To buy or not to buy? Exploring ethical consumerism in an emerging market—India

Abstract

This article reports the findings of a field study conducted on the purchasing intentions of ethical consumers in India. We explored how the involvement of ethical consumers with social networking sites (SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn and others) affects their intentions to buy ethical products. Applying an extended theoretical lens of theory of planned behaviour and social capital, we present an analysis of a rich qualitative data. We identify, and describe 7 dimensions, representing the 19 factors and manifesting the informational, relational and valuation usage of SNSs that explain their impact on the purchase intention of ethical consumers in India. We conclude by highlighting the decision-making role played by the ethical knowledge and price sensitivity of ethical consumers, reflecting the peculiarities and dynamics of ethical consumption in India.

Keywords: Ethical consumption, social networking sites, purchase intentions, ethical consumers, emerging markets, India

Introduction

By 2035, the gross domestic product of emerging markets is expected to surpass that of advanced ones (Wilson & Purushothaman, 2003; Sheth, 2011). With a growing number of middle-class consumers with high purchasing power (Francis & Sarangi, 2022), India, as an emerging market, is widely forecasted to become the third-largest consumer market within the next decade (Dhaundiyal, 2020). The evidence also suggests that environmentally sensitive purchase decision making is likely to continue to grow in the Indian market (Kumar & Ghodeshwar, 2015). Many Indian consumers interact via Social Networking Sites (SNSs). Hasan & Pandey (2021) stated that, in 2019, a significant minority of the Indian population - over 351.4 million, had used SNSs. On average, they had spent over 2.4 hours a day on these platforms and the monthly frequency of visits of Indian users on Facebook had crossed the 1.6 billion thresholds.

It is not, therefore surprising to see scholars highlighting the strategic value of SNSs for individual consumers as well as for organizations (Michaelidou et al., 2011). For example, many leading journals have announced calls for papers (see Baccarella et al., 2018; Behl et al., 2021; Wojcieszak et al., 2021) on the subjects relating to SNSs, signaling the growing scholarly interest in the development of a better understanding of how consumers interact through SNSs, particularly in the context of environmentally sensitive consumer consciousness and its impacts on the nature, scope, and scale of ethical consumerism in emerging markets. In our study, we aimed to examine this interaction and to explore how SNS usage affects the purchase intentions of ethical consumers in India. In so doing, we contribute to the rapidly developing scholarly conversation on the impacts of SNSs and on the peculiarities and dynamics of ethical consumerism (Vogel, 2005; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004) in emerging markets.

We base our exploration on two distinct but overlapping premises. First, that the ethical values and social and environmental concerns of consumers potentially affect what they buy and consume (Smith 2009; Bennett, 2018; Long & Murray, 2013; Kushwah et al., 2019). This premise draws on one of the central assumptions of the strategic case for ethical consumption, rooted in the paradigm of consumer sovereignty (Smith 2009). Second, that SNSs meaningfully affect the lives of those individuals and organizations (Zheng et al., 2020) who utilize SNSs strategically by setting up online forums (Kaliarnta et al., 2011), establishing ethical communities (Gummerus et al., 2015), and creating organized ethical spaces such as Facebook communities, in particular (Newholm & Shaw, 2007; Papaoikonomou et al., 2018). Scholars have been lately discussing topics involving ethical consumption (see, e.g., Jafarkarimi et al., 2016; Hajli, 2018; Abner, 2019; Chu et al., 2020; Burgin & Wilken, 2021). Research on ethical consumption has ascertained the strategic value of SNSs (see, e.g., Jafarkarimi et al., 2016; Hajli, 2018; Abner, 2019; Chu et al., 2020; Burgin & Wilken, 2021). It seems, SNSs enable and empower individual consumers and organisations to access, create, share, exploit, and distribute information (Ahmad et al., 2021), review items, leave ratings, provide feedback, recommend or warn about products, and offer tips on the use of products (Voramontri & Klieb, 2019).

The strategic perspective on ethical consumption and SNSs offered a productive starting point for our inquiry as it opened the possibility of considering and integrating diverse theories and approaches suited to be developed to explain the growth and dynamics of ethical consumerism in emerging markets. We thus assemble an extended theoretical lens that builds on the theory of planned behavior (TPB) and extend it by integrating the insights of the theory of social capital that is productively used to highlight the structural, relational, and cognitive aspects of SNSs. We apply this lens to analyze a rich qualitative dataset generated by means of observations, 24 interviews,

and 2 focus group discussions with ethical consumers in India. In so doing, we identify, and describe 7 dimensions, representing the 19 factors and manifesting the informational, relational and valuation usage of SNSs that explain the impact of SNSs on the three aspects-attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control-of the purchase intention of socially and environmentally concerned consumers in India.

The seven dimensions include SNSs efficacy (convenience, information abundance, availability, and immediateness), online communities (common shared interests), online word of mouth (timeliness, relevance, and comprehensiveness), consumer knowledge (both objective—i.e., product information and product alternatives, and subjective, i.e., information checking and prior experiences of networks), social support (relational and informational), SNS communication (content and positive or negative valence) and price sensitivity (informational cue and assessment of sacrifice). These five dimensions present the informational and relational usage of SNSs, while sharing knowledge of ethical products and price sensitivity reflecting their valuational usage.

We make three distinct contributions. *First*, our study confirms and explains the informational and relational roles played by SNSs in ethical consumption by providing empirical support for the dimensions that affect ethical consumer purchase intentions. *Second*, it describes and explains the valuation role played by consumer knowledge and price sensitivity in affecting the purchase intentions of ethical consumers in India. *Third and crucially*, it expands our knowledge of ethical consumerism in emerging markets by describing the contextual peculiarities and dynamics of the purchase intentions of ethical consumers.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, we present and discuss the theoretical foundations of our study. Following this, we describe our research methodology and present our

findings. We conclude with a discussion and articulate our theoretical and managerial contributions, the limitations of our study and directions for further research.

An Extended Theoretical Framework

What determines the purchasing behaviors of ethical consumers? Ethical consumption scholars offer two distinct answers (Davies & Gutsche, 2016). One school of thought relates them to individual cognitive processes, based on the assumption that ethical consumption is underpinned by consumers' concerns toward society or the environment, which are reflected in their purchase behaviors (Andorfer & Liebe 2012; Carrington et al., 2010). It argues that ethically informed customers are more motivated to buy ethical products (Schaefer & Crane, 2005). The other school of thought relates them to socio-cultural experiences. It stresses that consumption is not merely a cognitive process; it is fundamentally a socio-cultural experience involving sense-making, identity construction, group membership, and affiliation (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Bagozzi, 1975). As important as this insight is, it has not been fully explicated in relation to ethical consumer behaviors in emerging markets. This exploration is even more important in the context of SNSs. With the advent of SNSs, communication between consumers and firms has changed (Wang et al., 2012), bringing a transformation in consumer behaviors (Penni, 2017). From a socio-cultural standpoint, therefore, the question how the involvement of ethical consumers with SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn and others affects their intentions to buy ethical products is key to understanding the consumer decision-making (Lăzăroiu et al., 2020) and social morality (Caruana 2007) that underpins the purchase intentions of ethical consumers. To conceptualize the formation of such intentions, we draw on the theory of planned behavior and insights of the theory of social capital.

The TPB is one of the dominant theoretical lenses used to explain consumer intentions (Ajzen 1985, 1988, 2015). It has been applied extensively and successfully to predict a variety of behaviors in a range of populations, including some studies conducted among adolescents (Davis, et al., 2002; Hamilton & White, 2008) and others aimed at predicting communication technology-based behaviors, e.g., instant messaging (Yaobin, Zhou, & Wang, 2009). Despite having initially been constructed in the field of psychology, this theory has been widely applied to ethical consumption (see, e.g., Hassan et al. 2016; Papaoikonomou et al., 2018; Alsaad, 2021). It has been used extensively to study consumer intentions to purchase green/organic/ethical products (Assarut & Srisuphaolarn, 2018; Yazdanpanah & Forouzani, 2015) and organic foods (Yazdanpanah & Forouzani, 2015; Fles et al., 2020), engage in recycling behaviors (Oreg & Katz-Gerro, 2006), adopt zero waste lifestyles (Saplacan & Marton, 2019), and use green cosmetics (Pop et al., 2020). In addition, many studies claim that this theory is appropriate in ICT contexts (Banerjee, Cronan, & Jones, 1998; Chatterjee, 2008; Ifinedo, 2012; Leonard, Cronan, & Kreie, 2004; Namlu & Odabasi, 2007). Recently, the TPB is being applied to understand people's behaviors in the SNS context (Jafarkarimi et al., 2016).

The Formation of Ethical Purchase Intentions

The term 'ethical' can encapsulate different ideas, expressions, concerns, and issues for different consumers (such as environmental or green topics, worker rights, sustainability concerns, goods' countries of origin, the arms trade, fair trade, green consumerism [Carrington et al., 2010], and organic food consumption [Kushwah et al., 2019]). Yet, it is widely accepted that consumer intentions to choose ethical products will influence their purchase behaviors (Sun et al., 2020). Therefore, intention formation plays a central role in ethical purchase decisions (e.g., Shaw & Clarke, 1999; also, for reviews on this topic, see Fukukawa, 2003; Papaoikonomou et al., 2018).

According to Paul et al. (2016), '*intention*' refers to an individual's motivation in cognition to try to implement a specific behavior. The TPB posits that behavioral intentions are determined by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. This implies that the more favorable the attitudes, social approval, and perceived behavioral control about the purchase of ethical products, the higher the chances that consumers will buy them.

Insert figure 1 here

As a starting point, the first determinant of intention is the attitude held towards a particular behavior, which is defined as a learned tendency to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner with respect to a given object (Ajzen & Cote, 2008; Teotia, 2018). Here, '*attitude*' is an expression of a feeling originating from within an individual. The second determinant is the subjective norm, which refers to an individual's perception of the opinions of different social participants (other individuals or groups) in relation to the behavior in question (Teotia, 2018). It refers to perceived social pressure to either engage in or refrain from certain behaviors (Jimmieson et al., 2008) and it implies that individuals will make decisions based on their consideration of others; most interestingly, of those who they hold to be important to them, besides themselves (Kordnaeij et al., 2013). Hence, the influence of the subjective norm opinions of others is considered crucial in determining a person's behavior (Aziz & Wahab, 2013; Kaushik et al., 2018). The reasoning behind this is that, in relation to any meaningful actions, people usually consider what nearby others (e.g., their community) expect of them. The third determinant of intention is that of perceived behavioral control (PBC), which refers to people's perceptions of their capability to actualize a given behavior. More specifically, to people's perceptions of the ease or difficulty involved in engaging in a behavior (Chen, 2007), which are a function of their beliefs concerning the availability of any resources and opportunities linked to such actualization

(Madden et al., 1992). Evidence suggests that the consumer product knowledge and product price shape the subjective norms, attitudes, and PBC. Product knowledge influences various consumer behaviors, such as information search (Brucks, 1985), attitude formation (Aertsens et al., 2011), and consumption behaviors (Aertsens et al., 2011; Joshi & Rahman, 2015). The research (e.g., Brucks, 1985; Flynn & Goldsmith, 1999) has identified different types of consumer product knowledge, including objective knowledge (i.e., what individuals really know about a product), subjective knowledge (i.e., what individuals think they know about a product), and prior experience with a product (Flynn, & Goldsmith, 1999). This made it meaningful to examine how ethical consumers form the subjective and objective product knowledge, thus affecting their purchase intentions.

Price also plays out in two different ways in relation to the consumers' assessments of products, namely, as an assessment of sacrifice and as an informational cue (Hsu et al., 2017). The former refers to the amount of money consumers will need to spend, and the latter refers to the quality and status inferred by the ownership of a product (Volckner, 2008). Price sensitivity is defined as the extent of consciousness and reaction displayed by consumers faced by differences in the prices of products or services (Bhutto et al., 2020). For several reasons, certified organic/ethical foods/products are generally more expensive than conventional ones. Thus, price becomes important in this domain (Singh & Verma, 2017). Moreover, although price sensitivity has been the subject of extensive research, most studies have been conducted from the marketers' point of view (Hsu et al., 2017), thus leaving much to be understood in relation to that of ethical consumers.

As it is obvious that the theory of planned behaviour in conjunction with the concepts of consumer product knowledge and prices sensitivity can be used to explain the purchase intentions of ethical consumers who buy ethical product in emerging market. However, such an explanation will

represent the formation of ethical purchase intentions as merely a cognitive process. We suggest that it is essentially to build TPB by integrating the insights offered by the socio-cultural perspective and thus we made the case that SNSs facilitate the formation of social capital which directly or indirectly affect the purchase intentions of ethical consumers.

The Formation of Social Capital

Although the definition of 'social capital' varies among scholars, social capital theory is based on the premise that the relational structure of a social group has the potential to provide social value benefits both to the group itself, as a collective, and to its members individually (Coleman, 1988; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Social capital represents the resources embedded within an individual's (Cao et al., 2016) network of relationships, including his/her interpersonal ones, and the resources rooted in these relationships (McFadyen & Cannella Jr, 2004). Social capital, which is embodied in the relationships that exist between the actors within a social network (Coleman, 1988), is primarily argued to be a multidimensional concept made up of structural, relational, and cognitive aspects (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). The structural aspect explains the overall patterns of connections that exist among people, i.e., how and with whom one connects; the relational one describes the resources embedded in social relationships such as trust, commitment, and reciprocity; and the cognitive one refers to a collective context that increases people's understanding of shared languages, codes, and goals. SNSs enable people to: (a) create public or semi-public profiles in online systems, (b) communicate with those users with whom they share connections, and (c) view the list of connections of other users in a particular system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

We suggest that SNSs facilitate the formation of social capital (Sun & Shang, 2014) and this includes the structural network characteristics of such sites, which represent social interaction ties, tie strengths, and centrality (Chiu et al., 2006) as well as their relational network features, encouraging members to act and achieve collective goals by helping each other (Wang et al., 2020), further including their cognitive resource dimension by facilitating effective communication and mutual understanding (Wang et al., 2020). SNSs offer strategic means, such as online communities (Gummerus et al., 2017; Sun & Shang, 2014), online WOM (Gvili & Levy, 2018), and informational support (Hajli, 2018), that embody some of or all the three characteristics-structural, relational and cognitive-that are highlighted by the social capital theory.

SNSs as Means of Social Capital formation

SNSs facilitate the social interactions of individuals in online communities, with the nature of such interactions being virtual, based as they are on messages containing social, emotional, and informational support (Madjar, 2008). The provision of information, feedback, or recommendations on SNSs can be defined as a form of informational support (Hajli, 2018), whereas emotional interests such as understanding and caring refer to emotional support (House, 1981; Hajli, 2019). It has been argued that such forms of support (informational and emotional) are the main available ones (Hajli, 2015b). On SNSs, users can interact and communicate among themselves through feedback, posts, recommendations, ratings, and reviews in order to provide and benefit from better decision making and informational support in their purchase journeys, or emotional support suited to help resolve issues. In this sense, SNSs communication empowers consumers by enabling them to meaningfully interact online.

In the SNSs context, content is represented by the textual and visual information provided by consumers. Regarding this, positive valence is defined as being conveyed by those declarations that positively motivate consumer purchase intentions. Conversely, negative valence is ascribed to any negative declarations provided by people in relation to a particular service or product on social commerce platforms. Wu & Wang (2005) found that social commerce textual interactions are significant predictors of behavioral intentions and exert a strong influence on consumer buying decisions (Chu & Song, 2015). The importance of sourcing product information from other social media participants is on the rise, with many social media users having accrued fame and influence by sharing common ideas and cultural values through their interactions (Park et al., 2016). When aggregating many different information sources (with either positive or negative valence) through social media channels, consumers feel that they are receiving information that is more reliable than that supplied by traditional vendor-developed advertising (Goh et al., 2013; Kapoor et al., 2018). This large volume of content generated and consumed via social media channels strongly impacts consumer purchase intentions. In addition, frequent social media communication related to consumption matters leads to stronger purchase motivations (De Gregorio & Sung, 2010). Regarding this, online communities and online WOM (Word of Mouth) play informational, relational and valuation roles.

Online communities, which can be seen as means for forming social capital, are defined as "affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon a shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities" (Kozinets, 1999, p. 254). The extant research has discussed the advantages presented by SNSs for the creation of ethical communities (Wang et al., 2020). SNSs simplify the ways in which ethical consumers can communicate their interests to other users, either among their acquaintances or friends or to the

members of online communities. This makes SNSs platforms within which individuals can potentially share and discuss their ethical views with several people (Whelan et al., 2013). Moreover, within the broader group of SNSs that enable people to create public or semipublic profiles, connect to other users, and view the latter's connections, there are those that facilitate the creation of ethical online communities (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). It has been stated that online communities have a significant impact on the purchase intentions of consumers (Poulis et al., 2019). Hence, online communities built on SNSs by people with similar interests can impact the purchase intentions of their members.

Word-of-mouth is a form of person-to-person communication that involves brands, products, services, companies, and organizations; as such, it affects consumer purchase decisions (Harrison-Walker, 2011). In the internet age, online WOM communication involves interactions that take place through SNSs, blogs, online discussion forums, virtual communities, and rating/reviews sites (Khalid et al., 2020; Moore & Lafreniere, 2020). Online WOM enables consumers to gather and obtain information from heterogeneous groups of people, as opposed to just friends and acquaintances (Cheung et al., 2008). Information search, as a step, represents a consumer purchase decision. Consumers like to seek information about products to reduce any risk and uncertainty; this affects their purchase decisions, leading them to making better ones (Peterson & Merino, 2003). Consumers often check the recommendations of others (WOM) before making any purchasing decision, especially when buying new products (Kim & Srivastava, 2007). In the social media domain, consumers access product-related posts made by various sources without the need to for any great efforts on their own part, and they examine any information provided through various criteria to assess the value of a product. However, such product evaluation is only significant when the information contained in the posts meets the recipients' needs and

requirements (Olshavsky, 1985). Furthermore, previous research conducted on online WOM has noted that relevance, timeliness, and comprehensiveness are the primary features of online WOM messages that positively affect consumer perceptions of usefulness (Cheung et al., 2008) and informativeness (Zhang et al., 2014).

It seems that the online communities, and WOM manifest the structural, relational, and cognitive aspects that are highlighted by the social capital theory. Hence, they can be used productively to observe the making of social morality and exploring how the involvement of ethical consumers with social networking sites (SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn and many more) affects their intentions to buy ethical products.

Research Methodology

In consideration of our study's objective, we adopted an interpretive methodology suited to facilitate a better understanding of the participants' SNS usage and of how this usage had affected their purchase intentions. More specifically, we took a grounded theory approach to facilitate the emergence of participant-centered themes, rather than of categories prompted by the researchers (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Regarding the research method, we used the 'qualitative tool kit' suggested by Hall & Rist (1999, p. 295) as the use of a mix of research techniques enabled us to triangulate the information and test the data's validity (Carter, 1969).

Research Setting

The setting of our study was India, as an emerging market. We focused on India for three reasons: First, it has been reported that, apart from being the second largest growing economy, India is home to the second-highest number (approximately 250 million) of social media users in the world

(UNDP, 2019). Second, there has been substantial growth in the number of Indian consumers purchasing ethical products, and such consumers' consciousness of the environment is increasing (Paul et al., 2016; Kumar et al., 2018; Panda et al., 2020). Indian consumers are becoming selective in their purchases in relation to preferring green products, product quality, and competitive prices (Kumar & Ghodeshwar, 2015). They are increasingly advocating for ethical products that do not involve environmental damage, animal cruelty, or worker mistreatment (e.g., Teotia, 2018). Third, Indian consumers now expect the companies that produce the goods they purchase to be subject to greater social and environmental accountability (Kumar & Ghodeswar, 2015). Businesses have responded to these pressures, in part, with self-published annual corporate social responsibility and/or corporate sustainability reports (Afreen & Anand, 2016; Rinaldi, 2019).

Hence, the popularity of SNSs among Indians, the growth of ethical consumers, increased demand for ethical products, rising expectation of consumers from companies, and business response to consumer demands for ethical products made India a productive research site to explore the impacts of SNSs on ethical consumers.

Sampling technique and respondents

The unit of observation we adopted for our study was the SNS user (residing in New Delhi, the capital of India) engaged in the purchase of ethical products. We selected our interviewee sample through a two-stage strategy. First, we took a purposive sampling approach (Curtis, Gesler, Smith, & Washburn, 2000), collecting the details of our prospective respondents from one of the leading New Delhi organic stores, which sells food, grocery items, clothes, and other sustainable products. To ask our prospective respondents to participate in our research, we contacted them by phone. While briefing those who were interested in taking part in the research, we also asked them whether

they were active users of SNSs. We then verified their social handle details. As Delhi has the highest number of SNS users in India, it came as no surprise that all those we contacted fell into that category. To select those that were ethically oriented consumers, we used two strategies: (1) conducting initial observations to familiarize with the group and establish a rapport; and (2) using gatekeepers (Creswell, 1998) (here, the grocery store owners, staff and, in a few cases, the participants themselves) to help us identify the more ethically minded individuals. This participatory sampling method enabled us to identify the interview participants with relevant experiences, so that the interviews conducted with them could yield relevant insights. Then, in the second stage, we applied a snowball sampling, whereby the interviewees suggested other potential participants who were into ethical products and fit the study's criteria. These were then approached by the lead author. No financial incentives were associated with participation in our study. The interviews were conducted at the locations and times most convenient to the participants. The final sample comprised individuals who were interested in purchasing ethical products and extensive users of SNSs. The detailed sample description and interviewee characterization are shown in Table 1.

Place Table 1 about here

Data collection

We used the qualitative tool kit suggested by Hall and Rist (1999, p. 295), which combines observations, interviews (including focus groups), and document analysis. We first used observations (conducted primarily online, attending online webinars, and traditionally in physical settings by visiting the organic stores of two participants). These enabled us to establish a rapport with our respondents. The scope of our observational focus was extensive: the frequency of SNS

use, the participants' interactions on SNSs, the types of posts or chats on SNSs, their reviews and comments, etc. In all cases, we simply acted as spectators. Twenty-four in-depth informal interviews lasting from 45 to 120 minutes were conducted in English in various settings selected by the interviewees. These were followed by two focus group sessions with 27 participants conducted in English, each lasting from 90 to 120 minutes, recorded, and then transcribed verbatim. The focus group data, which were the product of context-dependent group interactions (Hollander 2004; Lehoux et al., 2006), were suited to accentuate our participants' similarities and differences and to provide rich information about their ranges of perspectives and experiences (Lambert & Loisaelle, 2008). The literature had already highlighted that some authors first obtain individual interview data and then run focus groups to confirm their findings (e.g., Plack 2006), which is what we did too.

We not only briefly introduced the research context to all our participants; we also assured them of the anonymity and confidentiality of their interview data. To ensure consistency, the lead author conducted all interviews, transcribing each without waiting for the following ones to be completed (Silverman, 2016). We developed our initial interview protocol based on a comprehensive understanding of SNS usage and of its effects on consumer purchase intentions in relation to ethical products. We then ran a small-scale pilot round of interviews to improve the wording and reduce any ambiguity in the interview themes. The interviews were conducted, and the interview protocol was developed recursively: as the interviews were carried out, the protocol was updated according to the feedback given by the interviewees and was then used in the subsequent interviews to gain further and more focused theoretical insights (Arsel, 2017).

Both the interviews and focus groups sessions were started with a few general questions on the usage of SNSs and on how useful they are in everyday life. The wording of the questions was

given special attention here. The intention was to ask - "*truly open-ended questions*" (Patton, 2002, p. 353), thus avoiding leading the participants' answers. The discussions were conversational in nature, but the interviewer used a guide to ensure that the main topics were covered. The other methods were complemented by document analysis, which, unlike them, did not involve any researcher mediation. The analyzed documents offered access to information pertaining to the most recent five-year period. According to Patton (2002, p. 559), "*checking about the consistency of what people say about the same thing over time*" is a form of triangulation of qualitative data sources.

Coding strategy and reliability

Our mix of data collection techniques produced a large volume of data and provided a more in-depth understanding of how our participants intended to engage in sustainability and ethical behaviors. We used the NVivo software to facilitate the data analysis process and minimize the possibility of errors and increase data transparency (Welsh, 2002). We adopted a coding strategy, as is common in theory-guided qualitative research concerning human behaviors at the individual level (Spiggle, 1994). We coded the data by combining codes into broader themes and categories and interpreting the results accordingly (Creswell, 2007; Sinkovics et al., 2005). To ensure the validity and reliability of the coded output, two experienced marketing scholars each received a sample of 12 interview transcripts and coded them independently. We calculated their inter-judge reliability using the approach proposed by Perreault and Leigh (1989); this yielded a value of 0.86, which was above the 0.70 threshold recommended for exploratory research (Rust & Cooil, 1994). Further, any discrepancies in the coding results provided by the two coders were discussed with an independent faculty member specializing in marketing and social media research who was not part of the research team. Comments on the research, solicited after presentations at a global

marketing conference, helped the researchers to further clarify and enhance the constructs in the emerging framework.

In our study, we used open and axial coding techniques. Open coding helps to identify the concepts and their dimensions, which can later be grouped into categories, while axial coding is used to make connections between such categories. Through open coding, we analyzed the responses directly given by the interviews to characterize the first order codes. These were then identified and labeled using the respondents' original wording, or the words and phrases most effective and appropriate to summarize the participants' ideas (Saldana, 2016). By performing axial coding, we grouped the first-order codes into second order themes, which we then categorized into aggregate dimensions. In this way, the data analysis involved the identification and classification of themes with a view to understanding the perceived usefulness of SNSs to ethical consumers.

Findings

This section reports the main findings of this study and how we used them to answer the question of how the involvement of Indian ethical consumers with social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn) affects their intentions to buy ethical products. We present the analysis of 19 factors representing the following seven main strategic dimensions: **SNS efficacy** (convenience, information abundance, availability, and immediateness), **online communities** (common shared interests), **online WOM** (timeliness, relevance, and comprehensiveness), **consumer knowledge** (objective knowledge [i.e., product information, and product alternatives] and subjective knowledge [i.e., information checking and prior experiences

of networks]), **social support** (relational and informational), **SNSs communication** (content and positive or negative valence) and **price sensitivity** (informational cue and assessment of sacrifice).

Appendix A provides illustrative quotations for each of the factors. The remainder of this section discusses each factor in turn. Figure 2 displays the theoretical framework emerging from the data analysis.

Insert figure 2 here

Themes related to 'SNS use by ethical consumers and purchase intentions

Here, the extracted factors explain how the participants, being part of various social networks and online communities, had utilized their social networks to obtain information on ethical products and other ethical issues and how this had formulated their purchasing intentions.

Shopping Experience-Without Any Cost: SNS efficacy

The respondents stated that SNSs are becoming a widespread medium for the engagement of ethical consumers. They emphasized that SNS usage facilitated their overall shopping experience. Besides, the participants elaborated on how the use of SNSs helped them to purchase ethical products easily, especially in India, where ethical consumption is limited. Convenience of usage, easy availability, access to abundant information, and the availability of immediate responses to any query were the valuable features highlighted by the participants while discussing SNS efficacy.

According to P25, the use of SNSs provides plenty of information about ethical products that would otherwise be difficult to obtain. She believed that, thanks to social media, everyone was getting the opportunity to access information quickly and easily from anywhere in the world.

"SNSs are quite useful for us. From India, one can successfully get information on any product worldwide without any cost." [P25, page 3, lines 12-17].

Most respondents also highlighted that the ease and convenience of these social media platforms make them the users' preferred means to access information on any product. In fact, this was a statement often reported in the analysis, which is in line with the literature's highlighting of the importance of affordability. One of the standard quotes that came out of the analysis was: *"I usually browse SNSs like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc., before thinking of buying any product."* [P24, page 4, lines 6-7].

One point raised by P12 was that those organizations that are involved in sustainable and ethical products are, for the most part, active on SNSs platforms. They initiate discussions, webinars, and conversations among users and reply to any comments and queries; this, in a way, makes users comfortable to raise queries. Apart from making information available through SNSs, this also helps users to connect with the organizations or companies directly.

"On the SNS pages, we find most information regarding sustainable products. The companies regularly update these pages as well. Often, they invite discussions and feedback, along with our views. The ease of SNSs makes it feasible for us to pose any question or query in open fora, and this has often proved to be helpful for us. The responses from the companies are always encouraging." [P12, page 1, lines 31-33].

Another noteworthy point raised by P19 was related to the convenience and affordability of SNSs. He mentioned the consumers' experiences, reviews, and comments that get posted on SNS platforms and help other consumers decide whether to buy any product. He stated that, in India, getting information on the availability of organic or ethical products is still not that easy.

"Using these popular sites saves money and time. And the best part is that there is relevant content. The posts are shared by consumers like us who post their experiences. Whether good or bad, we get firsthand information, which is very important for me. It is not easy but, because of SNSs, interaction like this is possible." [P19, page 6, lines 42-44].

"The use of SNSs makes it easy for us to get information or comments on any store that deals in ethical products, organic food items, or organic clothes. Even information on the availability at the locations is also there. It makes things easy for us. Even the comments, both positive and negative, help us to decide to buy or not to buy." [P19, page 9, lines 32-36].

Another practical point discussed by P12 was that it would be impossible for a single user to have all the information regarding the ethical products available in India. According to her, ethical consumers are often unaware of where a product is available or of how authentic it is. While posting reviews and comments, consumers on SNS platforms often share the locations of stores and many more details such as the genuineness, pricing, expiry times, shelf-life, and ingredients of products and so on, which increases the awareness of other consumers on the same SNS networks and helps them to decide whether to purchase those products.

"Thanks to SNSs, we can access products that are available all over the world. As this is a limited market in India, we lack access to many products. Further, we get information on whether they are genuine products from our SNS friends. Also, our networks or friends guide us in regard to

whether products are of good quality or available at a lower price or even alternatives." [P12, page 11, lines 16-20].

Interaction (Online communities)

An important theme that emerged from the analysis was that SNS usage enabled our respondents to join many online communities revolving around ethical products. According to the respondents, these online communities offer fora suited to access, share, and exchange ideas and viewpoints and product/service-related data. All our respondents stated that they preferred to reach out to their social media communities for their opinions before buying not only ethical products, but any product at all.

Another aspect that is specific to online communities is they are based upon the new technologies' ability to facilitate the use of a platform within which consumers can engage in sharing and adopting behaviors (Nash, 2018). An interesting point raised by P21 was that consumers leverage the potential of online communities built on SNS platforms. This is primarily due to the inherent features of SNSs platforms, whereby any contents that have the potential to stimulate greater discussion are given higher visibility, which ultimately helps the consumer.

"Whether a person actively engages or contributes to these online communities, their nature means that any content that generates a lot of traffic and interaction will be placed high in the search rankings. As such, anyone making any purchase and browsing the comments will undoubtedly be accessing those conversations, reviews, and advice." [P21, page 3, lines 23-27].

Our focus group participants highlighted the importance of receiving exact information on ethical products through SNS communities—which is particularly relevant in India. They also discussed the importance of these online communities in facilitating the buying and selling of products. In this regard, for instance, P13 (FG) mentioned that, especially in India, most organic product sellers are based in rural settings, and getting in touch with them is a near impossible task. However, with the widespread usage of Facebook- and Instagram-like platforms, the farmers from rural India are also connecting with the mainstream, which enables consumers to reach them conveniently.

"As not many people are into organic products in India, getting the correct information or feedback on these products is difficult. But taking part in ethical groups or communities on Facebook or Instagram makes things easy for us. They even help us to reach small store owners or farmer communities selling organic or sustainable products, including those in rural India." [P13, page 8, lines 26-29].

My information checkers: SNS use and knowledge of the product

Here, the extracted factors explain how leveraging various SNSs platforms helped the participants augment their ethical product knowledge. As reported by the participants, ethical customers wish to remain connected over SNSs to acquire information on ethical products from their networks. As discussed by P12, people use SNSs particularly to learn about the products; the launch of new ones, their manufacturing processes, ingredients, country of origin, and any extra information they believe to be helpful.

"I always want to know more about sustainable products that do not involve harming animals and are organic in nature. The more I browse Facebook and Instagram, the more I realize that I am unaware of the products I am using or planning to buy. SNSs, in fact, help me get more details on

the products—such as how they are made, what processes are involved, and the ingredients. This helps me get a better idea of new products" [P12, page 1, lines 21-26].

For example, as discussed by P2 and P22, people read the reviews on the SNS platforms and, accordingly, decide whether to visit a restaurant that serves organic food or a supermarket that sells organic products.

"I think I will use this service too because it saves a lot of time and energy." [P2, page 4, line 12].

"I will see some friends who like or comment on a supermarket's page about the availability of organic products and, if they are friends I trust, I will try to visit that supermarket." [P22, page 7, lines 12-15].

Another important point raised by P11 was that, while browsing, individuals always prefer to check comments under other posts and recommendations and, accordingly, develop an intention to buy a product or visit a store. He mentioned: *"When I see a negative comment about a product in a specific store, I will pay attention next time I go to that store."* [P11, page 8, lines 2-4].

A participant of a focus group mentioned that SNS posts and reviews also help to decide to purchase a product. In his words:

"*Under a new food product post, if people comment mentioning that it tastes good or is nutritious and good quality, I will want to buy it and try it myself." [P16, page 3, line 12]*.

As discussed by P2, customers want to stay connected over the SNSs to acquire information on the alternate ethical products available.

"We can get detailed information about products through online reviews. Plus, we can find comparisons of different products that serve the same purpose. Users explains their personal experiences with a product, and sometimes we can see how expert they are. It makes it easy for us to compare different products based on product reviews, prices, usability, or quality. That's why SNSs are quite useful." [P2, page 3, lines 16-19].

Another quote discussing the same aspect follows.

"If I read comments saying that some products have faults, I also get information on any alternatives available, sometimes also where and when. That is the best part of staying on SNSs. Our networks give us solutions. As these are not the regular easily available products that we use, this information is crucial for us.".

The analysis suggests that the discussions, posts, reviews, chats, and content posted on Facebook and Instagram helped the respondents to understand how much they knew about a product. As P16 stated, the reviews posted by friends and groups on SNS are always considered to be of prime importance in deciding whether to buy organic products.

"SNS groups and friends are, in fact, my information checkers on organic products. They make me realize that I have little knowledge of the products or their sources. We primarily receive updates on new products from company Facebook pages or tweets. Most of the time, not all the information is available, which make us less knowledgeable. Nevertheless, thanks to my social networking friends, I am much more aware now of what I know and of what I do not. For me, the most crucial aspect is to get the information immediately. Whenever I have doubts about any information or data, I ask my Insta friends, and I instantly get responses." [P16, page 2, lines 13-17].

Indirect experience is a mediated one in which consumers have not had a complete interaction with a product, which can be linked to various sources that may include the awareness of others' usage experiences, product advertisements, or displays in retail stores. (Han, 2019). The analysis suggests that the posts, reviews, comments, discussions, tweets, tags, and feeds found in the summary contents available on SNSs enrich the customers' indirect experience of ethical products. For instance, as discussed by P19, the SNS posts of friends, the comments of existing users on their experience of a product, and posts or feeds related to products were all elements that aided our interviewees in getting an idea of other people's experiences of ethical products.

"Thanks to SNSs, we get firsthand information and experience of new products. We all know organic products are both expensive and difficult to source. Hence, we always look at others' experiences before ordering or buying them. SNSs reviews and comments are a saving grace, as we instantly access the firsthand experiences of our friends or contacts with the products. We know them and we trust them. This helps me save time, effort, and money." [P19, page 2, lines 41-44].

Connecting the minds of consumers: Online Word of Mouth

Another important theme that emerged from the discussion was that SNSs facilitate person-to-person communication on the brands, products, services, companies, and organizations dealing in ethical products, which is also known as WOM. This was attributed to the online WOM feature of SNSs, which affected their purchase intentions, as depicted below.

"On SNSs platforms, we rate and review products or read comments on the experiences of other customers who have evaluated a product. When a customer experiences a new product, such as a new organic food item, and shares this experience with other users, the latter can comment on

these posts and can share their experiences. In this way, we get more choices and information for a single product." [FG2-P7, page 2 line 39 to page 3 line 1]

Another important point raised by P15 was related to the inherent characteristics of SNSs, such as posts, feeds, and tweets also helping in generating interest or curiosity in the minds of consumers.

"Notifications, posts, feeds, and the tweets of friends generate interest in a product. Also, SNSs… for example, Facebook is a place where each customer can take part, as everyone can share an online experience and post a product review for other users to read. This creates interest for the product." [P15, page 6, lines 12-14].

In addition, as discussed by P7 (FG1), the conversations and discussions that take place on SNS platforms also help in generating interest in the minds of users with respect to ethical product purchasing.

"Many discussions take place on SNS platforms regarding the various ways we can use more and more products that do not harm the environment or involve any cruelty to animals, which creates interest in buying ethical products." [FG1 P7, page 6, lines 22-24].

We learn, and others also learn: Social Support

According to our participants, it is quite common to get social support on SNS platforms, whether intentional or unintentional. They also accepted the use of networking platforms for the same purpose. Many participants also discussed the consequences, as did P23.

"My Facebook network is very strong, and I always depend on it. We have been connected for quite a long time. Once, I purchased a few raw organic pasta packets from a leading store in Delhi

that claimed to be a leading organic product store. However, the pasta was not organic, and the product description gave all the details (which I had overlooked while buying) of the chemicals used. However, the store refused to exchange the product or refund the money. I posted this on my Facebook wall. All my network contacts started posting on their company pages. Within one day, I got a call from the company itself and the amount I had spent was refunded." [P23, page 11, lines 13-20].

Illustrating how the social support received on SNSs platforms also helps in learning more about ethical products, P14 said:

"We get and share all information regarding products that are ethical or organic. We help and support each other by discussing the products, their manufacturing process, or ingredients, etc. In fact, we enjoy doing it. By doing this, we learn, and others also learn, and this helps in our purchase journey and makes decision making easier." [P14, page 4, line 12–14].

Value for Money: Price Sensitivity

Most respondents in our study discussed the high prices of organic/ethical products in India. A common quote that got extracted was "*In India, these products are priced higher than the regular ones*". As one respondent quoted "*As these products are very expensive, before buying or even thinking of buying them, we need to have sufficient knowledge on the products and their pricing.*"

As discussed by P22, SNS platforms are used to get price-related information. On the one hand, because of the easiness, convenience, and instant features of SNSs, users receive the information on the price of a product; on the other hand, they receive correct information from the end-users of a product. As these products are expensive in India, and because of the unavailability of much

information on them, people tend to check SNS sites or platforms or posts to get more information on products, especially in relation to their pricing, offers, discounts, etc.

"SNS comments and feedback help us to understand whether a product is value for money or not. I always turn to Facebook or Instagram to understand the price of a product. It is easy, convenient, and instant. Price is important … these products are always expensive. As I don't know much about this, I rely on Facebook comments to understand whether they are value for money or not, whether the products are authentic or have followed the sustainable processes for which they are charging so much. For all these aspects, I get an idea from the reviews, posts, and comments published on our groups or pages." [P22, page 4, lines 12-17].

"We get price information on offers and discounts from our network friends immediately, long before the company-sponsored messages or mails" [FG1 P5, page 3, lines 29-30].

Something extra we create—personal connections with each other: Social networking site communication

Almost all our interviewees mentioned the topic of SNS communication. 'Quick response', 'free', 'no cost', 'individual touch', 'anywhere anytime feasible', 'answers to questions', etc. were some of the standard quotes used by the respondents regarding the effective and fast communication aspect of SNSs. P6 highlighted how personal relationships are built over SNSs platform networks, which the existing research also discussed (Ellison et al., 2010). Such relationships and the communication or discussions that take place over the networks have a strong impact on buyers. The following statement illustrates this conclusion.

"Besides the formal or informal interactions, SNSs have provided us with the option for that something extra that we had always looked for. Because of our similar interests, we create personal connections with each other. The communication that takes place around any discussion on organic or sustainable products and on the stores, or companies that sell them makes us more knowledgeable and more connected. We often prefer to buy the products that had previously been bought by the users in our networks" [P6, page 12, lines 13-17].

Another interesting point highlighted by P17 was that people take visual images more seriously than any comments posted, which reflects the fact that such images have a stronger impact on the minds of the consumers in relation to whether to buy any product.

"Customers share their experiences and photographs on SNS platforms, which help us a lot. In our connections, if someone tries a product and gives positive feedback and posts the images, we take it seriously. The same also applies to negative feedback. I decide whether to buy based on those feedbacks or images only." [P17, page 8, lines 21-23].

DISCUSSION

We began by asking how the involvement of Indian consumers with social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn) affects their intentions to buy ethical products. Our qualitative field study yielded a set of findings that could productively be used to answer the question.

Whereas previous research on ethical consumption had explained why individual consumers make ethical choices (or not) (Carrington et al., 2010), we took a more collective and shared approach, exploring whether the use of SNSs influences the purchasing intentions of ethical consumers. In

so doing, we summarized the significant factors related to such use by ethical consumers collectively and the relationship between SNSs and such consumers' purchase intentions. The major emergent dimension were: SNS efficacy (convenience, relevance, information abundance, and immediateness), online communities on SNSs, online WOM on SNSs (relevance, timeliness, and comprehensiveness), ethical product knowledge, (more knowledge on products, alternative product information, information checking, and prior experiences of networks), social support among ethical consumers (informational and relational support), price sensitivity, and SNS communication on ethical products (content and positive or negative valence).

We defined the first macro-dimension as 'SNS efficacy', reflecting that the quotes pertaining to this dimension identified the usefulness of SNSs for the purchase of ethical products, whether online or offline. Our study not only highlights the extensive usage of SNSs for the purchase of ethical products but has also reveals the crucial role played by SNSs in affecting the purchase intentions of ethical consumers in India. Our findings suggest that the posts, comments, and feedback shared on SNS platforms significantly affect consumer purchase intentions. Our interviewees also revealed that the availability of reviews, videos, and photos of products on SNS platforms motivates them to shop, both online and offline, and encourage them to engage with ethical products. This is consistent with the earlier research that discussed the effects of SNSs on product brand engagement (McCormick, 2016). Consumers seem to be interested in knowing how others had used the products and whether these were organic/ethical or what processes were involved. This may affect individuals' attitudes toward products, resulting in an impact on their purchasing intentions (Ajzen 1985 Keller & Kotler, 2012).

Our study suggests that ethical consumers extensively use SNSs to create or participate in various online communities that facilitate the establishment of relationships among individuals, networks,

and community members. People appear to connect within these SNS-based online communities for common causes or to share common interests, such as ethical consumption (Kane, 2009). Our findings are consistent with the existing research that highlights how the social nature of online communities (Rheingold, 1993) support the collective aspect of ethical consumption, i.e., reaching out, and is extending beyond their immediate social networks to communities of like-minded individuals who share\ common interests or topics (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997) and are always ready to help each other and interact. As Cherrier (2007, p. 323) pointed out, *"consuming ethically links consumers to family members, friends, the state, and the market".* The interview findings suggest that the interests of ethical consumers encompass a wide range of ethical topics (Cherrier, 2007); hence, finding like-minded people is imperative. Given the limited reach of immediate physical social networks, SNS platforms play a vital role in connecting consumers with others who have similar ethical mindsets across the globe. It seems that interactions over SNS platforms foster feelings of in-group membership (Chen et al., 2020). These benefits of using SNS, in turn, influence ethical consumers' subsequent actions (Kuo & Feng, 2013), such as their purchasing intentions.

Being associated with virtuous causes, ethical consumers tend to be psychologically involved (Broderick et al., 2003) and to experience emotional reactions (Escadas et al., 2019) the expression of which, as our study suggests, is facilitated by SNSs. Our interviewees discussed how writing and reading posts had influenced their reactions, changing their attitudes toward products, and often shaping their intention to purchase those that had been bought by the members of their online communities. From the standpoint of the TPB model, this means that subjective norms, which are linked to the individual's perceptions of the "*social pressure to perform or not to perform the behavior*", are the second determinant of behavioral intentions (Ajzen, 1991:183). This refers to

the influence of those others who are close/important to a person/actor, such as friends, relatives, associates, or business partners (Hee, 2000) and of those who are connected in online networks. Hence, on SNS platforms, the ethical consumers' perceptions of their significant others' approval/disapproval of any product affect their own purchase intentions. This finding is also consistent with those of studies (Siddiqui et al., 2021), also conducted in India, that highlight the influence of informal network relationships on consumers—which is perceived as an inherent characteristic of India, as an emerging market.

Sharing information on SNS platforms is quite common for consumers, as supported by the existing research in this area (Thompson et al., 2008; Greysen et al., 2010). Our findings also suggest that SNSs have become popular for the sharing of ethical consumer experiences and ethical product-related information, which is also consistent with earlier findings in this area. Previous research indicates that consumers engage on SNSs to obtain up-to-date information (Baldus et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2020), and that they do so because it facilitates their active participation in communication processes and reciprocity (Tang et al., 2016). Further analysis revealed that a high usage of SNSs facilitates the generation of online WOM.

On SNSs, individuals share their information, feedback, reviews, recommendations and much more. As it increases with the sharing of reviews and opinions on SNSs (De Vries et al., 2012), online WOM interaction may foster positive ethical product attitudes and perceived behavioral control and can stimulate the buying intentions of ethical consumers (Erkan & Evans, 2016; Malthouse et al., 2013). This finding suggests that the relevance, appropriateness, timeliness, and comprehensiveness of the reviews, recommendations, posts, and messages found on these platforms helps consumers get a clear idea of the products they intend to purchase. Higher levels of information available through SNS platforms enable users to compare products, increase their

shopping ease, and help them make better purchase decisions, which positively affects their own perceptions of usefulness (Cheung, 2014; Cheung et al., 2008), thus influencing their purchase intentions. Furthermore, the effects of SNSs on ethical consumer purchase intentions found in our study are linked to the involvement of participants from India. The importance, in the Indian context, of informal social capital and networks has already been substantiated by previous research (Bapuji & Chrispal, 2020). Hence, these consumers simply perceive "*the ease or difficulty of performing the behavior*" (known as "*perceived behavioral control*": Ajzen, 1991:183) by reflecting on the past experiences of and obstacles anticipated (Zhou et al., 2013) by those with whom they are familiar in their SNS networks. Before making any product purchase, they trust online WOM (Doh & Hwang, 2009) because the views, feedback, or recommendations they find on SNSs platforms originate from their extended networks, ultimately affecting their purchase intentions.

All participants in our study, irrespective of their differences, highlighted the SNS communication aspect and defined it as the greatest advantage they derived from being on SNS platforms in relation to their purchase intentions. SNSs seem to enable two-way network interactions (Laksamana, 2020) among ethical consumers, which ensures that all are kept up to date with what is happening in regard to a product or service. Although, in this regard, our findings are in line with those of the extant literature (Yokoyama, 2016), they also highlight that the use of SNSs encourages both positive (statements that positively motivate consumers) and negative valence (negative statements that people make in relation to a particular service or product on SNS platforms). This may be due to the increasing interest of consumers to be heard and take part in conversations (Fan & Gordon, 2014). SNSs provide consumers with platforms on which they can share and receive information (Hajli, 2019) and obtain knowledge about ethical products from

their networks of friends, family members, and other online consumers. Accessing such information would otherwise be difficult, especially in the Indian context, where ethical consumerism is not that widely practiced. When accumulating both the positive and negative valence generated by SNSs, consumers feel that they are receiving highly reliable information (Goh et al., 2013), which exerts a substantial influence on their attitudes (Blasco-Arcas et al., 2014) toward a product and thus on their purchase intentions. In addition, several empirical studies have also established that online communication significantly affects the purchase intentions of ethical consumers. Their findings also revealed that—unlike in past scenarios, in which there was a dependency on fliers, texts, or emails—SNS communication, which relies on the ease and convenience of chats, posts, and feeds, exerts a considerable influence on consumers (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013). As the sources of information are part of the networks themselves, most consumers are likely to rely upon social media communication to make timely and accurate purchase decisions in many purchasing contexts. Besides, the findings also suggest that SNSs represent an open communication medium that overcomes the challenges found in a country like India, with its inherent regional, linguistic, and cultural differences. This finding is inconsistent with earlier ones (see Neuliep, 2019). Additionally, our findings point at the usefulness of the SNS medium in impacting attitudes and subjective norms, thus affecting the purchase intentions of Indian ethical consumers.

Our participants agreed that SNSs facilitate the provision of social support to their users in the form of both information and emotional support, which contributes to affecting the purchase intentions of ethical consumers. This finding is consistent with those of the existing literature, which highlight the influence exerted by social media on social support and on the purchase intention of consumers (Hajli, 2014). A possible explanation for this is that, on SNS platforms,

users can interact by means of posts, tweets, feedback, recommendations, ratings, and reviews. The respondents agreed that SNSs made it easy for them to receive emotional support by asking others for help in solving problems (such as leaving a complaint on the pages of a company's website regarding the organic food items it sells) and to obtain or provide informational support on any product or product-related issues. In addition to this, our findings suggest that the social support obtained through SNS platforms is beneficial to ethical consumers in the Indian context. This may be due to the unequal distribution of social capital among society's members, with some individuals being well-connected to social networks that provide support and information, and others having either few connections in general or few with the required resources (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). By virtue of their socioeconomic status, gender, religion, and other characteristics, the various members of Indian society are generally and systematically more or less able to access social capital, social support, and resources (Chrispal et al., 2021), which also results in inequality (Bapuji & Chrispal, 2020). Conversely, SNS platforms provide all their members with equal opportunities to access the resources they need, regardless of their socio-economic status or other features. Hence, it is easy for ethical consumers to receive or provide social support on SNSs platforms.

Crucially, our study suggests the usefulness of SNSs in increasing people's knowledge of products, which the respondents widely discussed. Green consumers' purchase decisions are mostly influenced by two types of factors. First, those that are intrinsic to such consumers, such as an understanding of their own environmental responsibilities, self-interest, and willingness to act for the conservation of the environment. Second, those that are extrinsic to them, which are related to, for example, their own social image and the products' characteristics (such as quality, safety, performance, price, promotion, impact on human health, and so on) (see Kumar & Ghodeswar,

2015: 342). Our findings suggest that the use of SNSs is linked to both these factors in regard to the formation of consumer purchase intentions.. Furthermore, our analysis suggests that access to information on ethical/organic/sustainable product-related environments is not easily, quickly, and conveniently available in India. However, with the use of SNSs, consumers can promptly get information on products, including the launch of new ones, their manufacturing processes, their ingredients, countries of origin, alternatives, and any extra information they believe to be helpful, as also highlighted by the extant research (Rahman et al., 2018). However, our analysis also indicates that the discussions, posts, reviews, chats, and content posted on Facebook or other SNSs helped our respondents to understand how much they knew about a product. Thus, the use of SNSs enhances both the objective and subjective product knowledge of the consumers. This could be due to the fact that fellow consumers or, indeed, most companies can be approached easily on SNSs platforms, which would otherwise be difficult in India. This is consistent with the findings reported by the existing literature (Brodie et al., 2013). For instance, SNS posts made by friends, comments left by other users on their experiences of a product, and any posts or feeds related to products are all elements that enable consumers to form an idea of others' experiences of ethical products

Crucially, our analysis suggested that price is an important factor for ethical consumers. This is consistent with earlier research, which identified how high prices affect the purchase intentions of consumers (Singh & Verma, 2017). D'Souza et al. (2006) found that high prices cause consumers to switch to other, cheaper products. In addition, our analysis also revealed that the use of SNSs by ethical consumers influences their purchase intentions even in this regard. This is possibly due to the fact that, while interacting on SNSs, consumers can easily and quickly become aware of any price differences from the posts, comments, reviews and suggestions, and

feedback. Under the paradigm of equity theory, Bolton and Lemon (1999) suggested that customers always appraise what is 'fair', 'right', or 'to be expected' in relation to the perceived cost of an offer, and then decide on whether to purchase a product. This becomes easy with the use of SNSs, as confirmed by our findings. The extant research found that millennial consumers are less price-sensitive and tend to favor the ethical aspects of consumption, whereas our interview data revealed that consumers are wary of the higher prices of organic/sustainable products, which affects their purchasing decisions. As affirmed by one of our participants, a possible rationale for this is that Indian consumers are relatively new to the ethical product market, which makes them wary of the higher prices and sensitive to the 'value for money' aspect.

Our findings both confirm and significantly advance the existing knowledge on ethical consumer behaviors. For instance, for some participants, SNS usage represented a space within which they could be authentic and consistent with their ethical selves. This could relate to the increased perceived effectiveness of being part of close social networks, rather than when individuals carry out actions on their own or as part of wider society (Jarillo, 1988). Some of the motivating rationale behind purchasing intentions, such as rewards, advertising, and brands (Ali et al., 2020), as identified by existing studies, were not mentioned by our interviewees. This may reflect the fact that the purchase intentions and engagement via SNSs of ethical consumers are motivated by different psychological and social factors. For example, they may not value extrinsic inducements (i.e., monetary rewards, deals, promotions, or incentives) as important purchase decision factors, rather preferring the collective actions, engagement discussions, and collective opinions found on SNSs platforms. Such use of consumption as a conceptual space of self-identity affected by collectivity has been previously identified in both ethical (Cherrier 2005, 2006; Papaoikonomou et al., 2012) and broader consumer research (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995;

Kozinets, 2001). Our study extends this finding to the SNSs context and provides empirical evidence of how ethical consumers relate to each other based on the similarities and differences of groups formed on SNSs, thus adding to the knowledge on the importance of the interplay between individual and collective behaviors and actions (Papaoikonomou et al., 2012).

Theoretical Implications

Our study contributes to both theory and practice. With respect to theory, it addresses the critical but hitherto under-addressed issue of how SNS usage impacts ethical consumer purchase intentions. In doing so, it makes key contributions to the literatures on SNSs (Sundararaj & Rejeesh, 2021), ethical consumerism (Arunachalam et al., 2019), and emerging markets (Arunachalam et al., 2019; Gillani et al., 2019). Our study provides an insight into the social nature of ethical consumption and highlights the importance of understanding ethical consumerism as a collective space as well as viewing ethical consumers as members of a community, rather than as asocial individuals. This insight is especially important in light of the lack of research on ethical consumer communities (Newholm & Shaw, 2007; Papaoikonomou et al., 2012). Although the existing research has provided a number of insights into the collective behaviors of groups and communities, there is still a need to move beyond the identification of collective groups of ethical consumption and to explore the motives and meanings attached to them (Papaoikonomou et al., 2012). Our study's contribution lies in filling this gap.

Our findings provide justification for why and how individual consumers participate in voluntary collective spaces such as online communities, online WOM, on SNSs platforms, and what this participation means to them. In our research, we analyzed the benefits of membership of

these collective spaces on SNSs (such as SNS efficacy, online communities, online WOM, social support) for ethical consumers, and how such membership affects purchase intentions (through varied aspects of SNS communication, price sensitivity and product knowledge), and thus reflecting the relational, informational and valuational usage of SNSs. In addition, by doing so, our study responds to a few calls recently made for in-depth research on online consumer purchase intentions (Thaichon et al., 2021), online WOM (Liu et al., 2021), online relationship marketing (Thaichon et al., 2018), and ethical consumerism (Gilaani & Kutaula, 2018).

Our study also contributes to the developing discussions on emerging markets and on how they affect and are affected by consumer orientations. Several calls for further research in this area have emerged in recent years (Meyer & Peng, 2013; Steenkamp, 2019)—including one for a special issue on theory building in relation to ethical consumerism in emerging markets (Kutaula et al., 2021), which substantiates the dearth of research hitherto conducted on it (Sharma et al., 2018). While previous research has extensively addressed the concept of ethical consumerism, there is surprisingly little prior evidence relating to ethical customer purchase intentions in emerging markets. We thus explored the intricacies of SNS usage that affect the purchasing intentions of ethical consumers in India under the purview of social capital theory and of the theory of planned behavior.

The vast literature already available in the field of the purchase intentions of consumers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020) has addressed such themes as its antecedents, causes, and consequences. In doing so, it has typically focused on the 'classic' forms taken by the purchase intentions of ethical consumers—i.e., the indicators that reflect such intentions toward products. Despite the predominance of this literature, a few studies have pointed to how the use of technologies or technological platforms influences consumer purchasing intentions. With our study, we have

established a new theoretical background by focusing on SNSs to explore the debate on the purchasing intentions of ethical consumers in the marketing, ethics, and technology scholarship. Given the popularity of SNSs and their increasing attractivity, especially in India, the study of SNSs through social capital theory can yield theoretical development in the purchasing intention and emerging country literature, especially with the increasing consciousness of Indian consumers in relation to environmentally sustainable green products. (Kumar & Ghodeswar, 2015). Thus, our study enhances our understanding of ethical consumers in the Indian context and provides insights suited to understanding their purchase intentions. The qualitative nature of our study enabled us to identify the factors that make the use of SNSs attractive to ethical consumers, facilitating the development of the framework illustrated in Figure 3. This also represents a sound basis for future research.

Insert Figure 3 here

Moreover, by researching both SNSs and their effects on purchasing intentions, our study expands the boundaries of the theory of planned behavior and of social capital theory. We uncovered that the extensive and habitual use of SNSs benefits ethical consumers in many ways, further influencing their purchase intentions within the scope of the theory of planned behavior (Aznan, 1991). Our findings highlight that SNS usage (which involves usefulness, online communities, WOM, communication, and social support) affects the knowledge and price sensitivity of ethical consumers, ultimately acting as a potential contributor to their purchasing intentions. We documented the role played by online WOM, social support, and online communities in providing information and in increasing the product knowledge and price sensitivity of ethical consumers, thus ultimately affecting their purchase intentions. Banerjee's (1992) model of herd behavior posits that people learn from and conform to the behaviors of others,

especially those they trust and/or appear to have some expertise. Hence, we suggested that consumerist behaviors become embedded by means of a social process influenced by the connections established with trusted or known persons over social networks. In addition, we also contribute to the literature on price sensitivity, which we found to be a potential contributor to the behaviors of consumers, especially to those of ethical ones in the Indian context.

Practical Implications

This study provides several suggestions for marketers. As its findings suggest, the price factor significantly influences (Indian) ethical consumers' decisions in regard to whether to buy a product. Hence, the consideration of price sensitivity is crucial not only for academic research, but also for retail managers, whose pricing strategies may affect ethical consumers purchase decisions. Additionally, as SNSs provide consumers with convenient and trusted ways to share information, marketers should ensure that their own social media marketing strategies are framed accordingly. More specifically, SNSs can be leveraged as a potentially effective way to enhance the purchase intentions of those consumers who intend to buy ethical products. In this regard, marketers could increase consumer confidence while, at the same time, justifying the high prices of their products by offering relevant certifications of their ethical nature by labelling them, for example, as ecological, organic, sustainable, and so on. Moreover, in order to increase consumer confidence, they could consistently advertise the prices and pricing differences between ethical and non-ethical products on SNS pages. In addition, marketers could occasionally enact pricing promotion campaigns on online communities to whet the purchase intentions of ethical consumers. In addition, marketers could employ on online community groups strategies such as member loyalty and frequent buyer programs, discount rewards, and other packages aimed at encouraging their existing customers to continue purchasing their products. Numerous past studies have found that

the attitudes of consumers significantly and positively affect their purchase intentions. Thus, marketers could also recruit opinion leaders or respected public figures to discuss the benefits of ethical products, both for people's health and the environment.

Our study has a few practical implications for manufacturers from emerging economies such as India. According to a World Economic Forum study and consumer survey, by the year 2030, India's economy will not be led by the bottom of the pyramid, but by the middle-class (Padhee & Kane-Potaka, 2020); this is due to the fact that, by then, 80% of Indian households are expected to be middle-income and to drive 75% of all consumer spending (Padhee & Kane-Potaka, 2020). Although, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, demand for natural and organic products in India had substantially increased (Padhee & Kane-Potaka, 2020), in its wake, health has become a priority for all, including Indian consumers. However, despite a growth anticipated to be at the significant rate of 40%-45% between 2014 and 2017 (Nandi et al., 2017), the Indian market for organic products is still limited mainly to the country's largest cities. By interacting with consumers over SNSs through online communities and WOM, manufacturers could ensure that the relevant information reaches those Indian consumers who are still unfamiliar with ethical products, in turn successfully enhancing their purchase intentions toward them. Hence, manufacturers could leverage the advantages of SNSs to reach their prospective consumers.

Our results provide practitioners with hands-on insights. First, the ethical product marketing strategies adopted by organizations should ensure that their SNS pages are constantly up to date and offer information and learning opportunities to consumers. Any social media activities should be judiciously planned with the aim of providing psychological and knowledge experiences and social communication. Also, by complementing these activities with visuals, thoughts, problem-solving, and inquisitiveness, managers could attempt to build and maintain

strong brand-consumer associations in social media environments (Brakus et al., 2009; Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013). Advancements in digital technologies—such as smartphone applications, cloud computing technology, artificial intelligence (AI), wearable devices, drones, robotics, and autonomous vehicles—have brought new concepts to the online marketing field. These should be leveraged by practitioners to reach and retain their consumers.

Limitations and Recommendations

Our study is one of only a handful to have hitherto investigated the impact of SNS usage on the purchasing intentions of ethical consumers; however, it does have a number of limitations that should also be noted. To begin with, it was focused on ethical consumers. In order to gain a better understanding of the impact of SNS usage on purchase intentions, any future research should thus test the model on other types of consumers. As our model can act as a useful theoretical foundation for the use of SNSs to better understand the purchase intentions of consumers, future researchers could use it to investigate how social media can influence the decisions of consumers. Another limitation was that sellers were not a part of our research scope. How their online campaigns affect ethical consumers and their purchase intentions was not investigated in our research. Future research could thus probe in this direction. Besides, there are many factors on SNSs that might negatively affect purchase decisions, such as different advertising campaigns or the use of influencers. Future research could explore these aspects to understand how extensive SNSs usage may adversely affect consumers.

In addition, from the micro-perspective of individual consumer characteristics, consumer perceptions of other members of SNSs could be found to affect the relationships established within them and their purchase intentions in contexts other than the Indian one. For example, future

studies could explore how the degree of engagement in ethical behaviors, the kind of ethical consumption in which fellow consumers engage in SNSs, and the similarities or differences between a consumer's own principles and those of other online community members may affect his/her purchase intentions.

Moreover, it could also be worthwhile to examine what types of online interactions are most beneficial for ethical consumers. Instead of finding like-minded consumers who are dedicated to ethical consumption for the same reasons, consumers may find a community content that reflects a wide variety of reasons with which they may not agree. In addition, the literature has discussed the growth in consumer skepticism toward social media marketing (Appel et al., 2020; Seo et al., 2019). Hence, the benefits that online SNSs are assumed to bring to consumers may be dwindling with more (negative) SNS experiences.

In addition, future research could focus on validating our research model in other country settings, as country-specific characteristics may affect the purchase intentions of consumers (Camacho, Ramírez-Correa, & Salazar-Concha, 2021). Although our research objective did not warrant an exploration of this aspect, future researchers could look into it by focusing on ethical consumers from other emerging economies. Another fascinating emerging question is whether these forms of SNS usage can explain the extent to which such usage will increase or decrease the purchase intentions of ethical consumers, as this aspect is also an essential part of the classification of such intentions. While this was not the focus of our work, we identified it as a research question essential to be addressed in the future.

Conclusion

While intending to extend social capital theory and to expand the theory of planned behavior in order to attain a better understanding of the dynamics of ethical consumption in emerging markets, our study was aimed at exploring SNS usage and how it influences the purchase intentions of ethical consumers in an emerging country context (India). In doing so, it identified a range of factors that affect the relationship between SNSs and consumer purchase intentions. The seven key factors that emerged from the analysis of our qualitative data provide a greater understanding of why SNS usage is essential for the understanding of ethical consumers' purchase intentions. Our research findings highlight that SNSs' usage (encompassing usefulness, online communities, WOM, communication, and social support) affects the ethical consumers' knowledge and their price sensitivity, ultimately acting as a potential contributor to ethical consumer purchasing intentions. In so doing, they represent a valuable step toward our understanding of ethical consumption in an emerging country context. Our findings are not intended to challenge any existing theories related to purchase intentions; they suggest an additional stage in the current technology-dominated era, one that involves the purchase intentions of ethical consumers and SNSs. However, our study represents only a starting point for research in this area, especially in the Indian context. Each factor identified here warrants further examination, and future studies may uncover further factors that will improve our understanding of ethical consumer purchase intentions. Moreover, our study provides constructive information suited to understanding the influence of SNS-based collective behaviors on the purchase intentions of ethical consumers as a social capital outcome. Social networking is well established as a fast-growing and advancing industry, which may lead to our research becoming quickly outdated. For example, new forms of networking platforms may emerge with new technologies and inventions, bringing with them new definitions of purchase intentions. Hence, attention should be given to understanding the

contextual reasoning behind such intentions. Consequently, our study is useful for both researchers' and practitioners' understanding of the complexities of the purchasing intentions of those ethical consumers who use social networking platforms in the Indian context. In this regard, previous research has linked some of the abovementioned constructs, but not all.

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Figure 2: SNSs-Purchase Intention of ethical consumer framework

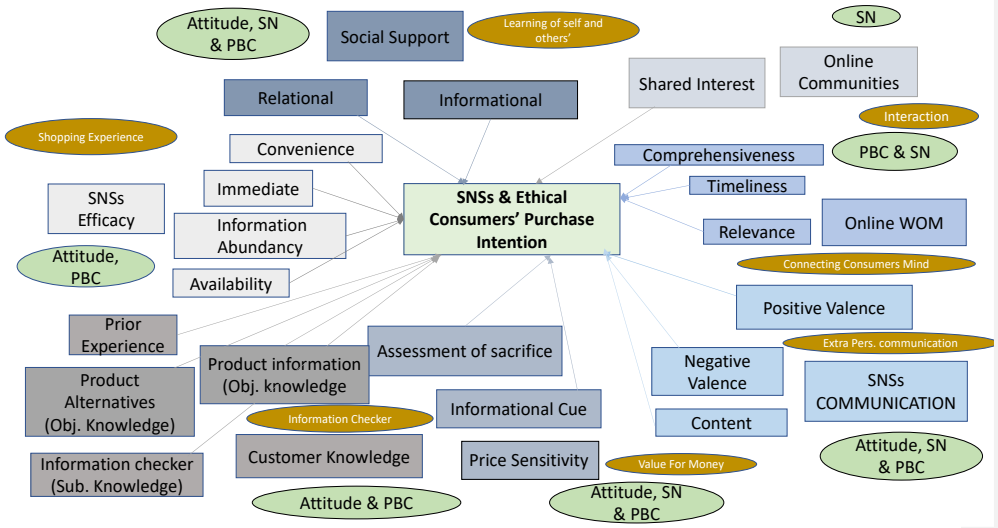

Figure 3: Proposed Research Model