The Problematics of Being an Ethical Consumer in the Marketplace: Unpacking the Concept of Ethical Consumer Literacy

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Abstract

The United Nations' 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals highlight the need to deal with the unprecedented envi-ronmental crisis, protect human rights, and promote equality. Therefore, it is timely and important to open a discussion about consumer literacy in relation to the social and environmental aspects of consumption, especially since previous research has emphasized the difficulties involved in being an ethical consumer. This article unpacks the concept of ethical consumer literacy, distinguishes between different levels of ethical consumer literacy, and explains the potential implications for educators and policy makers. Ethical consumer literacy refers to a consumer's ability to consume in a way that will not have a negative social, animal, or environmental impact. The data set includes the consumer diaries of 53 ethically oriented consumers, which were analyzed qual-itatively. Four main dimensions linked to the notion of ethical consumer literacy emerged: (1) defining ethical consumer behavior,(2) searching for information, (3) managing information in the ethical consumer context, and (4) engaging in ethical consumer lead-ership. The authors identify two levels of ethical consumer literacy depending on participants' skills in these areas: basic and advanced. Instead of placing the responsibility on individual consumers, governments should increase ethical consumer literacy.

Keywords
ethical consumer, consumer literacy, diaries, sustainability, social impact, environmental impact, literacy, consumption

The European Environment Agency's former executive director, Jacqueline McGlade, says that maintaining current consumption patterns "is not an option. As both population and purchasing power swell worldwide, resources will be ever more overused and constrained" (European Environment Agency 2012). She therefore emphasizes the need to explore "a new model of consumption which does not compromise the needs of others or of future generations, nor damage the environment" (European Environment Agency 2012). Similarly, the United Nations' 2030 Agenda and the introduction of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) raise several issues concerning human rights, poverty, social inequality, climate change, and the depletion of natural resources (United Nations 2015). The 2030 Agenda calls for a new production and consumption model. Although change must be the result of partnerships and collaboration among social agents, it is also important to determine how consumers can contribute to this transition.

However, despite notable exceptions, many consumers still do not fully understand their role and transformative potential. In fact, understanding the broader impact of consumption, as well as how to help consumers fulfill their potential through educational interventions and policy making, has been the subject of ongoing debate in the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* (Mende and Scott 2021). We aim to contribute to this debate by focusing on the concept of ethical consumer literacy, which refers to consumers' ability to consume in a way that will not have a negative social, animal, or environmental impact. This means not only that they are interested in how their consumption affects others and the environment but also that they have the necessary skills and knowledge to function as ethical consumers in the marketplace. It is important to clarify that when we discuss consumption, we do not limit

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this to the act of purchasing; consumption also refers to consumers' use and disposal practices.

We believe that it is the right time to discuss ethical consumption from a consumer literacy perspective. Consumer literacy generally refers to a consumer's ability to perform consumption-related tasks within a specific market context (Adkins and Ozanne 2005). But are most consumers literate enough to make consumer decisions that do not compromise social, animal, and environmental welfare? In this study, we see that even in groups of ethically oriented consumers, the levels of literacy (i.e., their skills, commitment, and knowledge to consume ethically) vary greatly.

This article is structured as follows. First, we provide a brief overview of consumer literacy and explain how the lack of other types of literacy (e.g., functional or digital literacy) can affect consumer literacy. We emphasize that we understand consumer literacy as context specific; in other words, the skills and knowledge required by consumers choosing financial products (financial literacy) are different from those needed to buy, cook, and eat food (food literacy). By discussing ethical consumer literacy we add another layer to the exploration of consumer literacy. Ethical consumer literacy means that consumers not only need to make the right choice for themselves but must also consider any negative social, animal, or environmental impact of their overall consumption. Unlike other types of consumer literacy, ethical consumer literacy is not focused on specific consumption categories; instead, it permeates all consumer decisions. This certainly complicates the task of defining an overarching set of skills and knowledge that would work perfectly for all ethical consumption contexts (such as choosing ethical coffee vs. ethical banking). However, we empirically identify broader consumer areas in which different skills and knowledge are required to be an ethical consumer. This is a crucial step, as research has shown how ethically oriented consumers often feel paralyzed, burned out, and confused about their decisions (Carrington, Zwick, and Neville 2016; Longo, Shankar, and Nuttall 2019; Szmigin, Carrigan, and McEachern 2009). We suggest that, to a certain extent, these feelings have to do with their level of ethical consumer literacy.

The second part of the theoretical background defines ethical consumer behavior, that is, the types of ethical concerns and behaviors discussed in previous literature and the challenges involved. Then, we present the methodological design of our study, in which we adopted a qualitative, exploratory approach and collected data from 53 consumer diaries of self-reported ethically oriented consumers. Next, in the "Findings" section, we explain the participants' accounts, which helped us define two levels of ethical consumer literacy: basic and advanced. Finally, in the "Discussion" section, we provide suggestions for educators and policy makers.

Consumer Literacy

Wallendorf (2001) distinguishes between basic literacy, the ability to read and write, and functional literacy, the ability "to use the written information needed for full functioning in that society" (p. 505). Broadly speaking, consumer literacy is understood as a kind of functional literacy applied specifically to the consumer context. However, consumer literacy is difficult to attain for several reasons.

First, consumer literacy is interrelated with other types of literacy, low levels of which can affect consumer literacy. For instance, low reading and numeracy skills are likely to generate problems across various consumer contexts. According to Huston (2010), who focuses on financial literacy, individuals who struggle with arithmetic may also find it difficult to manage their personal finances. Low reading skills can create problems in the area of health, as patients may not be able to understand medication instructions or how to complete consent forms (Grossman, Piantadosi, and Covahey 1994). But even consumers with high basic literacy skills may have a low functional literacy level in certain consumer contexts. That is, although consumers may be able to read, they may not have the decoding and reasoning skills necessary to use the information. Similarly, Adkins and Ozanne (2005) argue that consumer literacy is more than basic literacy, in that a literate consumer can not only read and understand labels and brands; they also know their rights, can handle different consumer situations, and can construct their own identity as a consumer.

Furthermore, high consumer literacy often goes hand in hand with information and digital literacy. Consumers who rank low on informational literacy may not locate and process the information necessary to make a consumer decision, or they may experience an information overload (Castañeda et al. 2020). Modern consumers interact online, provide consumer feedback, and create content regarding their consumption. To do that, they need a certain level of digital literacy. In Table 1, we provide a brief overview of different types of literacy, which, if lacking, may affect the successful performance of certain consumer tasks (the list is not exhaustive).

Second, as consumers, we make decisions about diverse products and services, and claiming high overall levels of consumer literacy is complex. For example, a consumer may have high levels of financial literacy and therefore be able to make sound financial decisions, but may face difficulties in other consumer contexts. Previous literature has raised the difficulties involved in being literate in specific consumer contexts. For instance, much attention has been paid to health and financial services because they are classified as credence services and tend to be technical in nature and difficult to evaluate. This means that "only the most knowledgeable and determined consumers have sufficient expertise to support an informed evaluation" (Smith and Royne 2010, p. 598).

But even university students have been found to be largely unprepared to make sound financial decisions and in need of tailor-made programs to increase their financial literacy (Xiao et al. 2014). In the case of health literacy, consumers would be considered literate if they acquired advanced cognitive and social skills to obtain health information, interpreted different forms of health communication, used the health care system, and actively promoted their health (Rademakers and Heijmans 2018).

Following this line of thought, in this study, we adopt a situated literacies approach (Hyland 2016). Situated literacy emphasizes that there is no single literacy and that different

Table 1. Types of Literacy and Their Consumer Implications.

Type of Literacy	Definition	Consumer Implications
Functional literacy	The ability to use the written information needed for full functioning in society and to perform certain tasks (Wallendorf 2001). In the consumer context, functional literacy refers to "consumption-related tasks within a specific market context" (Adkins and Ozanne 2005, p. 94).	- Decreased consumer ability to meet processing demands (Wallendorf 2001). Consumers may misunderstand pricing and product information in text or numerical form (Adkins and Ozanne 2005; Gau and Viswanathan 2008) or advertisements (Jae, DelVecchio, and Childers 2011). For instance, they can have trouble locating prices, reading numerical information, recognizing terms, reading labels correctly, and calculating unit prices or price discounts (Viswanathan, Rosa, and Harris 2005; Gau and Viswanathan 2008; Viswanathan, Hastak, and Gau 2009). - Decreased ability to make overall judgments regarding specific attributes of the product, like the product's safety (Adkins and Ozanne 2005) or the product's healthiness (Viswanathan, Hastak, and Gau 2009). - Problems in managing a service encounter without help, navigating unfamiliar retail environments, reading retail signs, or dealing effectively with the excess of information and stimuli in retail environments, such as multiple price discount signs (Adkins and Ozanne 2005; Gau and Viswanathan 2008). - Substandard product choices may be made (Jae and DelVecchio 2004; Gau and Viswanathan 2008). For instance, consumers may choose a lower-quality product for a higher price. - Emotional stress can arise when low-literacy consumers carry out purchase-related tasks (Adkins and Ozanne 2005; Gau and Viswanathan 2008). - Decreased ability to handle consumer tasks after purchase. Low-literacy consumers may not know their rights or how to file a complaint (Adkins and Ozanne 2005). A lack of literacy could also lead to product misuse, such as medication misuse (Kopp 2012), or product waste, such as the incapacity to judge food edibility, which may result in food waste (Farr-Wharton, Foth, and Choi 2014). Given that low-literacy consumers rely heavily on pictographic thinking to make decisions (Viswanathan, Rosa, and Harris 2005), misleading pictures on products could lead to inappropriate use (Jae and Viswanathan 2012).
Information and digital literacy	The ability level that helps a person know when there is a need for information and be able to identify, locate, and evaluate it and effectively use it in a specific consumer situation (Li, Chen, and Wang 2021). When this takes place in the digitized environment, it is called digital literacy (Castañeda et al. 2020).	- Consumers that rank low on informational literacy may not locate the necessary information or be able to process it (Castañeda et al. 2020). - Low digital literacy limits the ability to provide feedback online and share and create content (Nam and Hwang 2021). - Low informational literacy can produce information overload in the consumer (Castañeda et al. 2020).
Media literacy	Media literacy enables consumers to recognize the commercial nature or ideological positioning of media messages (Richins 2011).	- A lack of media literacy means that consumers may lack necessary critical skills to question media messages (Richins 2011), so consumers become convinced they need products that they do not really need. This could lead to excessive materialism or even debt.

contexts may require different sets of literacy skills in order to perform the tasks required. The situated nature of literacy is further highlighted by the concept of "literacy events," which are moments in which literacy plays an important role (Barton and Hamilton 2012; Heath 1980). These events can be found in different areas of social life, such as school, family, or the workplace. In the consumer context, literacy events would include consumer-related activities that involve planning consumption, carrying it out, and evaluating one's choices. For instance, Vidgen and Gallegos (2014) identify 11 literacy events in food literacy, such as planning food intake, making balanced decisions in terms of nutrition and taste, applying basic food hygiene when preparing a meal, and understanding the impact of food on well-being.

Ethical Consumer Behavior and Ethical Consumer Literacy

Ethical consumer behavior means making consumer decisions by using and prioritizing social and environmental criteria (Harrison, Newholm, and Shaw 2005). However, prior research has emphasized that ethical consumers form a diverse group; first, their social and environmental criteria involve several issues and concerns, and, second, they may express these concerns by adopting different practices (Carrington, Neville, and Whitwell 2014; Low and Davenport 2007; Papaoikonomou 2013). Ethical concerns tend to be grouped into three main categories: animal welfare, human/social welfare, and environmental welfare (Low and Davenport 2007). Ethical consumers

may be interested in only one ethical category or a combination of them. For instance, they may be concerned with animal welfare, which could translate into adopting veganism or buying cruelty-free cosmetics. Alternatively, ethical consumers may base their consumer decisions on a combination of ethical issues. This diversity is illustrated best in the segmentation of ethical consumers by Low and Davenport (2007), who identify "Animated" consumers (interested in human and animal welfare), "Clean" consumers (interested in human and environmental welfare), "Whole Earth" consumers (interested in animal and environmental welfare), and "Triple Bottom Line" consumers (motivated by all three categories).

Ethical consumers make purchase decisions that are in line with the aforementioned ethical criteria (Hartmann and Apaolaza-Ibáñez 2012; Ozcaglar-Toulouse, Shiu, and Shaw 2006), which is also known as buycotting (Micheletti 2017) or positive buying (Harrison, Newholm, and Shaw 2005). However, some ethical consumers, also known as ethical simplifiers, choose to reduce their overall consumption levels and adopt a simpler lifestyle (Shaw and Newholm 2002). Others reject certain options individually or as part of collective boycotts. Boycotts may be justified on different grounds, for example, due to a company's unethical social record (company-oriented boycotting) or because certain products are unsustainable (product-oriented boycotting) (Harrison, Newholm, and Shaw 2005; Klein, Smith, and John 2004; Kozinets and Handelman 1998). Finally, beyond purchases, other consumer decisions relate to how the product is used and the waste it generates. Thus, ethical consumers also assess the environmental impact of products in the household and engage in recycling, sharing, energy conservation, repairing, and upcycling, among other practices (Culiberg 2014; Diamantopoulos et al. 2003; McEachern, Middleton, and Cassidy 2020; Olli, Grendstad, and Wollebaek 2001; Tan et al. 2022).

In summary, ethical consumers are concerned about how their consumption levels and choices can harm others (including humans, animals, and the environment). This affects all phases of their consumer decision-making process and involves different tasks. Previous research has shown that being an ethical consumer can be difficult for various reasons, including a lack of information, low information credibility, well-established non-ethical consumption habits, information overload, a lack of ethical options, trade-offs with traditional product criteria such as quality or price, relativity of ethics, low perceived consumer effectiveness, and inertia (Carrington, Neville, and Whitwell 2014; Longo, Shankar, and Nuttall 2019; Ozcaglar-Toulouse, Shiu, and Shaw 2006; Szmigin, Carrigan, and McEachern 2009). It has been argued that ethical consumption can be hard because of factors that are out of consumers' control (e.g., limited availability). We suggest a different approach. These well-documented challenges should be also explored through the lens of literacy. We should examine whether consumers lack the necessary skills to overcome barriers (e.g., they do not know how to look for the right information to check availability). In the Web Appendix, we show an example of a specific consumer situation: an ethical consumer who wants a new outfit for a social gathering. Following the traditional six-phase consumer decision-making process, we explain what an ethical consumer is expected to do versus what might happen. Our intention is not to place the onus on consumers for not being ethical (Carrington, Zwick, and Neville 2016; Coffin and Egan-Wyer 2022), but to reflect on the need to educate consumers and offer them tools to navigate complex marketplaces (Fuentes and Sörum 2019). We argue that consumers could function better as ethical consumers if they had more skills and knowledge.

There have been calls for initiatives to critically consider consumption and its broader environmental and social impact (from the Brundtland report [United Nations 1987] to the SDGs). Educational programs, such as programs on recycling (Ward, Wells, and Diyamandoglu 2014), have been designed to teach young people at different levels about the impact of consumption and how to remediate it. In addition, related types of literacy have been discussed or even introduced in schools and universities, such as environmental literacy (Goldman et al. 2018; Roth 1992), sustainable literacy (Décamps et al. 2017), and climate literacy (Miléř and Sládek 2011). However, these are all rather broad constructs that only partly refer to consumer decisions. Increasing ethical consumer literacy could increase consumers' ability to understand their own transformative potential and to factor ethical issues into their consumer decisions in real ways, despite the significant barriers in the marketplace.

Table 2. Distribution of Diaries.

Year	Diary Duration	Number of Participants	Pages Generated
2016	11 weeks	10	81
2017	12 weeks	24	336
2018	12 weeks	19	238
Total		53	655

Methodology

We generated data through personal diaries. The fieldwork took place over three consecutive years: 2016, 2017, and 2018. Table 2 presents the distribution of the diaries over the three-year period, and Table 3 provides information about the sample. All participants were enrolled in an online master's degree course on responsible consumption, and all expressed interest in ethical consumption. As explained by Smith et al. (2003), researchers that employ diaries recognize a trade-off between the duration of the study, the depth of information provided by participants, and the number of participants (e.g., 14 participants for six weeks vs. 50 participants for one week). Some authors argue that diaries' duration should range between two and six weeks (Siemieniako 2017), whereas others believe that the duration should not be more than four months due to possible reliability problems (Smith et al. 2003). In this

Table 3. Participant Description.

Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status, Residence, Education, Work Status, and Information Related to Ethical Consumption
2016: 10 Participants		
Katia	40s	In a relationship and has children; lives in Barcelona; holds a bachelor's degree; currently working but wants to switch and work in corporate social responsibility (CSR); tries to minimize her car usage.
Maria	30s	Lives in Palma de Mallorca; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a firm; tries to buy responsibly for her office and house.
Lidia	30s	Single; lives in a small city near Barcelona; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a firm; knows about ethical packaging labels and checks CSR reports; practices ethical consumption at home and at work.
Carla	Early 40s	Married with young children; recently moved to Barcelona from Brussels; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a firm; uses sharing economy platforms for second-hand products and criticizes the low quality and limited availability of fair-trade products in Barcelona.
Tania	30s	In a relationship; lives in Saudi Arabia; holds a PhD and works for a firm; favors local consumption and uses public transport.
Joan	Late 50s	Married with children; lives in a small city near Barcelona; holds a master's degree and works for a firm; beginner regarding ethical consumption, mainly focused on fair trade.
Pau	Late 20s	Single; lives in a small Catalan city; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a multinational company; uses ethical banking and DIY to minimize waste.
Ana	40s	Married with young children; recently moved to Vienna; holds a bachelor's degree, has worked in CSR, and currently works for a nonprofit; interested in sustainability, minimalism, CO_2 emissions, and waste management.
Pedro	Late 20s	Single; lives in the Canary Islands; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a small firm; prefers local consumption.
Mariano	50s	Lives in Barcelona; holds a bachelor's degree and works in CSR; limits plastic consumption and interested in more transparent production process.
2017: 24 Participants		
Andrés	30s	Single; lives in Madrid; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a market research consulting firm; feels guilty because he does a lot of work-related travel.
Jenny	50s	Married with a daughter in her 20s; lives in Barcelona; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a firm; very interested in ethical consumption; practices recycling, walks to work, and uses public transport instead of her car.
Katrina	40s	Married with children; from Madrid, but lives in a village nearby; holds a master's degree in sustainable development; works for a bank, but wants to switch to CSR; buys organic products, prefers local producers, and repairs instead of buying new products.
Gina	40s	Lives in Barcelona; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a firm; considers herself a whole earth consumer with a main interest in the environment and animal welfare.
Paula	40s	Married with one daughter; lives in Barcelona; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a firm; member of a nonprofit organization in favor of human rights; buys fair-trade and secondhand products.
Matilda	40s	In a relationship and has a son; lives in medium-size Spanish city; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a firm; tries to limit her overall consumption; concerned about sustainability.
Neus	30s	Single; from Belgium but lives in Barcelona; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a firm; interested in ethical consumption; is strict about recycling and plastic reduction; strongly believes that consumer actions can be effective.
Laura	30s	Lives in Mexico City; holds a bachelor's degree; works in finance and teaches it; very interested in ethical consumption, but is still a beginner.
Emilia	30s	Single; lives in Barcelona; holds a bachelor's degree and works in tourism; interested in ethical packaging labels and waste reduction.
Erika	N.A.	Single; lives in medium-size Spanish city; holds a bachelor's degree and works in consulting for a small firm; limits her overall consumption, but succumbs to impulse purchases of clothing.
Sheila	30s	Single; from Barcelona, but she lives in the Netherlands; holds a bachelor's degree and works for an online gaming company; wants to work in CSR; interested in environmental issues.
Aurelio	40s	Married; lives in a big Spanish city; holds a bachelor's degree and works in CSR for a big company; he and his wife reject the throwaway culture and prefer to repair products rather than buy new ones.
Clara	Late 30s	Married with two children; lives in medium-size Spanish city; holds a master's degree and works in finance for a big company; she, her family, and most of her friends try to be environmentally sustainable consumers.
Gael	N.A.	Single; lives in Berlin; holds a master's degree in cooperative economics and has worked in ethical banking and in cooperatives; strongly believes in consumer power to bring about change and force companies to be responsible.
Luca	Mid 40s	Married with children; lives in small Spanish city; holds a bachelor's degree and works in health and consumption for the city council; interested in ethical consumption, but thinks it is difficult to implement.
Leonardo	30s	In a relationship; lives in Barcelona; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a firm; interested in reducing plastic consumption.

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status, Residence, Education, Work Status, and Information Related to Ethical Consumption
Patricio	70s	Married with children; lives in small Spanish city; holds a bachelor's degree and is retired; prefers local products but does not consider himself an ethical consumer.
Maite	Late 20s	Single; lives in big Colombian city; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a multinational company; interested in practicing ethical consumption at home and at work.
Carolina	50s	Married with two children; lives in Barcelona; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a firm; reads nutritional information carefully because her children have allergies; considers becoming vegetarian and buys from secondhand markets.
Aina	Late 20s	Single; lives in small Spanish village; holds a bachelor's degree and works in consulting; buys organic products and does not use plastic bags; her family and friends are not as aware and interested as she is in ethical consumption.
Veronica	30s	In a relationship; lives in Barcelona; holds a bachelor's degree in environmental sciences and works for a firm; considers herself a conscious consumer with regard to social and environmental issues.
Noa	30s	In a relationship and has children; lives in Barcelona; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a firm; is a vegetarian in the process of becoming a vegan; argues that ethical consumption options are hard to find.
Noor	40s	Married with small children; lives in Andorra; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a firm; considers herself a highly committed responsible consumer; grows her own vegetables, has an electric car, does not buy in excess, and has her electric appliances repaired instead of replaced.
Gloria	Late 20s	Single; lives in small Spanish city; holds a bachelor's degree and works part time; mainly buys local products; considers herself a responsible consumer, except for her consumer decisions related to leisure.
2018: 19 Participants		
Irene	30s	In a relationship; lives in Barcelona; holds a bachelor's degree in environmental sciences and works in animal protection; involved in activism; has organized awareness campaigns, lobbying so that companies would implement more animal-friendly practices; interested in ethical consumption as a social pressure tool.
Ángeles	40s	Married with children; lives in a small Spanish village; holds a bachelor's degree and works in marketing for a big Spanish firm; buys organic and local products because of health concerns for herself and her family.
Carlos	40s	Married with children; lives in Mexico; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a firm; prefers local and small producers; is still a beginner with ethical consumption practices.
Mihaela	30s	Single; lives in Bilbao; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a small firm, but wants to work in CSR; interested in minimalism and in reducing energy and water waste.
José	N.A.	Lives in Vienna; holds a bachelor's degree and works in a hotel chain; searches for information about ethical banking; is interested in sustainable tourism and willing to learn more about ethical consumption.
Silvana	30s	Single; lives in Barcelona; holds a bachelor's degree and works in a university; is very interested in organic products and sustainable products with long life cycle (like menstrual cups).
Marta	N.A.	Single; lives in Madrid; holds a master's degree in environmental law and works for a firm; makes a constant effort to stay informed about ethical options across various product categories and helps her family buy ethically.
Adela	30s	In a relationship; lives in Madrid; holds a bachelor's degree and works in occupational therapy; in charge of the projects department at a nongovernmental organization for people with disabilities.
Carla	30s	Single; lives in Barcelona; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a firm; only buys fair-trade products.
Elsa	20s	Single; lives in Madrid; holds a bachelor's degree and works in the stock market; reduces her car usage and water waste.
Cristina	N.A.	Single; lives in Colombia; holds a bachelor's degree and is an entrepreneur; uses ethical labels when buying products.
Cesilia	30s	Married and has one small child; lives in Andorra; holds a bachelor's degree and works in marketing; is particularly interested in the environment and sustainable development.
Dafne	30s	Single; lives in medium-size Spanish city; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a firm; has a long-term interest in ethical consumption; tries to remain informed through blogs and news articles.
Bárbara	30s	Single; lives in a small city near Barcelona; holds a bachelor's degree and works as a high school tech teacher; prefers seasonal, local, and organic food and is a member of a food cooperative; is interested in explaining ethical consumption to her students.
Macarena	Late 20s	In a relationship; lives in small Spanish village; holds a bachelor's degree in environmental engineering and works for a firm; has a lifelong interest in environmental protection and sustainable development.
Ariadna	30s	Single; lives in Valencia; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a firm; is particularly interested in sustainability, CSR, and sustainable fashion.
Mamen	30s	Single; holds a bachelor's degree and works in consulting, but wants to switch to working in CSR; is in the process of learning more about ethical consumption.
Alejandro	20s	Single; lives in small Spanish village; holds a bachelor's degree and works for a firm; is interested in ethical packaging labels and recycling.
Fatima	Early 40s	Married with children; lives in Madrid; holds a bachelor's degree and works as an executive of a public company; is trying to fix her mistakes as a consumer and become more responsible in the future.

Notes: N.A. = not available.

study, participants were asked to keep diaries over a period of 11 to 12 weeks.

Incentives in the form of credit were offered to ensure participation, as diaries tend to be time-consuming and participants may lose interest (Sheble, Thomson, and Wildemuth 2009). Participants were also reminded of the diaries' pedagogical function, that is, to gain self-awareness and learn more about personal consumption habits. Nevertheless, despite the incentives, not all students completed the required diary entries (around 60% submitted them). A total of 53 diaries were submitted over the three-year period. As explained in Table 3, some of the participants were beginners, whereas others were much more experienced, self-reported ethical consumers.

Diaries have been suggested as an appropriate data collection tool for consumer research because they reflect consumers' "true" behavior and can yield rich insights into consumer settings, processes, and behavior (Patterson 2005). According to Bolger, Davis, and Rafaeli (2003), diaries help researchers explore participants' experiences in their natural context, reduce the time between the experience and its recording, and help researchers study temporal dynamics. Furthermore, they increase participants' self-awareness and may lead to changes in behavior, and thus have been used in the fields of health and nutrition (Zepeda and Deal 2008). Also, diaries record ordinary events that might otherwise be missed, and minimize researchers' intervention in the data collection process (Sheble, Thomson, and Wildemuth 2009).

The scope of the diary entries was intended to be broad and to include different phases of participants' ethical decision-making process (when they recognized the need for consumption, when and where they looked for information, when they carried on with a purchase, their recycling and upcycling practices, their decision to avoid a purchase). Participants were attending a course on responsible consumption, so they had access to information on ethical consumer practices, but they were free to choose those situations and decisions that they considered relevant. They were asked to be honest and narrate their ethical habits and their achievements, but also their inconsistencies. A combination of time- and event-based diary design was used (Bolger, Davis, and Rafaeli 2003). Time-based designs require participants to report specific time periods. Event-based designs request diary entries every time the "triggering effect" takes place (Bolger, Davis, and Rafaeli 2003, p. 591). Participants were encouraged to write an entry at least once a week, but also to provide accounts of the studied phenomenon every time it happened. This resulted in a different number of entries per participant. Diary entries were submitted online in Spanish, so there was no need to transcribe them. In total, the 53 diaries' entries resulted in 655 single-spaced pages in 10-point text. During data analysis, coding was carried out in English, and the most relevant quotes were translated to English by one of the researchers.

Data analysis followed some of the tenets of grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2014). A flexible strategy was employed, and there were consequent rounds of data collection and analysis. In 2017 and 2018, participants were asked to submit partial submissions, although this was not obligatory. One of the authors read them and provided feedback before the final submission. For example, some participants did not initially understand what they were asked to do, others gave very little detail, and some were asked to elaborate on certain entries that seemed particularly relevant for the scope of the study. This strategy improved many of the final submissions, although some exceptions were found, such as very few or very brief entries. Data were coded individually by one author and were then reviewed by all three. Two of the authors were more familiar with ethical consumption literature, whereas the third had more knowledge of the broader literature on literacy. The concepts of literacy and literacy skills were not mentioned to participants at any point. The analysis showed differences in terms of skills, knowledge, and commitment regarding ethical consumption.

Findings: Levels of Ethical Consumer Literacy

Prior research indicates the problematics of being an ethical consumer. Fuentes and Sörum (2019, p. 131) argue that "being and becoming an ethical consumer remains a difficult endeavour." For Szmigin, Carrigan, and McEachern (2009), the ethical consumption context is a complex task environment. Thus, consumers require different skills to navigate it. Our data analysis enabled us to identify four main dimensions related to ethical consumer literacy: define ethical consumer behavior, access and search for ethical information, understand and evaluate ethical information, and engage in ethical consumer leadership. Within each of these dimensions, two levels of ethical consumer literacy are suggested (basic and advanced), since, similar to the findings of previous studies (Brinkmann and Peattle 2008; Wooliscroft, Ganglmair-Wooliscroft, and Noone 2014), ethical consumer lifestyles are carried out at different intensities.

First Dimension: Define Ethical Consumer Behavior

What constitutes an ethical consumer practice? Cherrier (2007) and Szmigin, Carrigan, and McEachern (2009, p. 225) agree that when it comes to ethical consumption, there is not one "regime of truth," and what may constitute an ethical option for one consumer may not be ethical for another. However, beyond the individual conceptions of ethicality in consumption that largely depend on what is important to each consumer (e.g., animal or environmental welfare), we identify two main challenges regarding consumers' ability to define ethical consumption.

First, when it comes to ethical purchasing or buycotting (Micheletti 2017), some consumers may easily define what an ethical purchase would be in specific product contexts. Lidia, for example, when purchasing office material, defines ethicality in terms of the company's transparency, its compliance with environmental credentials, and its certifications.

> Yesterday I purchased ecological material for the office online, material that follows criteria of sustainability and environmental and social respect. I bought it on the website of [name of the company]. I chose this company because, of all the companies I found on the internet, it was the one that was most socially and

> environmentally committed. It specifically stated on its website that they not only offer products with a solid environmental behavior, but they also ensure compliance with environmental credentials throughout the entire supply chain. It is the first company on the market to implement a multisite FSC and PEFC certification to guarantee complete traceability and transparency throughout the supply chain. (Lidia, Entry 5, 2016)

Others, like Carla, perceive local sourcing as the ethical option, which is also a common finding in previous studies (Carfagna et al. 2014; Papaoikonomou 2013; Szmigin, Carrigan, and McEachern 2009). Carla criticizes long production/consumption cycles as highly unsustainable especially for products that can be bought locally, like locally sourced fruits and vegetables.

> I always think about where the products come from. I always make sure that they do not come from far away. I refuse to buy apples from Chile for example. I understand that if I buy a pineapple it will come from far away, but an apple certainly not. (Carla, Entries 5 and 6, 2016)

However, modern consumers need to make a lot of purchase decisions every day. Most of our participants strive to be ethical, but they are unsure how to define what an ethical purchase option would be for the different consumer decisions they need to make. For example, Katia, until recently, had never considered what an ethical purchase would be in the case of media subscriptions and financial products. Now that she does, she cannot determine "ethicality" in these specific consumption contexts.

> I just became conscious that my retirement plan is actually an investment, a consumer decision I make, and as such it should be decided responsibly from my side. (Katia, 2016, Entry 8)

> About media subscriptions like Netflix. I just started thinking what ethical consumption is when we are choosing them. I also consider that this is a bit complicated to determine, since they are services that do not have an environmental impact. (Katia, 2016, Entry 9)

Micheletti (2017) has argued that the ethicality of a purchase option may be much clearer in certain sectors like food or wood products than in electronics or toys. Similarly, our results show that it is not always clear how to define what an ethical purchase would be for every choice.

Second, ethical consumption goes beyond purchasing. An ethical consumer would also scale down on consumption, swap, donate, recycle, upcycle, and share (Black and Cherrier 2010; Culiberg 2014; Papaoikonomou 2013; Tan et al. 2022; Wooliscroft, Ganglmair-Wooliscroft, and Noone 2014). Carla offers examples of swapping, repairing, and recycling practices in her entries. All these practices aim to lengthen the life of products, whether used by the participants themselves or others, and form part of sustainable lifestyles (Black and Cherrier 2010).

> There are also some clothing exchange initiatives that are praiseworthy and give great results. At my children's school, people donate clothes, and then they organize a flea market with the donated clothes to get funds for school trips. Most of the school's families participate. At my daughter's daycare, there was also like an exchange thing going on and if anyone wanted to donate clothes or toys, others who needed them would go and pick them up. (Carla, Entry 4, 2016)

> There are some initiatives like "Better than new," promoted by Barcelona City Council, where you can take objects that need repairing or that can be given a new use. You can repair bicycles, furniture, clothes or even small electrical appliances. Specialists can repair it for free or you can find the tools you need to repair it yourself. I went there to have my bicycle repaired and my clothes on multiple occasions. (Carla, Entry 7, 2016)

However, it was interesting to observe that many diaries' entries focus on the decision of purchase. Some participants either describe ethical purchases or discuss their decision to avoid certain purchases. Even for consumers like Katia, who grows her own vegetables and recycles, ethical consumption tends to be linked to purchase-related situations. In the following quote, she explains how she struggled to fill out the diary on her weekly ethical consumer practices due to a lack of consumption.

> I'm having a bit of a hard time filling out the diary, as I haven't spent much this week. (Katia, Entry 9, 2016)

So, the question emerges: do some ethically oriented consumers limit their definition of ethical consumer behavior to ethical purchasing? Indeed, previous research on ethical consumption has largely focused on ethical purchasing, why consumers do not "walk their talk," and the criteria considered valid "ethical" purchase criteria (e.g., Carrington, Neville, and Whitwell 2014; Hassan et al. 2013). For Uusitalo and Oksanen (2004, p. 215), "individual consumers can have a significant role, through their daily purchase decisions." Similarly, Culiberg (2014) claims that recycling, although widely studied, has received less attention from an ethical consumer perspective.

Thus, regarding this first dimension and the different levels of ethical consumer literacy, a basic level would imply a narrower definition, focus, and, often, application of ethical consumer practices. One of our participants, Joan, explains that his ethical consumption is limited to buying fair-trade coffee and sugar. Joan does not mention other examples of ethical purchases, and he does not describe practices like repair and recycling. Consumers like Joan may have recently become more concerned about the impact of their consumption and cannot translate ethicality across different consumer contexts and practices that do not involve new purchases, such as sharing, swapping, or donating.

At the advanced level of ethical consumer literacy, consumers can define and apply ethical concerns as a guiding principle for most decisions, both in the front and end stages of consumption. Examples of more advanced levels of ethical consumer literacy would involve ethical purchasing, but also swapping, DIY practices, and redistribution, together with an overall effort to

minimize consumption. Ana, in her second entry, describes what she calls a "zero waste fundamentalist couple," who, among other things, make their own shampoo and toothpaste. They would be an example of advanced ethical consumer literacy, because their notion of ethicality is not limited to specific ethical purchases, but implies a broader interest in waste reduction and DIY practices.

> Last week we met a "zero waste fundamentalist" couple. We want to be like them!! Although I assumed beforehand that we are not going to make our own shampoo and toothpaste. I have no time. My usual excuse. Although if they have time … (Ana, Entry 2, 2016)

Previous research also argues that it is not consumers' purchasing but their reducing, rejecting, and reusing practices that represent harder-to-adopt and more committed ethical consumer decisions and thereby place them at the top of the hierarchy for sustainable lifestyles (Black and Cherrier 2010; Lee, Fernandez, and Hyman 2009; Wooliscroft, Ganglmair-Wooliscroft, and Noone 2014).

Second Dimension: Access and Search for Ethical Information

At the basic level of ethical consumer literacy, consumers are capable of quickly and easily locating ethical information about specific product categories and ethical criteria. For instance, many participants state that information about fair-trade products, particularly coffee and chocolate, is easy to find. But in other product categories, such as financial products, finding information about ethical options is more complex. The following two entries show how for Joan, information is far more available when he buys coffee than when he chooses his car insurance.

> I read an article that coffee capsules are polluting the environment a lot. … So, with my partner we decided to make a change. … But not any type of coffee, I wanted to consume coffee produced and marketed based on Fair Trade criteria. There is a lot of information about Fair Trade, both online, websites, blogs … and offline with lots of books on the subject. (Joan, Entry 7, 2016)

> I had the objective to change my car insurance to one that respects ethical criteria. … There is not a lot of information about this. (Joan, Entry 2, 2016)

For Joan, ethical coffee equates to fair-trade coffee. He does not consider the clash with other ethical criteria (e.g., carbon dioxide emissions from transporting fair-trade coffee) that have been raised in previous research (Jaffee and Howard 2010). Joan's method of searching for ethical information (second dimension of ethical consumer literacy) is linked to his own definition of ethical consumption (first dimension of ethical consumer literacy). Here, Joan identifies a fair-trade coffee purchase as ethical, so his search focuses on that. However, when it comes to financial products, Joan is not sure what the ethical choice would be. What ethical criteria should be used when choosing car insurance? If Joan cannot define what constitutes an ethical option, this would also hinder his search for information. Therefore, basic skills in locating relevant ethical information mean that the consumer has a certain, but limited, capacity for identifying and using relevant ethical criteria across different product categories and, then, for searching for ethical information from different sources. Our findings show that less experienced participants, like Joan, found looking for information more difficult because they did not know how. Some of them were confused about what information to search for, or which keywords to use. For example, Erika was looking for a product with a generic "eco" profile. She searched on Google for two weeks (Entries 2 and 3), and she was amazed and overwhelmed by the number of results.

> So we were looking for a product with an "eco" profile. As per usual, my first search was online and through the quintessential search engine (Google). A total of more than 3.3 million results came up. Awesome. (Erika, Entry 3, 2017)

With so much information available, the consumer was able to further limit her search by changing the search parameters or by focusing on a few reliable sources. Nevertheless, at this level of ethical consumer literacy, consumers do not yet have a clear idea of the type of information they are looking for, and they often carry out generic searches that prove inefficient and unsuccessful. This is also evidenced by Matilda (Entry 4, 2017), who wanted to make her household consumption more responsible, so she used generic keywords like "how to be responsible at home." The search results were irrelevant and focused on family relationships and how to avoid domestic noise.

At the advanced level of ethical consumer literacy, consumers are more experienced. Using the right keywords and checking relevant online sources are essential for a successful search and are linked to digital literacy (Castañeda et al. 2019). Even if consumers cannot set the right parameters from the start, they should be capable of redefining them until they reach the information they need. Here, Fatima describes her journey sourcing relevant information on minimizing her water consumption at home:

> I googled the combination "responsible + consumption + water" and I found so many pages with generalities and advice that didn't really tell me much. Then I visited official pages like the website of the Ministry of Agriculture. The Ministry has a whole section about it. That's a good start! But I'm already doing all the things they mentioned, applying them in my everyday life. My intention was to go a step further, to "professionalize" my water management. I changed my search to "save + water + devices" to see what would come up. There was information on pearlizers, eco-showers, cistern mechanisms, etc. Then I went to Carrefour to see if they had any of these. (Fatima, Entry 2, 2018)

Fatima did not use the correct keywords in the beginning, but she managed to advance her search because she knew how to employ alternative search strategies. Also, at the advanced

level of ethical consumer literacy, consumers can use more complex combinations of ethical criteria in their searches. Macarena, for example, has a long checklist of ethical criteria for cosmetics. She considers criteria related to animal welfare (cruelty free), health (natural product), and the environment (recyclable packaging), showing that she is interested not only in the product's benefits and production process, but also in the waste it generates.

> When I started searching on the internet, I saw that there are quite a few brands that use cruelty-free products of natural origin, but it is difficult to find a brand that also uses biodegradable or recyclable packaging. I have to say that the search for brands of natural makeup has been less frustrating than I expected, although I got a little desperate when I couldn't find many brands that use recyclable packaging. (Macarena, Entry 5, 2018)

At this level of ethical consumer literacy, information searches are more sophisticated than those at a basic level. As previously mentioned, consumers, to a great extent, have the necessary skills to search and access ethical information (they can identify the correct keywords for their search, look at different sources, and redefine their search parameters until they find the information they need). Also, some participants, such as Carla and Katia, put significant cognitive effort into the search. Katia mentions that she spends time and effort searching and reading available information. Carla adds that she carefully reads all labels and might visit different shops to find an ethical option.

> Despite my desire to search for information, I must confess that it is a task that requires time, dedication and the ability to discern the information that is found. (Katia, Entry 4, 2016)

> I must say that it is not easy. For example, this week I went to three different supermarkets to look for a hair softening cream that was CO2 neutral and that I had previously bought, and I couldn't find it, nor any other brand that offered me some added value. I finally bought the one that was produced in the country, because I had no other way to choose a product. I guess I should try harder and find a store that sells them. I plan to do it. But I know that most people will not. Not even a few … not everyone spends as much time as I do, reading labels to make up their mind. (Carla, Entry 5, 2016)

Because consumers at this level make a considerable effort when searching for information, they also tend to develop strategies that would help them in the future. One strategy involves thinking about future needs and developing tools that would facilitate future decisions. Many participants carefully plan and systematically organize any ethical information they find. For example, Katia (in different entries) creates a directory of "ethical places" and "ethical products" across various product categories. Ana explains in a couple of her entries that she notes shops that sell organic clothes for her children, even if she does not need to buy anything at the time. Gael recently moved to Berlin and started preparing a map of the city's vegan restaurants, which he also shares with friends and family.

> I made the map of vegan restaurants or restaurants with a vegan option. On this map we use different images to indicate if they are only vegan and we write a small comment after going there … it's especially useful when you can't think of places to go. … We have also shared the map with family and friends that are vegan and want to visit Berlin. (Gael, Entry 5, 2017)

Also, quite a few participants try to remain informed by subscribing to blogs, following the Twitter (now X) accounts of ethical companies, joining Facebook groups focused on certain ethical issues, and using ethical consumption apps (Fuentes and Sörum 2019).

Third Dimension: Understand and Evaluate Ethical Information

Cherrier (2007) claims that despite having access to ethical information, consumers may experience the inability to know. Our empirical data set shows exactly that: sometimes participants can locate information about ethical consumption, but they cannot process it and translate it into usable knowledge. Cecilia emphasizes the following issues: (1) the technical terminology used, (2) the difficulty in discerning useful knowledge, and (3) the reliability of the information available. The latter has been raised in previous research (Papaoikonomou, Ryan, and Ginieis 2011; Uusitalo and Oksanen 2004).

> There is a good amount of information, but there were quite a few web pages with technical vocabulary that sometimes made it difficult to understand the article correctly. Also, sometimes it is difficult to filter information from lies, since many companies, far from betting on sustainability, want to profit. Examples of this can be banks, insurance companies … there is so much information and it's very diverse, so it would take a lot of time and effort to choose the most valid option. (Cecilia, Entry 2, 2018)

In this dimension, at the basic level of ethical consumer literacy, consumers can understand simple information and identify the most widely known ethical packaging labels. For Silvana, being able to carefully read the labels was the first step toward ethical consumption, especially since certifications can be found across sectors and product categories:

> So, this means that I have begun to consciously and carefully observe the labeling of the food I consume. (Silvana, Entry 1, 2018)

Other participants, like Pau, can easily recognize labels in certain product contexts (fair-trade and ecological labels on food; cruelty-free labels on cosmetics), but that is the extent of their knowledge.

> I knew about ecological labels and ecological products, but in that store, I saw a wide diversity of ethical products and ethical labels that I had never heard about. (Pau, Entry 7, 2016)

At the basic level, consumers are guided by simple and visual information. When searching for a new car, Mamen (Entry 3, 2018) was guided by the classifications of the Spanish

Department of Traffic Management: blue category (zero emissions, the most environmentally friendly), blue and green category, green category, and yellow category (the least environmentally friendly). All these categories come with a sticker that drivers put on their car. At this basic level, consumers may actively look and read ethical information, but they often lack the necessary knowledge to understand it. Paula explains in various entries that reading the packaging or blogs is not enough to evaluate the healthiness of cosmetics and determine what substances are dangerous for the human body.

> The search took me quite a lot of time, like 3 or 4 hours, and it was complicated to locate information that would be easy to understand. Yes, I've found blogs that publish information about cosmetics, but I'm left with this feeling of not being too clear about all the information provided. Perhaps I don't really have the knowledge needed to fully understand the type of information I was accessing. (Paula, Entry 4, 2017)

Paula accepts that she lacks the knowledge to understand what she is reading. These findings resonate with previous research (Hassan et al. 2013) showing that ethically oriented consumers may have located relevant information, but lack the knowledge and confidence to evaluate and use it.

At the advanced level of ethical consumer literacy, consumers can recognize most ethical labels and process ethical information of a higher technical complexity, such as reading technical reports and contrasting them with academic studies. These consumers can understand distinct pieces of data related to ethical consumption, from ingredients and labels to certifications, reports, and academic studies. They are capable of not only understanding more complex information, but also critically comparing different sources. Aurelio discusses the technical reports he has read about coltan and mobile phones (Entry 1), about materials used to make clothing and their environmental impact (Entry 4), and about the use of palm oil (Entry 7). Bárbara (Entry 1) narrates how she read an article about caffeine and its potential to pollute water, which prompted her to research further in academic journals before forming an opinion. For consumers with lower levels of ethical consumer literacy, consumers like Bárbara are often seen as "experts," the knowledgeable ones, and are used as reliable sources of information for ethical consumer-related decisions. For Fuentes and Sörum (2019, p. 150), consumers with this level of literacy are called "proficient complexity managers."

Fourth Dimension: Engage in Ethical Consumer Leadership

The fourth dimension involves consumers' capacity to generate social change and act as ethical consumer leaders. At the basic level of ethical consumer literacy, consumer action is limited to the individual level, that is, their individual purchase decisions or recycling practices in the household and workplace. Maite, for instance, explains that she decided to replace the disposable cups she was using for her morning coffee at the office with a reusable mug that she brought from home.

> I like coffee and I usually drink it in the office. I used to use those disposable cups they have there. When I thought about the situation, I realized that just like I have a reusable water bottle for drinking water, I can have my own mug and use it every time I feel like drinking coffee. Disposable cups are only used once and are difficult to recycle. (Maite, Entry 2, 2017)

Maite's decision, along with many of the practices described in previous quotes, refers to an individual practice. Maite proactively decided to change an unsustainable habit and followed the necessary steps to adopt it. This shows a certain degree of initiative because no one else in her workplace did so and no one asked her to do so. However, although laudable, practices that only affect individual behavior have a more limited impact than larger collective projects (Brinkmann and Peattle 2008). Using the same example, if Maite had asked her managers to replace all disposable cups with reusable mugs, the impact would have been greater.

At the advanced level of ethical consumer literacy, consumer action, which can take different forms, transcends the individual domain to generate broader change. For example, in a previous quote, Lidia described purchasing eco-friendly office material for her workplace. Her decision had a larger impact than just buying for her household. Similarly, Gael has been working toward adopting new sustainable initiatives in his workplace to limit customers' plastic consumption and waste generation (not just his own).

> I continuously collaborate with the owners to optimize the environmental impact of the coffee shop's actions. One of the actions we have started recently is to promote the reuse of glasses, cups, etc. for the consumption of takeaway drinks. The negative impact that paper or plastic cups have on the environment is widely known and even though where I work they only use recycled paper cups, the amount of waste is enormous … they were satisfied with this initiative and several of us, that form part of the staff, continuously look for new initiatives to reduce the environmental impact [of the business]. (Gael, Entry 7, 2017)

Another way to achieve greater change is by promoting, organizing, and/or participating in collective ethical consumer projects. Bekin, Carrigan, and Szmigin (2007) and Papaoikonomou, Valverde, and Ryan (2012) examine examples from the UK's New Consumption Communities and the Spanish Responsible Consumption Cooperatives, respectively. In both studies, the collective nature of the projects is linked to higher effectiveness compared with individual action, thus facilitating the adoption of a diverse range of practices within the community, including ethical purchasing, waste management, and repairing. Collective projects are more difficult to initiate and execute, as confirmed in previous research (Bekin, Carrigan, and Szmigin 2007; Papaoikonomou, Valverde, and Ryan 2012): conflicts and tensions may emerge because consumer decisions affect the entire collective, negotiation takes place, and planning is more complex. For example, Maite's change only required her to bring her own mug from home. Lidia does not say whether she had to advocate or convince her superiors to shift to eco-friendly material for the

office. However, when an ethical consumer practice concerns more than one person, its complexity typically increases, as the initiator needs to convince others to participate in the project and plan (or help plan) its execution. In Entry 2 (2018), Elsa describes a small project she initiated at work to reuse paper. Although she managed to convince her colleagues to participate, the project ultimately failed because it was not well planned. In any case, the examples of Gael, Lidia, and Elsa show how they tried to implement change, albeit small, for themselves and others. At the advanced level of ethical consumer literacy, consumers can assume a role of consumer leadership and act as catalysts for change. Some participants in Carfagna et al.'s (2014) study of a food swap would fall into this category: they are described as "entrepreneurs" trying to create a new culture of "real food" and "empowering others" (pp. 171–72).

Furthermore, at the advanced level of ethical consumer literacy, consumers also generate change by consistently informing and guiding others on what constitutes ethical consumer behavior, where to find ethical products, how to save energy, and which products to avoid. One example is Irene (Entry 9, 2018), who claims to act as an "influencer" by taking advantage of every opportunity to raise awareness about ethical consumption among the people around her: "my family, with my friends, in supermarkets, restaurants." Carla is another example as she consistently intends to raise awareness among other people:

> The packaging (I always pay attention to the packaging!) said "Valencia Oranges," but then, in small letters, it said "origin: South Africa," so I didn't buy them. A little later I met a girl I know and I saw her picking up those same oranges, so I warned her. She is not my friend, but we have friends in common and I know that she is a person who tries to be sustainable. She thanked me. We must warn others when advertising is misleading. (Carla, Entry 6, 2016).

Carla could have easily kept the information to herself, but she felt an obligation to share it with others. Not all participants feel the same way. For example, Aina is not interested in assuming the role of generating awareness among others:

> You find yourself in situations where you have to adopt a role of raising social consciousness [in others] and you don't feel like it. (Aina, Entry 7, 2017)

In this fourth dimension, consumers may even have their own websites, blogs, and social media accounts to communicate information about ethical consumption; an example from previous research is the personal blogs on Freeganism in Pentina and Amos's (2011) study. Leonardo describes a blog whose creators would be considered to be at the advanced level of ethical consumer literacy:

> "Living without plastic." This is a blog written by Patri and Fer … they have been living without plastic for more than a year. They mention a thousand ideas about alternatives to plastic: alternatives to garbage bags, plastic film, you can also find advice, current information on the topic and initiatives. Another very interesting aspect is the section "Bulk stores," it is a directory of bulk stores throughout the country, and they have opened the directory so we can all add stores they may have missed. (Leonardo, Entry 1, 2017)

Finally, consumers generate change by engaging in traditional activism, demanding structural and institutional change, and achieving changes to governmental and corporate policy. In Papaoikonomou, Valverde, and Ryan (2012, p. 22), some interviewees participated in campaigns about sustainability and ecology against genetically modified organisms by "collecting signatures in the street" and "regularly writing articles in their magazine." Some participants from our study, like Neus, also engage in more traditional activism, campaigns, street protests, and performances, such as the following:

> Yesterday I joined the "Route of the horrors of international trade," organized by Setem on the occasion of World Fair Trade Day with the aim of making consumers aware of the impact of their purchasing decisions and presenting alternatives for responsible consumption. It was a guided route along Passeig de Gràcia with a stop at four major brands to denounce the violation of human, labor and environmental rights in the development of their activity. In each company, a performance was carried out by the activists and a video was projected on the facade explaining their violations. (Neus, Entry 8, 2017)

Discussion

One of the most pressing challenges of our time is the transition toward a more sustainable model of consumption and production, which is in fact the 12th SDG. Previous work in the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* has explored how consumption could become beneficial for the greater good and has suggested how policy makers could help encourage the adoption of reuse practices and slow consumption (Scott and Weaver 2018), wiser consumption (Ozanne et al. 2021), moral consumption (Komarova Loureiro et al. 2016), and mindful consumption (Bahl et al. 2016). Although these concepts are different and do not share the same scope (e.g., slow consumption is focused on the environmental aspects of consumption, whereas moral consumption and mindful consumption are much broader), they share common ground in that consumption can have transformative potential for societies and consumers and "can serve as a catalyst for SDGs" (Mende and Scott 2021, p. 120). Nowadays, many encouraging and transformative small-scale experiments can be found; examples include the New Consumption Communities (Bekin, Carrigan, and Szmigin 2007), ethical consumption cooperatives (Papaoikonomou, Valverde, and Ryan 2012), food swaps and time banks (Carfagna et al. 2014), and repair cafés, where volunteers gather to repair everyday objects (Madon 2022). But these are nonetheless marginal. Many consumers are still not ready to embrace their transformative potential, which should be enabled by institutions, companies, and policy makers.

Furthermore, a lot of previous research on ethical consumption shows that many ethically oriented consumers struggle to be ethical consumers (Carrington, Zwick, and Neville 2016;

Connolly and Prothero 2008; Fuentes and Sörum 2019; Longo, Shankar, and Nuttall 2019; Papaoikonomou 2013). Carrington, Zwick, and Neville (2016, p. 32) describe ethical consumers as the "hysterical subject" who continuously wonders if they are doing the right thing. This struggle has been related to issues outside of the control of the individual consumer (e.g., lack and complexity of information, inefficient ethical products, limited availability of ethical offerings) and the problematic "responsabilization" of ethical consumers, who alone cannot amend the wrongdoings of capitalism (Carrington, Zwick, and Neville 2016; Fuentes and Sörum 2019). Although we agree with this and emphasize the need for holistic, systemic solutions that require multiactor collaborations, we suggest examining this struggle from a different lens, the lens of ethical consumer literacy. We have described ethical consumer literacy as consumers' ability to consume ethically, or in a way that will not have a negative social, animal, or environmental impact. Simply put, a literate, ethical consumer can function as an ethical consumer in the marketplace. But do modern consumers, even ethically oriented ones, have the necessary skills to successfully carry out different ethical consumer-related practices, including ethical purchasing, swapping, sharing, reusing, and recycling, and the different tasks involved?

In that regard, we examined our empirical data set of 53 diaries to see whether our participants' lack of skills would hinder their ability to function as ethical consumers. Four main relevant dimensions of our notion of ethical consumer literacy emerged from our data: (1) participants' (in)ability to define ethical consumer behavior across multiple contexts and situations, (2) their skills and ability to search for and access ethical information, (3) their skills and ability to interpret and use ethical information, and (4) their capacity for ethical consumer leadership. Within each of these dimensions, we distinguish between the basic and advanced levels of ethical consumer literacy.

Overall, at the basic level of ethical consumer literacy, consumers have a simple and basic notion of ethical consumption, and they possess certain, although limited, skills to function in the marketplace as ethical consumers. At the other end, consumers with advanced levels of ethical consumer literacy have superior skills, knowledge, and commitment to ethical consumption. Van Rooij, Lusardi, and Alessie (2011) distinguish between basic and advanced financial literacy; they associate advanced financial literacy with a greater professionalization of the consumer when it comes to selecting and managing financial products. Similarly, consumers with advanced ethical literacy not only have a deeper understanding of ethical consumer behaviors and their impact but also are more professional in how they "scan and interpret the complex marketplace" and "assume consumer leadership" (McGregor 2011, p. 351). Certainly, this does not mean that consumers at the advanced level of ethical literacy commit no inconsistencies whatsoever (Hassan et al. 2013; Longo, Shankar, and Nuttall 2019; Papaoikonomou 2013; Szmigin, Carrigan, and McEachern 2009). However, we suggest that, in a market system that is deeply flawed and full of barriers (Carrington, Zwick, and Neville 2016), they are more skilled than others at working the system.

In this study, we focus on an ethically oriented sample, and thus we observe instances of both basic and advanced levels of ethical consumer literacy. Nevertheless, in samples of consumers who are not ethically oriented, consumers could also display null ethical consumer literacy (or what others might call illiteracy). With regard to the dimensions identified in this study, those consumers would not be able to define ethical consumer behavior in most consumer situations prior to and after a purchase, establish ethical criteria when purchasing, look for ethical information, adopt information search and management strategies to locate ethical information, recognize ethical packaging labels, initiate ethical consumer projects, and so on. In other words, these consumers would not be prepared to carry out ethical consumer tasks and probably would not perform them. Instead of placing the onus on consumers for their lack of skills, institutional attention should be placed on how to facilitate these tasks and educate consumers. A UNESCO report on literacy (Oxenham 2008) mentions that literacy starts with "society and its obligations to make the right to literacy accessible," presuming that "all individuals would take up this right, if it were available to them" (p. 25).

Certainly, we can find people, like some of the participants in this and previous studies (e.g., Carfagna et al. 2014; Etzioni 1999; Papaoikonomou, Cascon-Pereira, and Ryan 2016), who would be identified as being at the advanced level of ethical consumer literacy and who became ethically literate through their own effort. We suggest that policy makers do not relinquish the individual responsibility of educating oneself as an ethical consumer, arguing that "if some can achieve it, so can everybody else" (Oxenham 2008, p. 25). By coining the notion of ethical consumer literacy, we hope to start the debate so that governments, educators, and institutions can assist and enable consumers that currently have different levels of ethical consumer literacy (from null to advanced) to become more literate.

In terms of policy implications, we consider the suggestions of Pappalardo (2012), who explains different routes toward consumer literacy; information policies, educational policies, regulation of products, and individualized decision tools. Pappalardo advocates against the use of regulations as they do not allow for individual choice. Information policies can be useful if they ensure access to trustworthy information, but they may fail if information is not understood and therefore not transformed into practical knowledge. Thus, policies should facilitate information access and comprehension.

Policy Recommendations

Consumers are not expected to be perfectly informed (Pappalardo 2012). Thus, a first line of work for policy makers would be to simplify the literacy tasks for consumers, particularly those tasks related to information search and management in the ethical context (second and third dimensions of ethical consumer literacy). Coffin and Egan-Wyer (2022) comment on the impossibility of choosing the right milk because all choices can be problematic and ethicality can be fleeting. We cannot expect all consumers to do the intellectual labor of fact-checking for every consumer decision they make.

Instead, policy makers can provide information and decision-making tools to assist consumers. Reports and academic studies on ethical consumption have already been published (e.g., the Spanish consumer ministry issued a report on sustainable consumption [Ministerio de Consumo 2022]). However, governments can invest more in knowledge generation and communication. First, they can extend their collaboration with other agents (e.g., universities and nonprofit organizations), finance research in the field of ethical consumption, and require knowledge transfer to society. An example would be to produce simple reports on the impact of specific consumption choices in different consumer contexts (impact on health, the environment, society). The reports should include information cues that are meaningful to consumers, such as annual cost savings in euros or dollars thanks to certain ethical consumer actions (Pappalardo 2012), or traffic-light product rating systems (Fuentes and Sörum 2019). This would be particularly useful to consumers with lower ethical consumer literacy levels (null or basic) in the second and third dimensions. Second, to facilitate informational access, governments can centralize content on specific websites, so that consumers who are less skilled in searching for information can use them as reference points (similar to the European Union web page on financial literacy). Also, governments can share this information on social media in a simple and understandable way (tutorials on YouTube, Facebook campaigns, podcasts), because consumers, like some participants of this study, often use social media (Sörum and Fuentes 2017). Third, governments can collaborate with existing experiments in alternative markets (e.g., local exchange trading systems, time banks, food swaps, consumer cooperatives) and create platforms where consumers can voice their concerns about becoming and being ethical consumers. For example, an issue that came up in our study was the inability to define ethicality when choosing a media subscription. This question could be answered on such platforms by experts and other ethical consumers. In that way, governments could better address consumer needs in each of the dimensions of ethical consumer literacy and encourage people to cocreate and go beyond their individual domain (the fourth dimension of ethical consumer literacy).

Related to the previous point, a second line of work would involve the use and development of new technologies. According to Wallendorf (2001, p. 510), "limited literacy has inspired compensatory technologies." Both companies and policy makers should encourage these ventures with subsidies, preferential loans, or tech hackathons. Governments should also promote existing apps and technological tools to facilitate ethical consumption. As our findings show, using these tools can "professionalize" consumers' information search and management skills. New and existing apps can help with literacy tasks that prove to be more complex. For instance, some of our participants mentioned finding it difficult to make ethical purchases from complex product categories, such as financial products, or when many ethical criteria need to be considered together. According to Fuentes and Sörum (2019), ethical consumer apps enable "consumers to acquire new capacities allowing them to be more proficient complexity managers" (p. 150). Fuentes and Sörum also mention that consumers may even stop using ethical consumer apps when they have internalized the knowledge the apps have to offer. Thus, these apps can improve ethical consumer literacy (particularly the third dimension).

A third line of work might focus on educational remedies. Note that the participants in this study had enrolled in a paid elective course on responsible consumption. We suggest that policy makers make education on ethical consumption accessible to all, by including it in educational curricula. Although efforts have already been made in this area (see, e.g., Christensen et al. 2007; Higgs and McMillan 2006; Schelly et al. 2012), it is timely and imperative to intensify efforts in educating consumers about the impact of their consumer decisions early on. On the one hand, younger consumers could be invited to question the tenets of the modern consumerist system and learn or think about postcapitalist alternatives and experiments, such as food co-ops, food swaps, exchange networks, time banks, and repair cafés (Carfagna et al. 2014; Madon 2022; Papaoikonomou, Valverde, and Ryan 2012). On the other hand, educational interventions should be practical in nature and help consumers act responsibly in different consumer situations.

Educational programs could be carried out between primary school and university in the form of ethical consumer literacy modules. For example, one of our findings is about consumers' difficulty to define ethical consumer behavior regarding diverse practices, contexts, and situations. As a result, some participants cannot determine what the ethical choice would be and which purchase criteria should be used in specific purchase situations. One module could pair consumer contexts and different ethical concerns, for example, mobility with climate change, food with fair-trade and local consumption, cosmetics with animal testing, or clothing with sweatshops and water pollution. It is important that students not be passive receivers of information; they should be actively involved in the learning process using novel methodologies. For instance, one module could aim to teach students how to recognize labels, what the labels stand for, where they can be found on the products, and why it is important to look for labels themselves when shopping. Another module could involve art projects to reuse waste in schools, which could also teach students how to be creative and reuse what they have at their disposal. Also, tech applications could be developed to support educational programs that introduce knowledge more naturally to digital natives.

In addition, educational planning should consider the intersection of ethical consumer literacy with other types of literacy (e.g., internet literacy, information literacy, digital literacy, and media literacy). Table 1 shows how the lack of different types of literacy could affect overall consumer literacy. Although our study does not thoroughly examine this, some of our findings suggest the need for higher levels of digital literacy, for example when consumers are required to look for ethical information online and set the right parameters of that search, or product literacy, like when consumers need to understand what each ingredient stands for. Other examples, such as the

intersection of food literacy or financial literacy with ethical consumer literacy, could also be identified. Both policy makers and academics should further explore the links between different types of literacies and the potential synergies that could emerge, for example, how to use digital technologies to repurpose food waste.

Finally, although we suggest that skills related to ethical consumer literacy should be taught formally through educational planning, we also recommend that policy makers further advocate for and create small-scale initiatives and support groups to bring together more experienced ethical consumers and beginners. Some of these initiatives, like repair cafés (Madon 2022), can attract people with diverse profiles who have never considered certain ethical consumer practices before. Furthermore, these groups can teach skills, offer ideas, provide support and socialization, and reinforce a sense of community, the importance of which has been often raised in previous research on the field (Carfagna et al. 2014; Fuentes and Sörum 2019; Madon 2022; Ozcaglar-Toulouse, Shiu, and Shaw 2006; Papaoikonomou, Cascon-Pereira, and Ryan 2016). The consumers with advanced ethical literacy in our sample (in particularly those ranking high in the fourth dimension of ethical consumer leadership) already participate or could be interested in participating in some of these initiatives. These consumers seem to understand ethical consumption as a project that needs to be undertaken by society, not just themselves. We agree. Ethical consumption should go beyond individual action, and policy makers should take action to ensure populations are literate in matters of ethical consumption.

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