically, future research can investigate the relationship between consumer prosocial behaviour and their perception about the threat to a just world order (White et al., 2012). Additionally, researchers should focus on exploring the role of consumers' implicit attitudes more than explicit attitudes, since the former are the real drivers behind ethical purchase behaviour (Govind et al., 2019; Mai et al., 2019).

5.3.4 | Methodology (M)

Much research is quantitative and cross-sectional. Future studies can employ longitudinal research to see whether CEBs and intention transform into actual behaviour (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014; Arlı et al., 2016; Vassilikopoulou et al., 2011). Moreover, ethnographic approaches can be applied to explore ethical behaviour in natural settings (Zou & Chan, 2019). Use of experimental setting may help to reduce social desirability bias quite often related to self-reporting on ethical issues (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2013; Gentina, Tang, et al., 2018; Chen & Moosmayer, 2020; Chowdhury, 2019) and in exploring ways to offset consumer rationalizations related to counterfeit consumption (Bian et al., 2016). The mixed method approach can be utilized in studies examining proenvironmental behaviour (Grimmer et al., 2016).

Numerous methods have been used in consumer research ranging from non-verbal techniques (e.g., painting and pictures), implicit association tests, and hypnosis (Gibson, 2008; McDonald, 1998). Adapting these methods can capture the unconscious and conscious elements influencing consumer ethical decision-making (Chatzidakis, 2015).

About sample selection, the existing body of consumer ethics research has mostly used student samples (Mai et al., 2019; Shang & Peloza, 2016; Wachter et al., 2012). So, there is a need to choose more nonstudent samples to understand consumer ethical/unethical behaviour better and generalize the results.

Negative stereotyping is a common barrier to responsible consumption (Antonetti & Maklan, 2016; Mai et al., 2019). Techniques such as laddering (qualitative) and conjoint analysis (quantitative) can help identify cues that reduce the stigma associated with ethical consumption (Mai et al., 2019). Further, we suggest that researchers employ cluster analysis, factor analysis, triangulation (Viglia et al., 2019), and other advanced research tools. Another value addition can be in the form of a bibliometric analysis or meta-analysis of the consumer ethics literature.

6 | CONCLUSION

Despite extensive coverage of articles related to consumer ethics, we cannot vouch for its exhaustiveness, and some papers might have been overlooked. Nevertheless, we are confident that this review is comprehensive and fairly representative of consumer ethics research. This review gives a summarised account of the current state of consumer ethics research in the last decade. Based on the review findings, we present significant theoretical and managerial implications. With regard to the theoretical implications majority of the review articles are based on a single theoretical underpinning. However, we presume that the application of a single theoretical perspective is insufficient to account for the complex nature of consumer ethics. Hence, we suggest researchers consider a multi-theory perspective in future studies. Such an approach might give a much clearer picture of consumer ethics research, which often involve diverse cultural and country setting. Another theoretical implication is that consumer choices vary along a broad spectrum, including outright illegal actions to prosocial and altruistic motives (Vitell & Muncy, 2005). It permits understanding the impact of the same antecedent across actions of varying ethicality. It also allows for the examination of a specific variable in different contexts. For instance, most studies have found a negative relationship between materialism and consumer's ethical behaviour (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2013; Flurry & Swimberghe, 2016; Lu & Lu, 2010). However, materialistic consumers can be motivated to act ethically by employing self-benefit appeal (vs. other-benefit appeal) in promotional campaigns (Ryoo et al., 2020). Another implication relates to the methodological issues in consumer ethics research. Our review reveals that research heavily favours quantitative methods, with particular emphasis on self-reported surveys. However, survey-based methods have their limitations and fail to encapsulate the complex nature of ethical consumption (Carrington et al., 2014). Therefore, we suggest the use of non-verbal techniques (e.g., painting and pictures), implicit association tests, and so forth, in upcoming researchers. Such methods are better suited to capture the nonrational and rational elements influencing consumer ethical decision-making (Chatzidakis,

2015; Gibson, 2008; McDonald, 1998). Finally, we found that promoters of ethical actions and inhibitors of unethical actions are not necessarily the same. Similarly, characteristics that propel consumers to engage in unethical behaviour are not essentially the same as barriers to prosocial activities. It has important theoretical implications as those who engage in ethical actions might not necessarily stay away from unethical deeds.

Consumer ethics has managerial significance as unethical acts (e.g., shoplifting, piracy, customer returns) lead to the financial burden for the company and other consumers. On the positive side, ethical consumption (e.g., buying fair trade products) leads to societal well-being and opportunities for sellers. Marketers can cue from consumer ethics research to fine-tune their communication strategies to discourage unethical behaviour, offset rationalizations, and promote ethical behaviour. For instance, antecedents like intrinsic religiosity (Chowdhury, 2018; Patwardhan et al., 2012), idealism (Zou & Chan, 2019), empathy (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014), moral intensity (Culiberg & Bajde, 2014; Yacout & Vitell, 2018), and collectivism (Swaidan, 2012) are linked to negative beliefs about unethical behaviour. Similarly, we found that firm related factors like social benefits, CSR, (Chang & Lu, 2019), dissuade consumers from committing unethical acts. These insights can help marketers to design campaigns that invoke or instil these traits among consumers and motivate them to reject unethical practices. Thus, such campaigns can be a novel way to reduce the incidence of unethical consumer behaviour. Our review also revealed that deterrence factors, namely fear of legal consequences and perceived risk, can also play a vital role in inhibiting consumer misdeeds (Koay et al., 2020). Retailers can use point of purchase displays to spread the message about the negative consequences of unethical behaviour. Practitioners can also apply research insights to engage consumers in ethical and environmentally friendly behaviour. For instance, factors that positively impact ethical behaviour can be part of marketing campaigns to promote such conduct. Prior literature has also acknowledged the inconsistency between consumers' intentions to buy ethical products and their actual purchase behaviour, termed the intentions-behaviour gap (Carrington et al., 2014; Grimmer et al., 2016). However, few studies have identified the variables which might help to reduce this gap. Based on our review insights, we present some action inputs that might help to lessen this intentions-behaviour gap. Marketers should design promotional initiatives that influence consumers' implicit attitude as they are primarily responsible for ethical consumption (Govind et al., 2019; Mai et al., 2019). Moreover, promotional campaigns should facilitate consumers to effectively plan their ethical purchases (Carrington et al., 2010). Additionally, situational factors such as price, availability, ease of purchase, and so forth, have been identified as important moderators that can positively influence the translation of intentions into actual buying behaviour (Carrington et al., 2014; Grimmer et al., 2016).

Finally, this paper has put forward a comprehensive and detailed account of the work in the field of consumer ethics. Although the last 10 years have witnessed growth in research, adding richness to this field, yet gaps in the literature exist. Promising avenues for future

research have been proposed, which may further add to this field's progress.

Specifically, we have identified research areas about theory development, context, characteristics, and methodologies for the future. In addition to the rational decision-making models, emphasis may be given to the nonrational perspective to deepen our understanding of consumer ethics. Research may also be carried out in varied contexts to better understand consumer beliefs toward various ethical and unethical acts, especially in emerging and developing markets where research has been limited. Furthermore, focusing on experimental, qualitative methods for data collection and advanced statistical tools for analysis seems to be more pertinent for better comprehension of consumer ethical decision-making process.

To conclude, advancement in this crucial research area may help marketers on the one hand to devise strategies and control mechanisms for curbing unethical consumer behaviour and, on the other hand, facilitate ethical and proenvironmental behaviour, leading to not only better customer-firm relationship but also an ethically conscious society.

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How to cite this article: Hassan, S. M., Rahman, Z., & Paul, J. (2022). Consumer ethics: A review and research agenda. *Psychol Mark*, 39, 111–130.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21580>

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