Young people as ethical consumers: Emotional tensions, identity work and household involvement

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This study examines how ethical consumption among young people is shaped by emotions and identity work, and how these processes influence their involvement in household purchasing. Drawing on survey data from 1,088 participants aged 12–17 in Spain, we analyze links between ethical sensitivity, consumption-related emotions, and symbolic identity expression. Findings show that ethical consumption is positively associated with discomforting emotions such as guilt and shame, and negatively with interest, highlighting tensions between reflective consumption and product appeal. Identity expression was also tied to ethical orientation and predicted young people's participation in family purchases across five product categories. Overall, the study highlights young people as active consumer agents whose ethical orientations inform household purchasing decisions and contribute to the negotiation of consumption within family life.

Keywords: Consumer socialization, young consumers, purchasing influence, family consumption, ethical values

Youth consumption increasingly reflects a growing ethical and reflective orientation, shaped by conscious engagement with social values and concerns about responsibility, solidarity, and distinction (Liu et al., 2022; Papaoikonomou et al., 2023; Roedder-John et al., 2024; Halibas et al., 2025). Young people navigate markets not only as consumers but also as identity-builders, integrating consumption practices with emotional resonance, moral conviction, and aspirations for social positioning (Belk et al., 1982; Deutsch & Theodorou, 2010). Within this body of literature, ethical considerations emerge as meaningful dimensions of young people's selfhood, linking consumption to personal values, identity, and social positioning.

From this perspective, consumption can provide young people with a moral and symbolic vocabulary through which they express responsibility, solidarity, and distinction within peer and household contexts. Consumer goods and possessions derive their significance from the public and private meanings individuals attribute to them, making them resources for self-expression and social recognition (Richins, 1994). Accordingly, consumption contributes to identity construction by connecting the meanings attached to products with the positions individuals adopt in relation to others (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998).

These symbolic processes operate alongside young people's consumer competence and autonomy. Research on consumer socialization shows that young consumers can develop the capacity to search for, evaluate, and communicate marketplace information. In digital environments, differences in knowledge between young people and their parents may consequently redistribute patterns of influence within the family (Thaichon, 2017). Research on family purchasing has explained young people's influence in terms of social power, preference intensity, previous decision outcomes, direct requests, negotiation, and parental gatekeeping (Flurry & Burns, 2005; Page et al., 2019). Studies of secondary and

reverse socialization further extend this account by showing that children's technological knowledge can shape parents' purchasing interactions (Watne et al., 2011). Environmental knowledge, attitudes, and practices may likewise move from younger to older family members through everyday household interactions (Liu et al., 2022).

Together, these perspectives establish young people as active participants in both consumer culture and family decision-making. Nevertheless, they provide limited insight into how young consumers internally experience and organize this participation. In particular, existing research has yet to fully connect the emotions associated with ethical sensitivity, the incorporation of ethical meanings into consumption-based identities, and the relationship between these orientations and young people's involvement in shared household purchasing.

The present study is based on two premises. First, ethical consumption allows young people to express and affirm their personal values. Second, young people may carry these ethical sensitivities into family life through their involvement in shared purchasing decisions. Using a quantitative research design with participants aged 12–17, we examined the relationships among emotions, identity expression, and ethical orientation within young people's consumption practices. We also assessed whether ethical consumption and identity expression predict their involvement in family purchasing across the fashion, leisure, tourism, technology, and body-care categories. In doing so, the study extends research on reverse socialization by examining ethical commitment and symbolic self-definition as additional dimensions associated with young people's participation in household consumption.

Young People, Consumption, and Identity Construction

The marketing and advertising industries increasingly target young people, recognizing both their emerging spending power and their role as consumers-in-formation. Over recent decades, firms have intensified engagement with this demographic (Chaplin & John, 2005; Connell et al., 2014; Dewinatalia & Irwansyah, 2022; Moschis & Mathur, 2024), acknowledging their influence on household purchasing and their capacity to shape adult consumption (Boland et al., 2024). Academic inquiry has paralleled this commercial interest, evolving from early work in the 1970s that measured brand recognition (Ward et al., 1977) to more complex theoretical frameworks introduced in the 1980s, drawing from developmental psychology, social and cognitive psychology, and decision theory (Brucks et al., 1988).

Within this trajectory, symbolic consumption has become central. From childhood onwards, individuals assign social meaning to possessions and interpret others through material objects (Chan, 2008). Research has documented the particular salience of these symbolic processes among young people aged 12–18 (Belk et al., 1982). Consumption can thus serve explicit identity functions within sociocultural contexts, where goods operate as tools of distinction, affiliation, and aspiration (Deutsch & Theodorou, 2010).

A socioconstructivist perspective highlights identity as emerging through constant interaction with social context (Côté, 2006). In consumer societies, material goods act as communicative tools through which individuals perform and negotiate identities (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). As Stearns (2006) observed, consumption has become a way of life, enabling individuals to articulate existential goals and personal meaning through acquisitions beyond functional needs.

From this perspective, young people's consumption is best understood as cultural and symbolic, not merely economic. Objects such as clothing, digital devices, cosmetics, and leisure experiences function as acts of self-expression and public identity. Richins (1994)

conceptualized this as “possession value,” highlighting how goods gain significance through personal narratives and representational values. Expanding on this, Csikszentmihalyi (2000) argued that material possessions provide coherence and psychological anchoring to lived experience.

Consumption therefore provides young people with tangible resources for identity work. Choices communicate preferences, tastes, and broader aspirations about who one is and who one wishes to become (Grougiou & Moschis, 2015). Young people mobilize fashion, technology, and personal style to position themselves in peer groups and project evolving self-concepts (Deutsch & Theodorou, 2010). In this sense, identity emerges not only through verbal articulation but also through repeated, tangible decisions in daily consumption.

Family environments form an important context for these processes, shaping young people’s relationships with material culture while also providing a setting in which consumer meanings are negotiated. Households that emphasize possessions as markers of success and happiness can reinforce materialist values among young people (Chan & Prendergast, 2007). At the same time, adolescence is marked by autonomy-seeking, where consumption can serve as a vehicle for independence and differentiation from parental authority.

Yet young people’s consumer identities cannot be reduced to materialism alone. Research shows that ethical considerations can also become integrated into consumption, particularly when aligned with internalized self-concepts (Ahuvia & Wong, 2002). Ethical consumer identity involves reflective engagement with the social and environmental consequences of choices. As Stryker and Burke (2000) argue, behavior externalizes deeply held values, making ethical consumption a performative extension of the self.

This interconnection underscores the regulatory role of values in guiding young people's consumption. Quach et al. (2025) observed that when material or ethical values are central to self-definition, they activate cognitive heuristics that guide behavior congruently with identity, often without conscious deliberation. Values thus operate as internal compasses, orienting practices around the self-concept (Kolańska-Stronka & Gorbaniuk, 2022).

Building on these insights, Roedder-John et al. (2024) propose reframing young people's well-being through the lens of ethical consumer identity, emphasizing how youth actively negotiate meaning, belonging, and recognition through consumption. This perspective is particularly relevant in contexts where ethical awareness and emotional investment shape young people's engagementwith goods as commodities and carriers of values and social intentions.

Ethical Sensitivity Among Young Consumers

Youth consumption cannot be understood solely in terms of materialistic motivations. Ethical and social priorities may also shape young consumers' choices, extending the meaning of consumption beyond individual benefit to encompass forms of collective responsibility (Gomes et al., 2022). This perspective aligns with theories of self-actualization, in which consumption serves as a means of meaning-making and self-expression (Solomon et al., 1999). Accordingly, consumption is not merely utilitarian but also an avenue for ethical signaling and identity work (Freestone & McGoldrick, 2007).

Scholarly attention has expanded across psychology, business, sociology, philosophy, and economics, consolidating ethical consumption as an interdisciplinary construct. Yet the absence of a unified theoretical model reflects its ongoing development and epistemological tensions (Dueñas-Ocampo et al., 2014). Empirical work has traced multiple entry points: Roberts (1996) identified early concerns with labor conditions,

sourcing, corporate politics, and sustainability; Newholm and Shaw (2007) reframed these into a broader ethos of consumer responsibility, highlighting decision-making embedded in ethical networks rather than isolated acts.

This conception gained traction with green consumerism in the 1960s, when consumers rejected products that harmed health, biodiversity, or the environment (Elkington & Hailes, 1989). While ecological risks were the initial drivers, subsequent research revealed the growing influence of equity, animal rights, and social justice. The label *ethical consumption* emerged to capture this broader orientation, signaling everyday choices guided by moral deliberation (Mintel Research, 1994).

Within this broader lens, young people engage in consumption as part of their ongoing identity work. Their choices can secure belonging, signal individuality, and meet emotional needs in peer-driven environments (Gentina et al., 2016). Ethics, when integrated into this process, serve as tools of moral distinction and personal affirmation, reinforcing values while enabling symbolic differentiation (Dhondt et al., 2025).

To explain such dynamics, Treviño's (1986) multiple influences model highlights the convergence of internal and contextual factors—moral development, personality, and social context—during ethical decision-making. Vitell et al. (2001) emphasize that adolescent judgments are both cognitive assessments of right and wrong and social acts grounded in development. Extending this logic, Vitell and Muncy (1992) showed that adolescents distinguish ethical from unethical behaviors based on engagement, legal norms, and perceived harm, positioning them as active moral agents rather than passive cultural recipients (Yang & Cayla, 2025).

Developmental approaches provide one framework for understanding variation in ethical reasoning. Kohlberg's (1994) cognitive moral development model distinguishes between preconventional reasoning, oriented toward consequences; conventional reasoning, more

closely tied to social norms and expectations; and postconventional reasoning, organized around abstract principles and universal justice (Flurry & Swimberghe, 2016). While this framework emphasizes developmental differences, young people's ethical reasoning should not be understood solely in terms of progression toward adult forms of moral judgment. Their ethical evaluations are also embedded in the social, cultural, and consumer contexts in which they participate.

Ethical reasoning influences the complexity of the arguments individuals use to determine and justify what they regard as right or wrong (Treviño, 1986). Moral judgment alone, however, does not necessarily translate into ethical consumption. Enacting ethical values in marketplace behavior also requires ethical consumer literacy, understood as the capacity to recognize responsible alternatives, locate and critically evaluate complex information, and exercise informed leadership in consumption contexts (Papaoikonomou et al., 2023).

Consumption decisions acquire particular symbolic significance for young people because products and brands provide resources through which young people develop, affirm, and communicate their identities both to themselves and through social interactions (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). From this perspective, responsible consumption emerges through a continuous negotiation between individuation and belonging. Young people may seek distinction through consumption choices that express their uniqueness while remaining responsive to peer expectations that facilitate social recognition and group membership (Gentina et al., 2016).

At the same time, young people are not passive in the face of commercial pressure. Many develop critical media literacies that foster resistance to persuasive advertising (Feijoo & Fernández-Gómez, 2025). While this resistance does not nullify corporate influence, it

challenges firms to adopt more accountable branding. When aligned with young people's ethical priorities, brands can support moral identity formation (Sahli & Zhai, 2025).

Finally, ethical sensitivity develops within families that model norms and provide moral scaffolding. Young people draw on these foundations to interpret ethical scenarios and navigate dilemmas with greater clarity (Sonnentag & Barnett, 2016). Thus, their sustainable behavior reflects both intra-family dynamics and anticipatory socialization, shaping how future adults engage in projects of ethical citizenship and sustainable living (van-de-Wetering et al., 2025; Hosany et al., 2022).

Young People, Intergenerational Influence, and Household Consumption

Research on domestic consumption has long examined how family members negotiate purchasing, exert influence, and adapt decisions to shared needs (Commuri & Gentry, 2005; Cotte & Wood, 2004; Hamilton & Biehal, 2005). While these studies mapped individuals' roles, they often overlooked the relational dynamics that make consumption a shared practice.

In research on consumer socialization, parents have typically been cast as the primary agents, transmitting transactional knowledge and decision-making skills such as money management, saving, price–quality comparison, and product evaluation (John, 1999; Dotson & Hyatt, 2005; Marchant & Harrison, 2020). This perspective positions parents as facilitators of youth competence and autonomy through their advice, supervision, and recommendations. However, early research suggested that young people's influence was contingent rather than absent, varying with the family communication environment, their personal resources, and their perceived product knowledge and importance (Foxman et al., 1989).

Subsequent studies refined this account. Beatty and Talpade (1994) demonstrated that young people's influence grows when products are personally relevant or when they hold domain-specific expertise. This paved the way for research on reverse socialization, which highlights how influence can also flow from younger to older family members, especially in domains like technology where youth are often more competent (Jiao & Wei, 2020; Dhondt et al., 2025).

This perspective introduced the notion of expert power, rooted in Lewin's (1951) theory of social influence. Watne et al. (2011) showed that young people shape family decisions in technology by sharing exclusive knowledge about devices, apps, or platforms. Yet expertise interacts with other forms of relational power. Flurry and Burns (2005) identified four types: (a) reward power, based on offering affection or good behavior; (b) referent power, grounded in admiration; (c) legitimate power, tied to perceived rights of use (e.g., clothing, toys); and (d) coercive power, enacted through complaints or persistent demands. Product category further conditions these dynamics: domain-specific expertise enhances adolescents' authority in some cases (Flurry & Burns, 2005), and influence patterns vary significantly across categories (Belch et al., 1985; Page et al., 2019).

More recent work points to ecological resocialization, where young people drive pro-environmental change in the household and position themselves as ethical agents (Liu et al., 2022). While uneven across product types, this dynamic reflects growing concern for intergenerational ethical alignment.

Influence also varies by sector. In leisure, young people's consumption often supports a "narcissistic self," with activities serving as self-expression (Wearing et al., 2012). In fashion, youth decisions balance ethical, aesthetic, and functional qualities (Ogle et al., 2014), while identity formation is reinforced through brand differentiation, especially luxury goods (Gentina et al., 2016). Yet fast fashion and social media cultures intensify

risks of compulsive buying (Ekawati et al., 2025). Body care highlights tensions between self-image and ethics: anxiety from real–ideal self-gaps can drive compulsive behaviors (Harnish et al., 2019), while ambivalence persists between normative pressures and emerging ethical concerns (Hermans & Veldhuis, 2025). In technology, young people can exert influence at both search and decision phases, aided by digital literacy and advertising exposure (Beneke et al., 2011; Rojas-Salazar, 2017; Torkia et al., 2015). Travel offers another site of participation, with young people contributing to agendas and destination choices (Borges-Tiago & Borges-Tiago, 2013).

Yet household decisions cannot be reduced to individual autonomy. As Epp and Price (2008) argued, family consumption practices help construct a shared intergenerational identity, shaped both internally and in response to wider cultural ideals. From this perspective, young people's participation not only expresses personal preferences or ethical concerns but also actively defines the family as a cultural consumer entity.

Research Objective and Questions

This study investigates how emotions shape ethical consumption among young people and how ethical sensitivity connects to identity construction. It also examines the extent to which ethical values and identity projection are associated with young people's participation in household purchasing. The analysis was structured around three research questions:

- RQ1. What emotions do young people associate with ethical consumption?
- RQ2. How is ethical consumption related to identity projection through consumer practices?

- RQ3. To what extent do ethical consumption and identity projection predict young people's participation in household purchasing across different product categories (fashion, leisure, tourism, technology, and body care)?

Method

The study used an online questionnaire administered to young people aged 12–17 years. Data collection was conducted by a social research firm through a supervised panel to ensure representativeness. In total, 1,088 participants took part in the study. The estimated margin of error was ±3%, based on a simple random sampling (SRS) assumption with 95% confidence ($p = q = 0.5$).

We applied a multistage cluster sampling design. In the first stage, the NUTS-1 region served as the primary sampling unit, following Eurostat's territorial classification, which groups several Spanish Autonomous Communities. In the second stage, we used proportional stratification by family socioeconomic status, defined by education level, household income, and related indicators. Participants were grouped into three categories: low, medium, and high socioeconomic status. In the final stage, individuals were selected within households using crossed quotas for gender and age to achieve a balanced distribution.

The final sample had an average age of 14.5 years, comprising 52.2% boys and 47.8% girls. Reported socioeconomic status was as follows: low (21.5%), medium (46.1%) and high (32.4%).

Measures and Data Analysis

The data analyzed in this study were drawn from Mark&Teen (2025), a broader research project examining young people as consumers in Spain. From the full project questionnaire, the present study selected the variables directly relevant to its research questions: purchase-related emotions, ethical consumption orientation, consumption-

based identity expression, and young people's involvement in family purchasing. Items were adapted or developed for administration to participants aged 12–17 years. Table 1 presents the complete item wording, response formats, and theoretical sources.

- **Purchase-related emotions (EM).** Participants indicated how frequently they experienced nine discrete emotions when making a purchase: joy, disgust, interest, amusement, sadness, anger, contempt, guilt, and shame. The selection was informed by research on consumption-related emotions (Richins, 1997) and was designed to capture both positive emotions commonly associated with purchasing—joy, interest, and amusement—and negative or morally relevant emotions, including anger, disgust, contempt, guilt, and shame. Each emotion was treated as a separate single-item indicator, and no overall emotion score was calculated. Accordingly, internal-consistency reliability was not applicable to this measure.
- **Ethical consumption (eth_cons).** Ethical consumption was operationalized using a brief three-item measure of self-reported ethical purchase orientation. Item selection was theory-driven and was not intended to reproduce the full Socially Responsible Consumer Behavior scale developed by Roberts (1996). Roberts' framework distinguishes between ecological and socially responsible consumer behavior, while subsequent conceptualizations of ethical consumption have broadened its scope to encompass animal welfare alongside environmental sustainability and social and labor justice (Sudbury-Riley & Kohlbacher, 2016; Halibas et al., 2025). Accordingly, one item was selected to represent each of three stakeholder domains affected by consumption decisions: the environment, workers, and animals. The concise format and concrete purchasing language were intended to facilitate completion by participants aged 12–17 years. Responses

were averaged, with higher scores indicating a stronger ethical purchase orientation. The three items showed good internal consistency in the present sample (Cronbach's α = .830). Given its brevity, the measure is interpreted as a parsimonious indicator of ethical purchase orientation across these three domains rather than as an exhaustive operationalization of the broader and contested construct of ethical consumption.

- **Consumption-based identity expression (id_expr).** Six author-developed statements assessed the extent to which young people perceived their purchases and product choices as expressions of their personality, tastes, and self-concept. The items were theoretically informed by Richins' (1994) distinction between the public and private meanings of possessions. Responses were averaged, with higher scores indicating stronger consumption-based identity expression. The measure showed good internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .874).
- **Child' involvement in family purchasing (CIFP).** Drawing on Flurry and Burns' (2005) account of children's active influence on family purchase decisions, four items were developed to capture distinct forms of participation: encouraging purchases, expressing opinions, suggesting specific products or models, and directly requesting products. The same items were administered separately across five purchase categories: fashion, leisure, tourism, technology, and body care. Separate mean scores were calculated for each category, and no overall cross-category score was computed. Internal consistency was good to excellent across categories: fashion (α = .888), leisure (α = .919), tourism (α = .937), technology (α = .927), and body care (α = .954).

Table 1. Measurement scales and items used in the questionnaire.

Measures	Item	Answer	Source
Emotions (EM)	To what extent do you experience the following emotions when making a purchase: 1. Joy 2. Disgust 3. Interest 4. Amusement 5. Sadness 6. Anger 7. Contempt 8. Guilt 9. Shame	5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very often).	Selection informed by Richins (1997) and the literature on moral emotions
Ethical Consumption (eth_cons) α= .830	1. I think about the environment before making a purchase (e.g., I look for durable products, buy local goods, etc.). 2. I try to buy products that respect labor rights. 3. I make sure the products I buy are not tested on animals.	5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).	Author-developed brief measure informed by Roberts (1996), Sudbury-Riley and Kohlbacher (2016), and Halibas et al. (2025)
Consumption-Based Identity Expression (id_expr) α= .874	1. Buying certain products allows me to express who I am. 2. Through my purchases, I can show who I really am. 3. The products I choose to buy represent my personality well. 4. Choosing products that reflect my personal tastes is important to me. 5. Through my purchases, others can understand things about me. 6. The products I buy reflect the kind of person I am.	5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).	Author-developed items informed by Richins (1994)
Child's Involvement in Family Purchases (CIFP) **Fashion (CIFP_F)** α=.888 **Leisure (CIFP_L)** α=.919 **Tourism (CIFP_T)** α=.937 **Technology (CIFP_tec)** α=.927 **Body Care (CIFP_BC)** α=.954	1. I encourage my family to buy products in this category. 2. I give my opinion when other family members buy products in this category. 3. I make suggestions about specific models or products in this category. 4. I ask my family to buy products in this category.	5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very often).	Author-developed category-specific measure drawing on Flurry and Burns (2005).

We conducted quantitative analyses using SPSS (version 27). The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicated that the variables were not normally distributed; therefore, we applied non-parametric tests.

First, Spearman's bivariate correlations were calculated to examine associations between ethical consumption and emotions experienced during purchasing. A multiple linear regression was then conducted to determine which emotions were associated with young people's ethical consumption after controlling for age, gender, and socioeconomic status. Second, a linear regression was conducted to examine whether ethical consumption predicted consumption-based identity expression, controlling for the same sociodemographic variables. Finally, five multiple linear regression models—one for each product category (fashion, leisure, tourism, technology, and body care)—were estimated to assess whether ethical consumption and consumption-based identity expression predicted child's involvement in family purchasing after controlling for age, gender, and socioeconomic status.

The enter method was used in all regression models. Standardized coefficients, significance levels, and model-fit statistics were reported. Regression assumptions were evaluated using residual, multicollinearity, and influence diagnostics, including the Durbin–Watson statistic, variance inflation factors, standardized and studentized residuals, Cook's distance, normal probability plots, and plots of standardized residuals against standardized predicted values.

The study followed ethical standards for research with minors and the Declaration of Helsinki. The university's ethics committee approved the protocol (Ref: CE_2024-24). Informed consent was obtained from participants and their legal guardians. Participation was voluntary, and data were treated with confidentiality and anonymity for research purposes only.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Before addressing correlation and regression analyses, we present descriptive statistics for the study variables. As shown in Table 2, the most frequent emotions during purchasing were joy, interest, and fun, whereas negative emotions such as disgust, sadness, or shame had notably lower means. Ethical consumption scores averaged slightly below the midpoint of the scale, while identity projection through consumption showed a moderately high mean. Child's involvement in family purchasing (CIFP) varied across categories, being more frequent in fashion, leisure, and technology, and less common in tourism and body care.

Table 2. Description of the study scales and items.

Variable	N	Min	Max	M	SD
E1 (Joy)	1079	1	5	3.98	0.89
E2 (Disgust)	1067	1	5	1.41	0.73
E3 (Interest)	1068	1	5	3.66	1.00
E4 (Amusement)	1078	1	5	3.75	0.95
E5 (Sadness)	1074	1	5	1.59	0.80
E6 (Anger)	1071	1	5	1.63	0.88
E7 (Contempt)	1069	1	5	1.41	0.72
E8 (Guilt)	1068	1	5	1.79	0.88
E9 (Shame)	1075	1	5	1.69	0.92
eth_cons (Ethical Consumption)	1088	1	5	2.90	0.86
id_expr (Identity Expression)	1088	1	5	3.27	0.75
CIFP_F (Fashion)	1088	1	5	3.04	0.87
CIFP_L (Leisure)	1088	1	5	3.06	0.86
CIFP_T (Tourism)	1088	1	5	2.75	1.00
CIFP_tec (Technology)	1088	1	5	3.06	0.90
CIFP_BC (Body Care)	1088	1	5	2.63	1.05

Ethical consumption and emotions (RQ1)

Spearman correlations revealed significant, though weak, associations between ethical consumption and several emotions experienced during purchasing (see Table 3). Specifically, positive correlations emerged with sadness ($\rho = .084$, $p = .006$), anger ($\rho = .062$, $p = .042$), contempt ($\rho = .097$, $p = .001$), guilt ($\rho = .063$, $p = .041$), and shame ($\rho =$

.065, p = .034). These results suggest that participants with stronger ethical orientations tend to experience emotions linked to moral or social discomfort, particularly those tied to social judgment or disapproval.

Table 3. Spearman's correlations between ethical consumption and emotions experienced during purchasing

Emotion	ρ (eth_cons)	*p*
Joy	.006	.848
Disgust	.056	.069
Interest	−.046	.134
Amusement	.001	.983
Sadness	.084	.006**
Anger	.062	.042*
Contempt	.097	.001**
Guilt	.063	.041*
Shame	.065	.034*

Note. N ranged from 1,067 to 1,088 depending on the variables included. Correlations are Spearman's ρ. p < .05. ** p < .01.

A multiple linear regression including all nine emotions as predictors of ethical consumption and controlling for age, gender, and socioeconomic status was statistically significant, $F(12, 1014) = 2.42$, $p = .004$. However, the model explained only a small proportion of the variance, $R^2 = .028$ (adjusted $R^2 = .016$). Gender was the only statistically significant predictor ($\beta = .100$, $p = .002$), with girls reporting slightly higher levels of ethical consumption than boys. Interest showed a negative association with ethical consumption, although this association did not reach statistical significance after adjustment for the sociodemographic variables ($\beta = -.065$, $p = .069$). Neither age nor socioeconomic status was significantly associated with ethical consumption. Overall, these findings suggest that purchasing-related emotions have only weak associations with young people's ethical consumption.

Mean emotion levels revealed that participants reported more frequent positive emotions such as joy (M = 3.98) and amusement (M = 3.75), compared to negative emotions such as disgust (M = 1.41), anger (M = 1.63), contempt (M = 1.41), or guilt (M = 1.79). Thus,

while negative emotions are linked to heightened ethical awareness, they occur far less often during purchasing.

Ethical Consumption and Projected Identity (RQ2)

The correlation between ethical consumption and identity expression through consumption was positive but weak ($\rho = .067$, $p < .05$). This finding indicates that participants who consider ethical criteria in their purchases also tend to perceive consumption as a way of expressing who they are.

A multiple linear regression was conducted to examine whether ethical consumption predicted consumption-based identity expression after controlling for age, gender, and socioeconomic status. The model was statistically significant, $F(4, 1083) = 8.57$, $p < .001$, although it explained only a small proportion of the variance, $R^2 = .031$ (adjusted $R^2 = .027$). Ethical consumption was a significant positive predictor of consumption-based identity expression ($\beta = .059$, $p = .048$). Gender and age were also significant predictors: girls reported higher levels of consumption-based identity expression than boys ($\beta = .111$, $p < .001$), and older participants reported higher levels than younger ones ($\beta = .110$, $p < .001$). Socioeconomic status was not significantly associated with consumption-based identity expression ($p = .206$).

Within the projected identity scale, the items with the highest means were *"The products I choose to buy represent my personality well"* (M = 3.5);*"It is important for me to choose products that reflect my personal tastes"* (M > 3.5). All identity expression items are reported in Table 4.

Table 4. Means and standard deviations of the identity expression items

id_expr1	Buying certain products allows me to express myself as a person.	1088	1	5	3.13	1.008
id_expr2	Through my purchases, I can show who I really am.	1088	1	5	2.97	1.014

id_expr3	The products I choose to buy represent my personality well.	1088	1	5	3.48	0.875
id_expr4	Choosing products that reflect my personal tastes is important to me.	1088	1	5	3.60	0.933
id_expr5	Through my purchases, others can understand things about me.	1088	1	5	3.10	0.963
id_expr6	The products I buy reflect the kind of person I am.	1088	1	5	3.32	0.968

This pattern points to a symbolic orientation of young people consumption, where decisions respond not only to functional or social criteria but also to a logic of self-affirmation. The fact that ethical consumption is associated with this identity dimension reinforces the hypothesis that, for some participants, ethical commitment is part of their symbolic self-definition.

Ethical Consumption, Projected Identity, and Family Participation in Product Purchasing (Fashion, Leisure, Tourism, Technology, and Body Care) (RQ3)

The third line of analysis explored the weight of ethical consumption and projected identity as predictors of child's involvement in family purchasing decisions across product categories. Correlation analyses (Table 5) revealed significant associations between ethical consumption and all five CIFP dimensions, with the strongest link observed for body care ($\rho = .245$, $p < .01$). This suggests that ethical values are particularly influential in consumption practices related to the body.

Projected identity was consistently associated with all categories, with fashion showing the strongest correlation ($\rho = .225$, $p < .01$), reflecting the symbolic importance of clothing as a channel of self-expression.

Table 5. Spearman's Correlations between *eth_cons*, *id_expr*, and CIFP.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. eth_cons	—						
2. id_expr	.067*	—					
3. CIFP_F	.153**	.225**	—				
4. CIFP_L	.150**	.189**	.624**	—			
5. CIFP_T	.139**	.162**	.523**	.560**	—		
6. CIFP_tec	.100**	.184**	.460**	.594**	.486**	—	
7. CIFP_BC	.245**	.217**	.572**	.413**	.475**	.347**	—

*p<.05. ** p<.01.

To examine the explanatory contribution of ethical consumption and consumption-based identity expression while accounting for participants' demographic characteristics, five multiple linear regression models were estimated, one for each product category (Table 6). Age, gender, and socioeconomic status were included as covariates in all models. Across all five categories, both ethical consumption and consumption-based identity expression were significant positive predictors of young people's reported involvement in family purchasing. Explanatory power varied across categories and was highest for body care (adjusted R^2 = .201), followed by fashion (adjusted R^2 = .097), technology (adjusted R^2 = .066), tourism (adjusted R^2 = .058), and leisure (adjusted R^2 = .055).

Table 6. Regression model summary for each CIFP category

DV	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F (df)	p	Std. Error
CIFP_F	.318	.101	.097	24.38 (5,1082)	< .001	0.830
CIFP_L	.244	.060	.055	13.71 (5,1082)	< .001	0.835
CIFP_T	.250	.062	.058	14.42 (5,1082)	< .001	0.975
CIFP_Tec	.265	.070	.066	16.31 (5,1082)	< .001	0.869
CIFP_BC	.453	.205	.201	55.73 (5,1082)	< .001	0.942

The regression analyses showed that ethical consumption and consumption-based identity expression each contributed independently to young people's involvement in family purchasing after controlling for demographic characteristics (Tables 6 and 7). Although the models explained relatively modest proportions of variance in most product categories, their explanatory power differed across consumption domains. Consumption-based identity expression had the largest standardized coefficient in the fashion, leisure,

tourism, and technology models, whereas ethical consumption had the larger coefficient in the body-care model.

Demographic characteristics also showed category-specific associations. Girls reported greater involvement than boys in fashion, tourism, and body-care purchases, whereas boys reported greater involvement in technology purchases. Age was positively associated with involvement only in body-care purchasing. Socioeconomic status was significantly associated with involvement in tourism and technology, with negative standardized coefficients in both models, but not in fashion, leisure, or body care.

Table 7. Ethical consumption and consumption-based identity expression as predictors of CIFP.

DV	β eth_cons	p	β id_expr	p	β Gender	p	β Age	p	β SES	p
Fashion	.126	<.001	.205	<.001	.165	<.001	-.005	.853	-.035	.219
Leisure	.130	<.001	.198	<.001	-.011	.706	-.004	.897	-.031	.295
Tourism	.126	<.001	.131	<.001	.109	<.001	.054	.068	-.070	.018
Technology	.106	<.001	.194	<.001	-.133	<.001	.054	.066	-.062	.033
Body care	.214	<.001	.159	<.001	.301	<.001	.110	<.001	.015	.577

Overall, these findings indicate that young people's reported involvement in family purchasing is consistently associated with both ethical consumption orientation and consumption-based identity expression after accounting for age, gender, and socioeconomic status. However, the relative contribution of these orientations varies across consumption domains. The findings do not demonstrate changes in parental preferences or household purchase outcomes; rather, they identify ethical and symbolic orientations as modest correlates of young people's involvement in family decision-making processes.

Discussion

This study examined how young people's ethical consumption orientation relates to emotions during purchasing and consumption-based identity expression, and whether ethical consumption orientation and identity expression were associated with young people's reported involvement in family purchasing. Across the three research questions, the findings revealed a consistent but modest pattern of associations.

Regarding RQ1, ethical consumption orientation showed weak positive associations with the reported frequency of sadness, anger, contempt, guilt, and shame during purchasing. This pattern is consistent with theoretical accounts that assign affect a role in moral recognition and evaluation (Treviño, 1986; Vitell et al., 2001). However, emotions were measured in relation to purchasing in general rather than specifically ethical purchase situations. The findings therefore do not establish that ethical consumption elicits guilt, shame, sadness, or other negatively valenced emotions.

The small magnitude of these associations further limits their interpretation. The bivariate correlations were weak, and after controlling for age, gender, and socioeconomic status, none of the individual emotions was a statistically significant predictor of ethical consumption. Taken together, these findings suggest that emotional experiences during purchasing are only weakly related to young people's ethical consumption orientation and that the observed associations are not robust to adjustment for demographic characteristics.

Regarding RQ2, ethical consumption orientation was positively but modestly associated with consumption-based identity expression, even after controlling for age, gender, and socioeconomic status. The findings are consistent with the possibility that some adolescents draw on ethical considerations as a symbolic resource for expressing aspects of the self (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Richins, 1994; Roedder-John et al., 2024).

Ethical consumption choices may allow young consumers to articulate values, affiliations, or desired social positions through the products they select or reject.

The regression model explained only 3.1% of the variance in consumption-based identity expression, underscoring the limited explanatory role of ethical orientation. Gender and age also emerged as significant correlates, with girls and older adolescents reporting higher levels of consumption-based identity expression. Ethical meanings thus coexist with personal taste, aesthetics, peer affiliation, distinction, and social validation as potential dimensions of adolescents' symbolic engagement with consumption (Chan & Prendergast, 2007; Deutsch & Theodorou, 2010; Gentina et al., 2016). The comparatively high mean scores for personality and personal taste further support this broader symbolic role, while the modest association with ethical orientation suggests that moral considerations constitute only one dimension of consumption-based identity expression.

For RQ3, ethical consumption orientation and consumption-based identity expression were significantly associated with young people's reported involvement in family purchasing across all five product categories, even after controlling for demographic characteristics. Although explanatory power was modest for most categories, it was substantially higher for body care. These variables should therefore be understood as consistent correlates of young people's involvement rather than as primary determinants of family purchasing decisions.

The category-level analyses revealed differences across consumption domains. Consumption-based identity expression had the largest standardized coefficient of the two focal predictors in fashion, leisure, tourism, and technology, whereas ethical consumption orientation had the larger coefficient in body care. Fashion, leisure, tourism, and technology may provide particularly salient contexts for identity expression and social positioning, whereas the stronger relative association between ethical orientation and

body-care involvement may reflect ethical meanings associated with ingredients, health, bodily practices, sustainability, and personal responsibility (Harnish et al., 2019; Hermans & Veldhuis, 2025; Gentina et al., 2016; Ogle et al., 2014). These interpretations remain tentative, as the study did not directly assess motivations underlying involvement within each category.

Demographic characteristics also showed category-specific associations. Girls reported greater involvement than boys in fashion, tourism, and body-care purchases, whereas boys reported greater involvement in technology purchases. Older adolescents reported greater involvement only in body care. Socioeconomic status was significantly associated with involvement in tourism and technology, with negative standardized coefficients in both models. These patterns suggest that young people's involvement varies across consumption domains and may be shaped by differences associated with gender, age, and household resources.

Interpreting young people's participation in family purchasing requires a clear distinction between involvement and effective influence. The CIFP measure captures how frequently participants report expressing opinions, making suggestions, requesting products, or encouraging family purchases. It does not establish whether parents acted on these suggestions, whether young people altered final purchase decisions, or whether other household members adopted their ethical orientations. The findings therefore indicate associations with young people's self-reported involvement rather than effective influence on household decisions.

In this respect, the findings complement research on family purchasing and reverse socialization. Previous studies have examined how young people may influence parents through technological expertise, product knowledge, purchase requests, and the intergenerational transmission of environmental literacy (Watne et al., 2011; Liu et al.,

2022). The present findings indicate that ethical consumption orientation and consumption-based identity expression are also associated with young people's reported involvement across several consumption domains. Differences across product categories suggest that the potential for reverse socialization may vary according to the symbolic and practical meanings associated with different forms of family consumption. However, because the study measured young people's involvement rather than changes in parental attitudes or decisions, these patterns should not be interpreted as direct evidence of reverse socialization.

The household nevertheless provides a relevant relational context in which young people can express ethical and identity-related preferences. Rather than positioning them solely as recipients of consumer socialization, the findings highlight their active participation in household consumption and the ways in which their values and identity orientations enter everyday family purchasing practices. At the same time, the modest explanatory power of most models indicates that involvement is likely shaped by a broader set of personal, relational, and contextual factors, including family communication, parental mediation, product relevance, consumer expertise, socioeconomic resources, peer influence, and the distribution of decision-making authority.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference and does not allow us to determine how ethical consumption orientation, emotional experiences, consumption-based identity expression, and involvement in family purchasing develop over time. In addition, the exclusive reliance on self-report measures may have introduced social desirability and

common method bias, particularly in the assessment of ethical orientations and emotional experiences.

A further limitation concerns the interpretation of young people's involvement in family purchasing. The CIFP measure captures how frequently participants report expressing opinions, making suggestions, requesting products, and encouraging family purchases. It does not establish whether parents act on these contributions, whether young people alter final purchase outcomes, or how influence unfolds through household negotiation. The findings therefore identify factors associated with young people's self-reported involvement but cannot establish whether or how children shape family consumption practices or whether ethical values are transmitted to other household members.

The measurement of emotions also warrants caution. Participants reported how frequently they experienced different emotions during purchasing in general rather than during explicitly ethical consumption episodes. Consequently, the observed associations cannot establish whether guilt, shame, sadness, or other emotions arise from ethical considerations, conflicts between values and behavior, or other features of the purchasing context.

The study also did not incorporate family-context variables such as parental ethical discourse, communication and mediation styles, educational background, or the distribution of decision-making authority within the household. Such factors may help explain why ethical consumption orientation and consumption-based identity expression are more strongly associated with young people's involvement in some households or product categories than in others. Moreover, because the data were collected from participants aged 12–17 years in Spain, further research is needed to determine whether the observed patterns extend to other cultural, socioeconomic, and family contexts.

Future research could combine children and parental reports with observational or dyadic designs to examine how ethical and identity-related preferences enter family negotiations and whether they influence final purchase decisions. Longitudinal designs could clarify how these relationships evolve as young people acquire greater autonomy and consumer competence. Qualitative and mixed-methods approaches could further illuminate how they articulate, justify, and negotiate ethical considerations within particular product categories, while scenario-based and experience-sampling designs could examine emotional responses to specific ethical purchasing situations. Finally, research on digital environments should explore how social media, online communities, and consumption platforms shape the information, values, and symbolic resources that young people bring into household decision-making.

Conclusions

This study provides an integrated empirical examination of ethical consumption among young people by connecting emotional experiences, consumption-based identity expression, and involvement in family purchasing. The findings indicate that ethical considerations form part of young people's consumption, although their associations with the dimensions examined are generally modest. Ethical consumption orientation showed weak associations with several negatively valanced emotions during purchasing, which did not remain significant after demographic characteristics were taken into account. Thus, the findings point to a limited relationship between ethical orientation and young people's general emotional experiences during purchasing rather than to inherent emotional conflict.

Ethical consumption orientation was also positively but modestly associated with consumption-based identity expression after controlling for demographic characteristics.

This suggests that ethical considerations may constitute one symbolic resource through which some young people express aspects of the self, alongside personal taste, aesthetics, peer affiliation, and social positioning.

Finally, ethical consumption orientation and consumption-based identity expression were consistently associated with young people's reported involvement in family purchasing, with their relative strength varying across product categories. These domain-specific patterns suggest that the relative salience of symbolic self-expression and ethical considerations varies across consumption domains. For Consumer Studies, these findings highlight young people as active participants in contemporary consumer culture, whose ethical orientations and identity expression extend into the relational context of household consumption.

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