(Araştırma)

CONSUMER ETHICS IN TÜRKİYE: A QUALITATIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS [1,2]

Mustafa Enes TEPE[3]*

Muhammet Ali TİLTAY[4]

Murat ÖZ[5]

ABSTRACT

Consumption decisions have direct and indirect effects on both living and non-living entities. These effects can be either positive or negative. Minimizing the negative impacts requires consumers to act responsibly and make more sustainable consumption choices. This study examines the phenomenon of consumer ethics within the context of Türkiye. The data were collected from four focus groups: three student groups representing different educational levels and one tradesmen group. The analysis resulted in the identification of six key themes: environment, animal welfare, copyright infringement, economic factors, ethical consumption consciousness, and purchasing/consumption practices. The findings indicate that ethical consumption consciousness has not yet developed sufficiently and that economic factors play a significant role in ethical consumption decisions. While participants emphasized the role of family and educational institutions in fostering ethical consumption, they also highlighted the need for governmental support through regulatory measures. Notably, human rights, which constitute an important dimension of consumer ethics, did not emerge as a salient theme. This study underscores the importance of cultural context on consumer ethics.

Keywords: Consumer Ethics, Ethical Consumer, Conscious Consumer, Generations, Culture, Türkiye

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[3] ***Corresponding Author**: Assist. Prof., Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of Business Administration, menestepe@kmu.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-9350-0754

[4] Prof. Dr., Eskişehir Osmangazi University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of Business Administration, matiltay@ogu.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0001-7877-8523

[5] Prof. Dr., Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of Business Administration, muratoz@kmu.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0003-4955-3848

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TÜRKİYE'DE TÜKETİCİ ETİĞİ: NİTEL BİR TEMATİK ANALİZ

ÖZ

Tüketim kararları hem canlı hem de cansız varlıklar üzerinde doğrudan ve dolaylı etkilere sahip olup, bu etkiler olumlu ya da olumsuz nitelik gösterebilmektedir. Olumsuz etkilerin en aza indirilebilmesi, tüketicilerin sorumlu davranmasını ve daha sürdürülebilir tüketim tercihlerinde bulunmasını gerektirmektedir. Bu çalışma, Türkiye bağlamında tüketici ahlakı olgusunu incelemektedir. Veriler, üçü farklı eğitim düzeylerinden öğrenci grupları, biri ise esnaf grubundan oluşan dört odak grup görüşmesinden elde edilmiştir. Analiz sonucunda çevre, hayvan refahı, telif hakkı ihlali, ekonomik etmenler, ahlaki tüketim bilinci ve satın alma/tüketim uygulamaları olmak üzere altı temel tema belirlenmiştir. Bulgular, ahlaki tüketim bilincinin henüz yeterli düzeyde gelişmediğini ve ekonomik etmenlerin ahlaki tüketim kararlarında önemli bir rol oynadığını göstermektedir. Katılımcılar, ahlaki tüketimin benimsenmesinde aile ve eğitim kurumlarının rolünü vurgulamakla birlikte, düzenleyici önlemler yoluyla devlet desteğinin gerekliliğine de dikkat çekmiştir. Dikkat çekici biçimde, tüketici etiğinin önemli bir boyutunu oluşturan insan hakları belirgin bir tema olarak ortaya çıkmamıştır. Bu çalışma, tüketici ahlakı konusunda kültürel bağlamın önemini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tüketici Etiği, Etik Tüketici, Bilinçli Tüketici, Kuşaklar, Kültür, Türkiye

1. Introduction

Consumption decisions have far-reaching implications, affecting various stakeholders, including workers, the environment, animals, and consumers themselves. As natural resources continue to deplete rapidly, uncontrolled and uninformed consumption choices are exerting an increasingly widespread impact. These decisions can contribute directly or indirectly to diverse global issues, ranging from extreme weather events and micro plastics contaminating the seafood supply to child labour in distant, unseen locations.

Since the early 1990s, the field of marketing ethics has developed significantly. In its initial stages, research primarily focused on the seller's perspective, while the consumer side remained relatively overlooked. However, as ethical consumption research has become more comprehensive, the necessity of examining consumers has become increasingly evident (Vitell & Paolillo, 2003). Although early studies focusing on consumers were limited (Muncy & Vitell, 1992), the number of consumer-oriented research in the field has steadily increased over the years. Interest in the subject has grown significantly, particularly after 2011. Moreover, contributions to the field have predominantly originated from Western countries, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom (Tiltay & Tepe, 2022). Consequently, research focusing on consumers outside North America and Western Europe remains relatively insufficient.

Consumer ethics remain a significant economic and social issue worldwide, extending beyond the academic domain. For instance, a global study conducted by the Business Software Alliance (BSA) in 2017 reported that the global rate of unlicensed software installations was 37%, with an estimated commercial value of $46.3 billion. In Türkiye, this rate stood at 56%, amounting to a commercial value of $208 million (BSA | The Software Alliance, 2018). At the same time, there has been a noticeable increase in consumer engagement with ethical consumption practices. For example, in the United Kingdom, the ethical consumption market experienced substantial growth, rising from £11.2 billion in 1999 to £141 billion in 2023 (Ethical Consumer, 2023). Another study commissioned by Marks & Spencer revealed that 80% of the company's customers expressed a desire to be informed about the production processes of the goods they purchase and wear. Consumers seek to determine whether any form of exploitation occurs during production (Torlak & Tiltay, 2017). Therefore, consumer ethical values play a crucial role in shaping both ethical and unethical behaviours, underscoring their broader significance.

Moreover, the cultural context in which consumers make decisions plays a significant role in shaping their ethical decision-making processes (Belk et al., 2005; Bucic et al., 2012). Culture does not merely constitute a background condition, rather, it shapes how consumers define right and wrong conduct in everyday marketplace situations, such as cheating, dishonesty, misleading others, or benefiting from questionable practices. In this sense, culture provides the normative frame through which consumers evaluate whether a practice is illegal, actively unethical, passively unethical, or relatively harmless (Swaidan, 2012). For instance, variations in consumers' access to resources and infrastructure across different cultures (Karimzadeh & Boström, 2024) or the influence of cultural context on personality traits (Al-Khatib et al., 1997; Arli & Pekerti, 2017; Rawwas et al., 2005; Rocha, 2024) play a significant role in shaping consumers' ethical consumption decisions. Cross-cultural studies also show that consumers' ethical evaluations differ according to cultural dimensions such as collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, and power distance (Rawwas et al., 2005; Vitell et al., 2016). For example, consumers who score higher on collectivism and uncertainty avoidance tend to reject questionable consumer practices more strongly (Swaidan, 2012). The formative role of culture is further evident in cross-cultural studies comparing consumers from different national

settings. Al-Khatib et al. (1997), argue that consumer ethics research should examine not only which ethical principles may be universally applied, but also which may be ethnocentric across different societies. Similarly, Rawwas et al. (1995) suggest that consumers' judgments of questionable consumer practices are shaped by broader cultural and environmental conditions, including colonial experience, war, terrorism, and culturally embedded factors such as religion, national identity, loyalty, values, and customs. Extending this view, Pekerti and Arli (2017) underline that acculturation, migration, and generational cohorts may alter consumers' values, ethical ideologies, and judgments of questionable consumer practices over time, showing that consumer ethics is shaped by both inherited cultural orientations and changing sociocultural conditions. Building on this perspective, this study aims to explore how consumers in Türkiye perceive consumer ethics. The primary contribution of this research lies in examining how the phenomenon of consumer ethics—predominantly defined within a Western context—is understood in the Turkish setting. In this context, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How is consumer ethics generally understood in the Turkish context?

2. What ethical consumption issues are emphasized across different age groups?

3. How do consumers and sellers perceive ethical consumer behaviour?

2. Conceptual Framework

Before defining consumer ethics, it is necessary to clarify how the present study approaches the relationship between ethics and morality. Although the two concepts are often used interchangeably, Harper's discussion suggests that they should not be understood as entirely separate domains. Harper (2009) notes that the original distinction between ethics and morality was largely linguistic, rooted in Greek and Latin terms associated with character, disposition, and custom, yet contemporary theory has often transformed this distinction into a rigid divide. Such a divide, for Harper, is problematic because moral and ethical experience are practically intertwined rather than fully separable. Weiss (1942) offers a useful analytical distinction by associating morality with conformity to the established practices and customs of a group, and ethics with a voluntary orientation toward an ideal good; in this sense, morality refers to socially embedded practices and habits, whereas ethics provides a reflective ground for evaluating them. Similarly, Aktaş (2014) emphasizes that, although ethics and morality are frequently used in place of one another in everyday Turkish usage, they refer to different conceptual levels: morality is concerned with culturally grounded understandings of right and wrong and their practical enactment, while ethics refers to the theoretical and philosophical evaluation of such moral understandings. Based on this distinction, the present study is positioned within the field of consumer ethics rather than consumer morality. It examines the moral norms, values, habits, and judgments through which consumers make sense of consumption-related practices, but analyses these meanings within an ethical framework. Thus, references to moral principles, moral norms, or moral judgments throughout the study refer to the moral content that constitutes the object of ethical inquiry in the context of consumption, rather than indicating an interchangeable use of ethics and morality.

Consumer ethics is defined *as "the moral principles and standards that guide the behavior of individuals or groups as they obtain, use, and dispose of goods and services"* (Muncy & Vitell, 1992, p. 298). Ethical consumer behaviour encompasses the entire process, from pre-purchase to post-purchase activities. At this point, the literature on ethical behaviour identifies three

fundamental approaches: (1) the teleological approach (consequence-based approach), (2) the deontological approach (rule- or reason-based approach), and (3) the relativist approach (cultural relativism) (Torlak & Tiltay, 2017). The teleological approach argues an action is considered ethical or acceptable if it produces desired outcomes. The deontological approach, on the other hand, focuses on individuals' rights and the intentions associated with a particular behaviour rather than the outcomes. In the relativist approach, definitions of ethical behaviour are derived from the experiences of individuals and groups (Ferrell et al., 2017).

In studies on consumer ethics, the most widely utilized theory by researchers is the General Theory of Marketing Ethics developed by Hunt and Vitell (Hassan et al., 2022; Hassan & Rahman, 2021). The theory, also referred to as the Hunt-Vitell Theory, was developed to explain the moral decision-making process. It was first introduced by Hunt and Vitell in 1986 and presented to the academic community through an article published in the *Journal of Macromarketing* (Hunt & Vitell, 1986). The authors had two primary objectives in their work. The first was to provide a general theoretical framework for moral decision-making processes. This framework aims to explain how individuals think and which factors influence their decision-making when faced with situations involving moral dilemmas. The second objective was to present this theory as a process model. One significant contribution of the Hunt-Vitell Theory lies in its shift of focus in ethical research from the question, "How should moral decisions be made?" to "How are moral decisions made?" (Vitell & Hunt, 2015). Due to its direct applicability to individual consumer behaviour, the theory emerges as the most suitable theoretical model for research conducted on consumer ethics (Vitell, 2003, p. 34). In this regard, the theory has provided a framework that guides empirical studies, offering a robust foundation for understanding the functioning of moral decision-making processes in everyday life. Accordingly, the Hunt-Vitell Theory has been used in marketing ethics studies in different contexts, including empirical model testing, ethics education, and channel relationships (Donoho et al., 2001; Hunt & Laverie, 2004; Mayo & Marks, 1990; Vermillion et al., 2002). More importantly for the present study, the theory has provided a useful basis for explaining consumers' ethical beliefs and evaluations. In this stream of research, consumer ethics is not treated merely as an assessment of right or wrong marketplace behaviours, but as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by personal, moral, and cultural factors. For instance, Arli et al. (2019) examined religiosity and Machiavellianism and showed that highly religious consumers are less likely to engage in unethical consumer behaviours. Chowdhury (2020) focused on personal values and demonstrated that moral identity and Machiavellianism mediate the relationship between consumers' values and their ethical beliefs. Similarly, Chowdhury and Fernando (2014) showed that empathy and moral identity are associated with lower acceptance of questionable consumer practices and stronger support for doing-good/recycling behaviours, whereas cynicism is associated with the opposite tendency. Other studies have further emphasized the role of culture and context. Swaidan (2012) found that cultural orientations such as collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, and power distance differentiate consumers' evaluations of questionable activities. Vitell et al. (2016) showed that spirituality and internalized moral identity are related to stronger ethical predispositions across different cultural settings, while Ozgen and Esiyok (2020) revealed that Turkish adolescents' ethical beliefs vary according to socio-economic level and gender. Taken together, these studies indicate that consumer ethics should be understood as a decision-making process influenced not only by deontological and teleological evaluations, but also by values, religiosity/spirituality, moral identity, personality traits, and cultural context.

The theory draws upon deontological (rule-based) and teleological (consequence-based) approaches to moral reasoning within the field of moral philosophy. In the deontological

evaluation process, individuals assess alternatives within the framework of specific moral norms, comparing their options against these predetermined standards. These norms can reflect either personal values or principles of ethical conduct. They may be general, such as prohibitions against stealing or mandates for fairness, or specifically, addressing issues like deceptive advertising or product safety. For instance, when evaluating whether a seller's act of offering fraudulent products is ethically acceptable, one would consider a fundamental value like honesty. In contrast, the teleological evaluation process focuses on outcomes. Individuals assess the potential consequences of each alternative and their impact on those affected by the decision. This process involves determining how good or bad the consequences of each alternative are and understanding the overall net positivity or negativity of the potential outcomes. The assessment here is subjective, relying on the decision-maker's perception. For example, when evaluating the decision to purchase counterfeit cosmetic products, a consumer would focus on the potential outcomes of this choice (Hunt & Vitell, 2006).

Consumer behaviour is widely understood as culturally embedded, since values, symbols, norms, roles and cognitive structures are considered to shape consumers' perceptions and behavioural responses (McCort & Malhotra, 1993). The meaning attached to consumer goods is also treated as something that is transferred from the culturally constituted world to goods and then to individual consumers through mechanisms such as advertising, fashion and consumption rituals (McCracken, 1986). Purchasing behaviour has further been linked to subjective culture through intervening psychological processes such as attitudes, self-definitions, perceived purchase consequences, and referent expectations (Lee, 2000). Many aspects of consumer behaviour have been identified as culture-bound, including self-concept, personality, attitudes, motivation, emotions, information processing, decision-making and responses to brands and advertising (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011). Consumption has also been conceptualised as a sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological phenomenon through which marketplace meanings are used by consumers to construct identities, social relationships, and cultural worlds (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Consumers' perceptions of local products have been shown to be strongly influenced by culture-related factors such as regional image and authenticity, and these perceptions, in turn, affect consumers' expenditure on such products rather than their frequency of purchase (Pantano, 2011). Consumer responses to brands, service providers and others' needs have also been associated with horizontal and vertical forms of individualism and collectivism, through which personal values, goals and normative expectations are shaped (Shavitt & Cho, 2016). Consumer behaviour should therefore be examined in relation to the cultural meanings, values and norms through which perceptions, preferences and actions are formed. This cultural embeddedness also provides a basis for understanding how ethical evaluations and ethical consumer behaviours are shaped.

Ethics is an integral component of the culture in which it develops. Therefore, examining ethical choices without considering the cultural context can lead to misleading conclusions (Belk et al., 2005). Similarly, ethical behaviour is influenced by and shaped through culture. Hence, culture determines what is considered acceptable or unacceptable in behaviours. Consequently, individuals' actions are guided by their cultural heritage and experiences (Steinberg & Austern, 1990). However, this does not imply that all individuals will exhibit identical behaviours. While similarities may exist in individuals' actions, differences are also possible (Torlak & Tiltay, 2017). Such variation is also reflected in cross-cultural consumer ethics research, where consumers' evaluations of questionable marketplace practices have been shown to differ across cultural settings. Ethical judgements concerning consumer situations such as changing price tags and other marketplace dilemmas were found to vary between Egyptian and American consumers, suggesting that consumer ethics may include both

universal and culture-specific elements (Al-Khatib et al., 1997). The relationship between cultural values and ethical beliefs was also examined through comparisons of US and Middle Eastern consumers, and value systems were treated as an important basis for understanding differences in ethical attitudes and moral reasoning (Ford et al., 2005). In the Turkish context, ethical beliefs were compared with those of American consumers through idealism, relativism, Machiavellianism and the Muncy–Vitell consumer ethics scale, and significant differences were identified between the two groups (Rawwas et al., 2005). The influence of culture on consumer ethics was further shown to be shaped by acculturation and generational cohorts, indicating that ethical beliefs and ideologies may change across cultural and generational contexts (Pekerti & Arli, 2017). Sustainable consumption motives have also been conceptualised in relation to horizontal and vertical forms of individualism and collectivism, suggesting that environmentally responsible consumption should be understood through culturally relevant motivations(Ur Rahman et al., 2023). Similarly, in the Chinese consumer context, Chan et al. (2024) show that cultural values, particularly integration, mediate the effect of ethical ideologies on consumers' ethical judgments across active benefit, passive benefit, deceptive practice, and no/indirect harm situations, while the mediating role of moral discipline receives limited support.

In the Turkish context, previous consumer ethics studies suggest that Turkish consumers are generally sensitive to ethical issues, yet their ethical evaluations differ across types of consumer practices. Turkish consumers are reported to be sensitive to ethical issues, to represent different ethical ideologies, to perceive actively benefiting from illegal activities as unethical, and to evaluate no-harm/no-foul practices as the least unethical category (Yurtsever, 1998). Similarly, respondents' ethical sensitivity has been found to be high except for behaviours perceived as harmless, while idealism appears more prominent than relativism and Machiavellian tendencies remain relatively low (Oyman, 2004). A cross-cultural comparison of Turkish and American consumers shows that ethical beliefs differ across the two national samples and relates this difference to cultural dimensions such as power distance and uncertainty avoidance (Rawwas et al., 2005). More recent studies also indicate that ethical consumer behaviour in Türkiye differs according to demographic and socio-economic variables. Ethical consumer behaviour has been found to vary by education, income and age (Özden, 2019), while Turkish adolescents' consumer ethics varies by socio-economic level and gender, with males reporting lower ethical beliefs than females (Ozgen & Esiyok, 2020). Consumer ethics is also related to value-based factors, as intrinsic religiosity is negatively associated with negative consumer ethics actions, whereas extrinsic religiosity and materialistic tendencies are positively associated with such actions (Tiltay & Torlak, 2011). In addition, the Turkish consumer ethics scale has been validated through dimensions such as no-harm/no-foul activities, downloading copyrighted materials/buying counterfeit goods, doing the right thing/doing good, passively benefiting from illegal activities, recycling/environmental awareness, and actively benefiting from questionable but legal practices; however, actively benefiting from illegal activities did not meet construct validity conditions (Kurtuldu, 2023). Recent evidence further emphasizes that cultural and religious values should be considered in understanding Turkish consumers' ethical beliefs in a context where copyright violations, environmental pollution, deceptive advertising, unsafe products, bribery and ethical misconduct are presented as salient ethical concerns (Harcar et al., 2026).

Muncy and Vitell (1992) identified that consumers respond differently to moral situations and issues, categorizing these actions into four distinct dimensions. The first two dimensions refer to proactively benefiting from a situation at the seller's expense and passively benefiting from a situation at the seller's expense. In both cases, while the consumer gains an advantage, the

seller incurs a loss. The distinction between these two lies in the fact that, in the first case, the benefit gained by the consumer results from their actions, whereas, in the second case, the consumer does not take any initiative to obtain the benefit. The third dimension involves deceptive practices, where the consumer engages in various forms of deception against the seller. The final dimension refers to harmless actions, in which neither the consumer nor the seller experiences any form of harm from the action. The authors expanded these four categorized dimensions by adding three additional dimensions. These dimensions include *downloading*, which refers to downloading free data from the internet and purchasing counterfeit products; *recycling*, which represents environmentally conscious consumption behaviours; and *doing good*, which encompasses morally appropriate actions (Vitell & Muncy, 2005). These dimensions developed by Muncy and Vitell constitute an important foundation for understanding consumer ethics. In the following years, they have been frequently utilized by researchers in studies on consumer ethics across different contexts (e.g. Arli et al., 2021; De Bock & Van Kenhove, 2010; Erffmeyer et al., 1999; Rallapalli et al., 1994; Rawwas et al., 2005; Rodriguez-Rad & Ramos-Hidalgo, 2018; Swaidan, 2012; Tiltay & Torlak, 2011).

However, since the introduction of these dimensions, the field of consumer ethics has evolved to a new level. In a sense, there has been a subtle shift in focus from the "dark side" of consumer ethics—namely, controversial consumer behaviours—to the "bright side," which emphasizes ethical consumption (Hassan et al., 2022). Consumer ethics encompass a range of moral concerns beyond the dimensions identified by Muncy and Vitell. In addition to various moral values inherent in the buying and selling process, issues such as environmental sustainability, human rights, and animal welfare are also associated with ethical consumption (Harrison et al., 2005; Strong, 1996).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Participants

This study is based on a phenomenological approach within the qualitative research tradition. Phenomenology aims to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of a particular phenomenon or concept (Creswell, 2018) and assumes that reality is constructed through human experience, and seeks to reveal the essence of lived experiences related to a particular phenomenon. The phenomenological lens allows for the exploration of individual perceptions while also seeking shared meanings across participants. The process involves not just description but also interpretation, requiring the researcher to engage with participants' narratives with sensitivity and reflexivity (Patton, 2018). In this context, the research focuses on how Turkish consumers experience, interpret, and make meaning of ethical consumption in their everyday lives. The phenomenological research design was deemed appropriate for this study due to its focus on understanding how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. The aim of the research is to explore how different groups in Türkiye perceive and interpret ethical consumption. Since consumer ethics involves deeply personal, value-laden, and socially influenced experiences (Belk et al., 2005; Hiller & Goworek, 2023), a phenomenological design provides a suitable framework to capture these subjective meanings in depth. This approach enables the researcher to uncover the essence of participants' experiences and the meanings they attribute to ethical consumption practices within their specific socio-cultural context. Consequently, it allows for an in-depth exploration of the perspectives of individuals from diverse backgrounds, which aligns with the study's objective of revealing both shared and divergent experiences across different generational and educational cohorts.

Focus group discussions were selected as the data collection method because they are especially effective in uncovering how individuals think and feel about a particular issue within a socially interactive setting. Focus groups allow participants who share common characteristics to articulate their perspectives in a safe and permissive environment. This interaction fosters the emergence of shared meanings and contrasting views (Krueger & Casey, 2015), which aligns with the aim of this study to explore ethical consumption as a socially constructed experience. Therefore, focus groups not only capture individual perspectives but also the collective dynamics that shape consumer ethics. Although in-depth individual interviews are frequently used in phenomenological research and may provide detailed accounts of personal experience (Bevan, 2014; Groenewald, 2004), recent methodological discussions suggest that focus groups are not necessarily incompatible with phenomenological inquiry when they are used reflexively and coherently with the epistemological assumptions of the study. In particular, hermeneutic phenomenology emphasises dialogue, relationality and situated meaning-making, and therefore allows meaning to be understood as something that emerges through interaction as well as through individual reflection (Vella, 2025). Similarly, Palmer et al. (2010) argue that, although individual interviews are widely used in interpretative phenomenological studies, focus groups may also generate rich experiential data, especially when both individual accounts and group interaction are considered analytically. Since the study focuses on consumer ethics in Türkiye, where cultural meanings, social norms and collective evaluations are central to the phenomenon under investigation, the interactive character of focus groups was considered suitable for capturing not only individual meanings, but also the social processes through which ethical consumption is interpreted.

The data collected through focus group discussions were analysed using MAXQDA qualitative analysis software. The study adopted a combined inductive and deductive approach to coding and theme development. This hybrid method is essential for achieving both theoretical depth and empirical richness; as Ger (2009) emphasizes, only through a dialogic, iterative interplay between theory and data can we move closer to meaningful insights and significant findings. Similarly, Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) demonstrate how such an integrated approach enhances the rigor and credibility of thematic analysis. While the initial structure of the focus group questions was informed by key themes in the consumer ethics literature—such as environmental concerns, worker's rights and animal welfare (deductive aspect)—the analysis remained open to emerging patterns and concepts grounded in participants' own expressions (inductive aspect). The focus group guide included broad, open-ended questions designed to understand how participants make sense of consumer ethics in general and which consumption-related practices they associate with ethical or unethical consumer behaviour.

As part of the study, four focus group discussions were conducted with participants from Generation Z, Generation Y, and Generation X to explore diverse perspectives on consumer ethics. The inclusion of participants from different age-based generational cohorts was theoretically justified by previous consumer ethics research showing that ethical beliefs and ethical consumption evaluations may differ across age groups and generational cohorts. Prior studies have examined consumer ethics among adolescents, Millennials, and elderly consumers, indicating that ethical judgments may vary according to age, generational position, socio-economic background, and related socialization experiences (e.g., Arli et al., 2017; Bucic et al., 2012; Flurry & Swimberghe, 2016; Ozgen & Esiyok, 2020; Pekerti & Arli, 2017; Vitell et al., 1991). Therefore, participants from different generations were included to capture potentially shared and divergent meanings of consumer ethics across different age-based socialization experiences in the Turkish context. Each group consisted of six participants (Table 1), selected through quota sampling, which is commonly used to ensure representation

of key subgroups within the sample (Neuman, 2017). The sessions were held online via the Zoom platform and recorded for analysis. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Eskişehir Osmangazi University Ethics Committee on February 11, 2021 (Decision No. 2021-03). Transcriptions were generated using an AI-based tool and subsequently reviewed by the researchers to correct inaccuracies. To enhance the validity of the findings, the transcripts were repeatedly reviewed, relevant quotations were included in the results, and expert consultation was sought throughout the process (Creswell, 2018). The study followed the six-phase framework of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). After familiarization with the data, meaningful segments were identified and inductively coded. These initial codes were then organized into themes, which were iteratively reviewed, refined, and clearly defined. A codebook was developed during this process, including code definitions, representative quotes, and hierarchical relationships. This structured yet flexible approach ensured that the analysis remained grounded in participants' lived experiences while providing methodological transparency and rigor.

This study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis, which was considered methodologically compatible with the phenomenological orientation of the study given its theoretical flexibility and its capacity to identify, analyse, and report patterns of meaning within qualitative data. In applying this approach, particular attention was also paid to ensuring trustworthiness as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Specifically, we drew on the framework presented in Nowell et al. (2017), which aligns each phase of thematic analysis with corresponding strategies to address credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. All six phases—ranging from familiarization with the data to producing the final report—were carried out in an iterative and reflexive manner, with careful documentation and methodological transparency. Multiple researchers were involved in the coding process, and peer debriefing was conducted regularly throughout the analysis. This collaborative and systematic approach enhanced the credibility and dependability of the findings.

Table 1. Participant's Information

Participants	Age	City	Group
K1	18	Muğla	GI (High School Students)
K2	18	Ankara	
K3	18	Adıyaman	
K4	18	Van	
K5	18	Hatay	
K6	18	Karaman	
K7	22	İstanbul	GII (Undergraduate Students)
K8	20	Van	
K9	22	Konya	
K10	23	Adıyaman	
K11	23	İstanbul	
K12	22	Mersin	
K13	34	Ankara	GIII (Postgraduate Students)
K14	32	Konya	
K15	33	Çankırı	
K16	34	Eskişehir	
K17	30	Afyon	
K18	29	Konya	
K19	56	Karaman	GIV (Tradesmen)
K20	50	Karaman	
K21	48	Karaman	
K22	50	Karaman	
K23	46	Karaman	
K24	53	Karaman	

4. Findings

As a result of the analyses, the findings have been categorized under six themes which are environment, animal welfare, copyright, economic factors, ethical consumption consciousness, and purchasing/consumption practices.

Environment*:* In consumer ethics research, environmental issues are among the most frequently addressed topics by researchers (e.g. Belk et al., 2005; Cerri et al., 2018; Culiberg, 2015; Thφgersen, 1999). One of the topics that participants also associated with consumer ethics is the environment. The environment has generally been addressed in the context of plastic usage and recycling.

Recycling: Participants emphasized the lack of infrastructure that enables waste separation at the source. They highlighted the insufficiency of multi-compartment waste containers placed at designated locations by local governments.

> *"I live in Çankaya, Ankara. In fact, I reside in a well-developed area of the city. When I observe my surroundings… I do not see people being very attentive. At one point, I started collecting plastic waste at home, but I noticed that recycling bins, or whatever they are called, were not very accessible in my vicinity." (GIII)*

> *"There are trash bins at the corner of every street, which is convenient for people. However, recycling bins or informative materials are not as common, and we tend to be reluctant" (GII).*

Plastic Usage: Plastics, which are widely used in almost every aspect of daily life, also contribute to the growing issue of plastic waste. While this situation raises deep concerns globally, the majority of waste generated by increasing plastic production is discarded rather than being sent for recycling (Zhang et al., 2021). Participants primarily evaluated plastic usage within the context of the mandatory pricing of plastic bags. While some opposed the charging plastic bag fees, others supported it due to its potential to reduce plastic consumption. In addition, discussions also touched upon packaging and single-use plastics.

> *"If a person does not discard the plastic bag, it does not contribute to environmental pollution. Even though I am against the plastic bag fee—why? Because when I get a plastic bag, I use it as a trash bag for a* second *time, maybe even a third time. So, I don't fully agree with this policy, and I am against it." (GIV).*

> *" I believe it should be even more discouraging. In fact, I think plastic bags should be completely phased out, and more sustainable alternatives, such as reusable mesh bags, should be promoted." (GI).*

***Animal Welfare*:** Another topic that participants evaluated within the context of consumer ethics is animal welfare. The prominent sub-themes include the use of animal-derived products, animal testing, veganism and vegetarianism, and pet ownership.

Using Animal Products: Another topic emphasized by researchers within the context of consumer ethics is animal-derived products (Hölker et al., 2019; Lin-Schilstra & Fischer, 2020). Participants perceived the killing of animals for their fur, skin, or teeth as unethical, whereas the use of animal hides from livestock slaughtered for the meat industry was not considered a major issue.

> *"Wearing leather boots doesn't seem wrong to me. I don't know, maybe I'll be judged for saying this (smiling), but honestly, I believe leather boots are more practical and long-lasting, so I don't see anything wrong with it." (GI)*

> *"Fur and leather products, for example—when I think of animals and consumption, that's the first thing that comes to my mind. The idea of animals being killed solely for this purpose... The image that comes to my mind looks truly horrifying." (GI)*

Animal Testing: Animals are used in certain fields to determine product efficacy and safety. However, due to the diseases and toxicity that occur during testing processes, many test animals experience significant pain and distress (Stokes & Marsman, 2014). While animal testing poses a threat to animal welfare, reactions to its use vary depending on the field. In particular, animal testing in the cosmetics industry is widely rejected, whereas in the medical field, its use for testing purposes is considered acceptable in cases where no alternatives are available (Kabene & Baadel, 2019). Participants also distinguished between the use of animals in the cosmetics industry and their use in science and medicine.

> *"It definitely needs to be used in pharmaceuticals; testing on humans is not ethical. We are already debating the ethics of animal testing. I see it as inevitable. When it comes to cosmetics, it's unnecessary, but in terms of health, do we really have any other choice? In my opinion, testing on animals is a necessity." (GI)*

> *"I am a pet owner, so I pay attention to vegan brands. I prefer The Body Shop's products because they do not test on animals." (GIII)*

Veganism/Vegetarianism: Veganism and vegetarianism was discussed only in the first group. While some participants mentioned having tried a vegan or vegetarian diet, the prevailing view was that the consumption of animal-based products is necessary.

> *""I actually tried to be a vegetarian for a while. I even considered veganism, but I couldn't fully achieve that goal." (GI)*

> *"I believe humans need animal-based resources, and this is a natural necessity. I don't see any issue with it." (GI)*

Pet Ownership: Participants noted that domesticated animals can be taken in as pets and that pet ownership influences attitudes toward animals. However, they stressed that taking exotic animals out of their natural habitats is unethical.

> *"I think I became more attentive after getting my cat, especially toward animals in general. I already loved animals, but after becoming a cat mother, I started to be even more mindful." (GIII)*

> *"There are some pets that need to be kept at home, but logically, no bird species should be kept indoors. Birds are meant to fly, be outside, and live in their natural habitat." (GI)*

***Copyright Infringement*:** Another topic addressed by participants was copyright infringement. This theme was examined under two main aspects: digital piracy and the purchase of counterfeit products.

Digital Piracy: Although accessing digital content through illegal means is not considered ethically acceptable, participants generally acknowledged that this practice has become normalized. The ease of access to pirated content and the absence of cost were cited as primary reasons for its preference.

> *"Once again, the issue of pricing comes into play. To watch the shows you want, you now need HBO, Netflix… Every company has created its own platform, and if you try to subscribe to all of them, it would cost a fortune." (GI)*

> *"Simply typing it into the internet and instantly downloading it is much easier." (GIII)*

Additionally, it has been stated that digital piracy has become normalized over time and is rationalized by consumers for various reasons.

> *"When cassette tapes and CDs were popular, I always bought the albums of my favourite artists through those formats. I had a certain value and belief in doing so… But over time, this practice (downloading) gained so much legitimacy in society, and with technological advancements, society changed so much that it changed me as well. Eventually, I also started to see it as morally acceptable." (GIII)*

Purchasing Counterfeit Products: Participants suggested that the preference for counterfeit products among consumers could be driven by identity construction and resentment toward the brand.

> *"When purchasing a replica, can you feel resentment toward the brand of the product you are buying? For example, a Rolex watch—an extremely expensive item, costing around $60,000. You might buy a perfect replica not just because you believe it is the right thing to do, but also out of a sense of frustration with the system." (GIII)*

> *"These products serve as tools in identity construction. They contribute to people's identity-building processes because, through them, individuals can showcase who they are to those around them." (GIII)*

***Economic Factors*:** Participants identified the economy as one of the key factors to consider in ethical consumption. This is because products associated with ethical consumption tend to be more expensive than their alternatives. For instance, fair trade-labelled coffee (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005) and free-range animal products (Harper & Makatouni, 2002) are generally priced higher compared to conventional alternatives. According to participants, factors such as price, cost, and their impact on purchasing power directly influence consumer decisions.

Price/Cost: Price has a significant influence on consumers' purchasing decisions (Zhao et al., 2021). In particular, price sensitivity is one of the key barriers to ethical consumption (Bray et al., 2011). This situation stems from consumers perceiving responsible consumption choices as more costly (d'Astous & Legendre, 2009). Participants also stated that price is a determining factor in a wide range of product choices. While purchasing a more expensive product may be considered a more responsible consumption decision, participants indicated that they would opt for the cheaper alternative when substitute products are available.

> *"I think the main reason is so significant that the secondary factors become almost irrelevant. In other words, the issue of price is so crucial for many people that it seems unnecessary to consider other reasons." (GI)*

> *"Wanting a product made from high-quality materials is always our preference. However, once a customer enters a store in an industrial area, the first thing they ask about is the price." (GIV)*

Purchasing Power: Consumers may have the intention to make ethical consumption choices; however, this intention must also be supported by their purchasing power. Participants emphasized that purchasing power plays a significant role in ethical consumption decisions.

> *"This might actually be related to people's standard of living as well." (GII)*

> *"Even if there are differences in product preferences or prices, someone with the financial means who wants to create change or influence those around them may still choose ethical consumption." (GIII)*

***Ethical Consumption Consciousness*:** Participants emphasized the lack of ethical consumption consciousness in Türkiye and highlighted the importance of raising awareness. In this regard, they underscored the necessity of legal regulations and incentives. Additionally, supporting local businesses and addressing climate change were among the other topics discussed under this theme.

Raising Ethical Consumption Consciousness: Participants stated that the general consumer profile lacks awareness regarding ethical consumption and provided suggestions for increasing consciousness. They particularly emphasized the importance of instilling awareness within families and educational institutions.

> *"Of course, this can be achieved through education. Such habits are developed at a young age and should be instilled early on." (GIII)*

> *"It all starts with education. When proper education is not provided at a young age, future generations pay the price in a painful way." (GII)*

Legal Regulations and Incentives: Participants emphasized the necessity of legal regulations to reduce unethical consumption practices. They highlighted the importance of the state's role in enforcing regulations in specific areas.

> *""I might be a highly conscious, 100% environmentally aware individual, but I don't have the authority to make a significant impact. How many people can I influence? Those who hold power should be the ones using their authority. This issue requires a regulatory and administrative approach." (GIII)*

> *"In my opinion, strict laws need to be implemented on this matter." (GII)*

Consciousness Level: The level of consciousness regarding ethical consumption is another topic that was discussed. Participants particularly emphasized the low level of ethical consumption consciousness in Türkiye.

> *"I think we are very unconscious of this issue (recycling) in Türkiye." (GII)*

> *"In general, I never pay attention to such things (labels), like the ones on products. I have also realized that I am definitely an unconscious consumer… (smiling)." (GI)*

Collective Action: Participants emphasized the necessity of collective effort in raising awareness of ethical consumption and transitioning consumption practices toward a more sustainable approach. In addition, participants stated that efforts to create change alone could be discouraging

> *"Even when I try to make a difference, I sometimes feel a sense of pessimism. I think, 'What can I change on my own? People need to become more aware.' This can be quite discouraging. That thought—'What can I do alone?'—definitely plays a role." (GI)*

> *"Acting alone, like a lone fighter, is quite difficult because, inevitably, we tend to revert to old habits. However, when we continuously see change happening around us and feel the pressure of societal influence—by societal pressure, I mean a collective society, a collective movement—it becomes more impactful." (GI)*

Climate Change: Participants stated that climate change is not widely addressed unless its effects are directly felt, and even when it is acknowledged, its impact is not long-lasting.

> *"Climate change does not seem like a dire situation. It does not appear to have a significant impact on our lives because it is not at the centre of our daily experiences." (GI)*

> *"We are experiencing a consumption frenzy. Even if we are not fully aware, we sometimes hear on television that producing a certain product requires a specific amount of water or energy." (GIV)*

***Purchasing/Consumption Practices*:** Another topic that participants associated with ethical consumption is the patterns emerging in consumers' purchasing and consumption practices. Within this theme, participants highlighted sustainable consumption behaviour, the awareness cycle, saving/waste, group behaviour, in-store negative behaviours, and attitude/awareness behaviour gap.

Sustainable Consumption Behaviour: Different outcomes have emerged regarding sustainable consumption practices. While some participants stated that they consciously and intentionally strive to adopt more sustainable consumption habits, others support sustainable consumption without being fully aware of it. Additionally, some participants admitted to being unfamiliar with the concept of sustainable consumption.

> *"The last time I went shopping for clothes was in June, and I decided not to shop for clothes frequently anymore. One of the reasons for this decision was to minimize harm to the environment" (GIII)*

> *"Kids nowadays buy a smartphone, let's say for 5,000. The following year, the same brand releases a newer model, which sells for 8,000 or 9,000. They sell their current phone for 4,000 and buy the new one for 9,000—just for a couple of extra features. Is it really worth it? Isn't it a waste?" (GIV)*

> *"I think there is something called sustainable shopping or sustainable consumption. It seems to be a term that many brands have been using lately. But to be honest, I'm not exactly sure what it means." (GI)*

Awareness Cycle: The awareness cycle refers to the temporary nature of individuals' awareness of issues related to ethical consumption and the tendency to revert to previous behaviours after a certain period of heightened awareness. Participants noted that increased awareness of certain topics does not necessarily lead to lasting behavioural change; rather, its impact is short-lived, and once the initial influence fades, individuals tend to return to their previous consumption habits.

> *" People were consciously reminding each other and acting as they should. But then, gradually, as new events emerged and the fires started to die down, as the disaster began to fade, we slowly went back to our old ways. It's like a cycle—we pay attention for a while, and then we return to where we started." (GII)*

> *"Yes, when you watch documentaries, you think, 'Wow, this is terrible! What is happening to our world?' But then, two days later, you forget about it." (GI)*

Conservation/Waste: Participants associated waste and conservation with consumer ethics, particularly emphasizing food waste. They also highlighted the importance of needs-based consumption.

> *"When I think of consumer ethics, two things come to mind: one is financial control, which we can call saving, and the other is waste." (GI)*

> *"By practicing conservation—purchasing only what we need rather than excess—we can cause less harm to the environment." (GI)*

Group Behaviour: In shaping ethical consumption behaviours, the individual's consumers take as role models and the social groups they belong to play a significant role. Participants also discussed the impact of group conformity on consumption practices. They particularly highlighted the influence of social circles in the purchase of counterfeit products and the illegal streaming or downloading of digital content.

> *"Even though they know that imitation shoes can be harmful to their feet, they still buy them. Why? Because the desire to imitate others comes into play once again." (GI)*

> *"Because of a certain mindset in Türkiye, for example, I used to have a Netflix subscription. But my friends would ask me, 'Why are you paying for it? You can watch it for free on these websites.'" (GII)*

In-store Negative Behaviours: This sub-theme was derived from the evaluations of the fourth focus group, tradesmen. Participants highlighted negative consumer behaviours, particularly those observed in physical stores, such as theft, deception, and disrespect toward sellers. It was emphasized that such behaviours are inconsistent with ethical consumer behaviour.

> *"They can behave rudely and disrespectfully toward our employees and colleagues. They just throw the product onto the rack and say, 'It's their job to clean it up'. This kind of insensitivity has started to develop. And they say it in a way that the employee can hear it too." (GIV)*

> *"When it comes to changes and returns, there are certain product categories where we do not offer changes. We clearly inform the customer about this. However, despite that,*

the next day, the customer may come back and claim that we never mentioned such a policy." (GIV)

"Product theft—even with security alarms. Some people manage to find ways online to steal items that have security tags on them." (GIV)

Attitude/Awareness-Behaviour Gap: Numerous study highlight the discrepancy between consumers' ethical attitudes and their actual purchasing behaviours in ethical consumption (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Caruana et al., 2016; Shaw et al., 2016; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006; Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018). Participants also emphasized this gap, stating that despite high levels of awareness in certain areas or positive attitudes toward more conscious consumption, these attitudes do not always translate into actual behaviour.

"When it comes to words, everyone knows the basics—we've been learning this since primary school. If you ask a child, they'll say, 'We shouldn't waste water, and we should dispose of batteries in battery bins.' But when it comes to practice, we face a problem." (GII)

"When I think about myself, even though I know how important this is, it doesn't always translate into my actions." (GIII)

Table 2. Group-Specific Thematic Salience

Theme	Most salient group(s)	Less salient group(s)	Cross-Group Implications
Environment	Group II and Group III	Group IV; Group I is present but narrower	Environmental issues are visible across groups but not equally emphasized. Plastic usage appears in all groups, while recycling is mainly concentrated in Groups II and III. Group IV shows only limited emphasis, mostly around plastic usage. This suggests that environmental ethics is more elaborated among undergraduate and postgraduate participants than among tradesmen.
Animal welfare	Group I	Groups II and IV; Group III is very limited	Animal welfare is strongly concentrated in Group I. Sub-themes such as using animal products, animal testing, veganism/vegetarianism and pet ownership are mainly discussed by this group. Group III includes only limited references, while Groups II and IV do not show visible emphasis. Therefore, animal welfare should be interpreted as a group-specific rather than a broadly shared theme.
Copyright infringement	Group I and Group III, but through different sub-themes	Group II; Group IV is absent	Copyright infringement appears in different forms across groups. Digital piracy is most visible in Group I, with limited references in Groups II and III. Counterfeit products are most visible in Group III, with only limited references in Groups I and II. Group IV does not show visible emphasis. This indicates that the same main theme carries different meanings across groups: digital access and piracy for younger participants, counterfeit products for postgraduate participants.
Economic factors	All groups for price/cost; Groups II and III for purchasing power	Groups I and IV for purchasing power	Economic factors are among the more cross-cutting themes, especially through price/cost, which appears in all four groups. However, purchasing power is visible only in Groups II and III. This suggests that while cost is a common concern across groups, the broader issue of purchasing power is more salient among undergraduate and postgraduate participants.
Ethical consumption consciousness	Groups I, II, III and IV, but with different emphases	No group is fully absent; sub-theme emphasis differs	Ethical consumption consciousness is the most broadly shared theme, but it is framed differently across groups. Raising ethical consumption consciousness is strongest in Group III and also visible in Groups I and II, while it is very limited in Group IV. Legal regulations and incentives are strongest in Group IV and also visible in Group III. Consciousness level appears across all groups, especially Groups I–III. Collective action is mainly associated with Group I, whereas climate change is most visible in Group II. Thus, student groups tend to frame the issue through awareness, education and collective action,

			while the tradesmen group gives stronger emphasis to regulation and incentives.
Purchasing/ consumption practices	Group I; Group IV for a distinct seller-side sub-theme	Groups II and III are present but more selective	Purchasing/consumption practices show the most differentiated sub-theme structure. Group I strongly emphasizes awareness cycle, conservation/waste and group behaviour. Group IV uniquely contributes the seller-side perspective through in-store negative consumer behaviours, while also referring to sustainable consumption behaviour. Groups II and III engage with this theme more selectively: Group II mainly through conservation/waste, and Group III through sustainable consumption behaviour and the attitude/awareness–behaviour gap. Therefore, this theme should not be treated as uniform across groups; it reflects different everyday and marketplace positions.

Although the findings are presented under six overarching themes, the code-frequency distribution across the four focus groups indicates that these themes were not equally salient in all groups. As shown in Table 2, some themes were broadly shared but differently framed, whereas others were concentrated in particular groups. For example, animal welfare was primarily associated with Group I, copyright infringement took different forms in Group I and Group III, and in-store negative consumer behaviours emerged only in Group IV. Therefore, the integrated thematic presentation should not be interpreted as implying thematic uniformity across groups; rather, it captures common patterns while preserving meaningful differences in thematic salience across educational and marketplace positions.



Figure 1. Frequency of Codes within Groups

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, the concept of consumer ethics in the context of Türkiye was examined by exploring how participants from different age and education levels interpret it and which issues emerge as prominent. The data collected from four different focus group discussions were analysed utilising the MAXQDA software. As a result of the analyses, six main themes and twenty-one sub-themes were identified. The sub-themes of plastic usage, price/cost, raising ethical consumption consciousness, legal regulations and incentives, consciousness level, and sustainable consumption behaviour were addressed in each focus group, albeit with varying levels of emphasis. The issue that participants emphasized the most was the level of consciousness regarding ethical consumption and, consequently, the need to raise ethical consumption consciousness. The primary reason for this was that participants generally perceived consumers in Türkiye as lacking consciousness in ethical consumption. While highlighting the importance of increasing consciousness, participants emphasized two key environments for fostering it: school and family environments. The emphasis on school and family is particularly significant, as the values and habits acquired during the formative years play a significant role in shaping individuals' behaviours throughout their lives (Mannheim, 1952).

Another key point emphasized by participants was the price of products, or in other words, the cost to consumers. Participants highlighted economic factors as one of the key barriers to ethical consumption. In particular, the ongoing economic crisis and declining purchasing power were noted as forces compelling consumers to prioritise the most affordable products. This is because product pricing plays a crucial role in shaping consumption preferences (Zhao et al., 2021). The high prices of ethically produced goods, which hinder the widespread adoption of ethical consumption, are also criticized for contributing to the formation of a new social class. To address this issue, the significant role of educational institutions is emphasized, with a particular focus on integrating ethical consumption into their curricula (Han, 2024). This suggestion aligns with participants' emphasis on the role of schools in raising ethical consumption consciousness.

Another point of consensus among participants was the necessity of legal regulations to ensure and promote ethical consumption across society. Believing that individual efforts alone would be insufficient, participants argued that punitive measures would encourage individuals to act more responsibly. However, although legal regulations have a preventive and regulatory impact in many areas (Al-Rafee & Cronan, 2006), they do not entirely eliminate unethical consumer behaviours. For example, piracy websites receive 300 billion visits globally and more than one-third of personal computers operate with unlicensed software (Koay et al., 2020). Therefore, alongside legal regulations, initiatives aimed at enhancing consumer consciousness of ethical consumption should be further intensified and structured to inclusively address all segments of society. Another key topic examined within the context of consumer ethics is the environment, specifically in relation to plastic usage and recycling. In this regard, particular emphasis was placed on the inadequacy of waste separation infrastructure at both the household and public level. Consequently, the necessity for local authorities to take initiative in establishing the required infrastructure was underscored. In parallel with the development of recycling infrastructure, particularly waste separation at the source, it is crucial to implement initiatives that enhance consumer awareness and knowledge regarding which materials are recyclable, and which are not. This is essential because confusion over which materials can be recycled and which waste belongs in specific bins leads to 68% of recyclable waste ending up in landfills, the environment, or incineration (Sarafraz et al., 2024).

Animal welfare, a significant topic in consumer ethics, was not extensively discussed except within the high school group. While the killing of animals for their leather, fur, horns, and tusks was deemed unacceptable, the use of by-products from animals slaughtered for meat was not considered problematic. Additionally, although the use of animals for cosmetic testing was criticized, their utilization in medical and scientific research for advancements that benefit human health was regarded as reasonable (Kabene & Baadel, 2019). Participants also expressed similar views regarding animal testing.

One of the key factors driving consumers towards digital piracy is the cost-effectiveness of pirated content (Sahni & Gupta, 2019), while another significant reason is the ease of access to such materials (Chen et al., 2008; Yoon, 2011). Participants similarly highlighted these two factors. Moreover, consumers may also engage in efforts to rationalise their norm-violating behaviours. One participant's statement, *"they are already making enough money,"* as a justification for digital piracy, illustrates one of the applications of Sykes and Matza's (1957) neutralisation techniques known as "the denial of the victim". Participants attributed the widespread engagement in digital piracy to the perception of piracy as a normalised practice within society. Regarding counterfeit products, it was predominantly discussed in Group III. Participants linked the use of counterfeit goods to identity construction, self-presentation, and resentment towards brands.

There is a positive correlation between consumers' level of awareness on a particular issue and their likelihood of taking action. As awareness increases, the probability of engaging in relevant behaviour also rises (Freestone & McGoldrick, 2008). This phenomenon, also noted by participants, has been referred to as the awareness cycle. This concept describes how consumers tend to adopt more conscientious behaviour following events that heighten their awareness, only to gradually revert to their previous habits once the impact of the event diminishes. To mitigate this effect, participants emphasised the necessity of exposing consumers to more ethical consumption-related stimuli and implementing reminder-based announcements to reinforce awareness over time. One of the key findings of the study is that the tradesmen group primarily evaluated consumer ethics through the lens of in-store consumer behaviour. In particular, practices such as **c**ontract withdrawal, concealment of facts, theft, and disrespectful attitudes towards employees were criticised and classified as unethical consumer behaviour.

In the literature, consumer ethics has been examined both in terms of active and passive responses that consumers exhibit in various consumption-related situations (Vitell & Muncy, 2005) and within the specific contexts of environmental concerns, human rights, and animal welfare (Harrison et al., 2005). The results indicate that certain dimensions of consumer ethics were not discussed at all. Most notably, human rights were absent from all focus group discussions. This absence is significant because human rights constitute a key ethical concern within consumer decision-making, particularly in relation to production conditions, global supply chains, corporate responsibility, and the political positions adopted by corporations in contexts of human rights violations. In this sense, consumer ethics is not limited to labour conditions or workplace exploitation, but also extends to cases where companies are perceived to support, legitimise, or align themselves with oppressive regimes, as illustrated by contemporary debates surrounding Palestine. Therefore, the lack of discussion around human rights suggests that participants' understanding of consumer ethics remained limited to more visible or familiar issues, while the human consequences of consumption were largely overlooked. Furthermore, the issue of the environment has been primarily discussed in terms of plastic usage and recycling. Animal welfare has been extensively addressed within one group, particularly concerning illegal animal products and animal testing. However, in other

groups, the topic of animal welfare has received little attention. On the other hand, the findings related to copyright, negative in-store behaviours, and sustainable consumption align with the dimensions identified by Vitell & Muncy (2005).

Overall, the findings reveal that consumer ethics in the current research context is shaped by four interrelated dynamics. First, ethical concerns are not uniformly distributed across groups; rather, they vary according to age, education, and marketplace position. Second, participants tended to emphasize visible and everyday ethical issues such as recycling, plastic use, animal testing, digital piracy, and counterfeit products, whereas less visible concerns such as human rights remained largely outside the discussion. Third, economic conditions shaped not only consumers' ability to make ethical choices, but also their moral reasoning about whether such choices are feasible and fair. Finally, the tradesmen group broadened the scope of consumer ethics by highlighting consumers' conduct toward sellers and employees in physical retail settings. These findings suggest that consumer ethics in our research context is formed at the intersection of visibility, affordability, institutional support, and marketplace interaction.

Consumer ethics is culturally embedded because culture filters perceptions of what counts as good or responsible consumption and how the consequences of violating moral norms are understood (Belk et al., 2005). In the present study, participants' emphasis on family, schools, legal regulations, state support, and collective action suggests that consumer ethics was framed as a socially and institutionally embedded issue rather than merely an individual moral choice. This interpretation is consistent with previous research linking Turkish consumers' ethical perceptions to authority, family, traditions, religion, obedience to authority, and risk avoidance (Oyman, 2004), as well as with research discussing Türkiye in relation to power distance, uncertainty avoidance, rule-following, authority, and communally correct conduct (Rawwas et al., 2005). In this respect, participants' expectation that ethical consumption consciousness should be developed through education and family socialization, and supported by public authority, reflects a culturally situated understanding of responsibility.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest several implications for businesses, public institutions, educational institutions, and non-governmental organizations. Since participants emphasized the low level and temporary nature of ethical consumption consciousness, awareness-raising efforts should not be limited to one-time campaigns; rather, continuous and reminder-based communication should be developed through schools, product labels, in-store information, digital platforms, public campaigns, and educational materials. Considering the formative influence of early life experiences on individuals' later orientations and behaviours (Mannheim, 1952), ethical consumption issues such as recycling, waste, animal welfare, copyright infringement, counterfeit products, sustainable consumption, and human rights should be integrated into school curricula from early ages. The fact that human rights, although an important dimension of consumer ethics, did not emerge as a salient issue in the findings also points to the need for greater education and awareness in this area. This curricular integration should also extend to teacher education programs so that awareness and consciousness regarding ethical consumption can be developed in a more holistic and inclusive manner. In this regard, non-governmental organizations may play a crucial role in disseminating reliable and accessible information, monitoring ethical consumption issues, developing consumer guides, and sustaining public awareness beyond temporary events or campaigns. This is particularly important because the development of ethical consumer values is closely related to consumers' access to reliable information about firms' ethical and unethical practices (Kennedy & Kapitan, 2022). The existence of independent organizations that inform consumers about ethical products, responsible brands, environment, animal welfare and human rights help consumers make more conscious and informed choices. Businesses can contribute

by providing clear, credible, and visually supported information about their products, production processes and sustainability claims, while avoiding the positioning of ethical products only as premium alternatives. In this regard, businesses should also consider affordability and accessibility when designing ethical product strategies, since the findings show that price and purchasing power strongly shape consumers' ability to translate ethical concerns into actual consumption choices. Moreover, human rights-related information should be made more visible and understandable through labels, corporate communication, and consumer education materials, as this issue did not emerge as a salient concern among participants despite being an important dimension of consumer ethics. Public institutions and local authorities should support ethical consumption through regulatory measures, incentives, and infrastructure investments, particularly in recycling systems, waste separation at the source, the reduction of single-use plastics, and the monitoring of misleading ethical claims. In addition, the seller-side perspective introduced by the tradesmen group suggests that retailers should develop clear and visible policies regarding returns, exchanges, product use, and in-store conduct in order to reduce deceptive practices, disrespectful behaviours toward employees, and product misuse.

One of the limitations of this study is the sample size constraint. Given the exploratory qualitative design and focus group-based sample, the findings should not be interpreted as representative of all Turkish consumers, but rather as context-specific insights into how consumer ethics is understood among the participant groups included in this study. Given that consumer ethics is influenced by cultural context, future research could be conducted with broader participant groups from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, similar studies could be carried out in different countries to enable cross-cultural comparisons. Apart from this, the current study adopts a phenomenological approach within a qualitative research design. Future research may employ alternative qualitative research designs or adopt quantitative research methods to further explore the topic. Future studies may also use scenario-based or vignette-based designs to examine how consumers evaluate specific ethical dilemmas such as human rights violations, digital piracy, counterfeit products, animal welfare, and environmentally harmful consumption practices. Such designs may help reveal whether the absence or limited salience of some themes in the present study results from low awareness, low perceived relevance, or the way ethical issues are encountered in everyday consumption contexts. One of the notable findings of the study is that the tradesmen group primarily interpreted consumer ethics within the context of unethical consumer behaviour in physical stores. This highlights the need for further investigation by incorporating tradesmen from various business sectors into the sample. Future studies could explore the phenomenon of consumer ethics from the tradesmen's perspective in greater depth. Finally, results indicate that sufficient awareness and consciousness regarding ethical consumption have not yet been well established.

Author Contribution Statement

All authors contributed equally to all stages of the study.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to this study.

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