

Do Ethical Social Media Communities Pay Off? An Exploratory Study of the Ability of Facebook Ethical Communities to Strengthen Consumers' Ethical Consumption Behavior

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Received: 16 February 2015 / Accepted: 20 August 2015 / Published online: 2 September 2015
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Abstract It has been proposed that the social networking site Facebook is suitable for building communities and strengthening customer relationships, and also many organizations that promote ethical consumption have established online communities there. However, because of the newness of ethical online communities, little is known about the extent to which consumer participation in them produces positive outcomes. The present study aims at exploring such outcomes: first, we identify consumer-perceived benefits from ethical community participation, and second, we explore whether these benefits influence the activity promoted (in this case, ethical consumption), as well as consumer loyalty toward the ethical Facebook community. The results of an online survey of ethical community participants reveal that informational benefits reinforce consumers' ethical consumption behavior. Social and entertainment benefits, in turn, have a positive influence on loyalty to the community. The present study further reveals that the consumers' prior commitment to ethical consumption influences the perceived benefits: the affective commitment to ethical consumption has a positive, and the continuance commitment a negative influence on the benefits. Thus, the more consumers feel they engage in ethical consumption because of an emotional attachment, the higher the perceived benefits from online community participation are. The more consumers perceive

that their ethical consumption is driven by lack of choice, the fewer the benefits. Overall, the perceived benefits were at a relatively low level, which is somewhat alarming and highlights the need to manage the communities more efficiently.

Keywords Ethical consumption · Online community · Commitment · Consumer benefits · Loyalty · Social media

Introduction

Ethical consumption, i.e., the “decision making, purchases, and other consumption experiences that are affected by the consumer's ethical concerns” (Cooper-Martin and Holbrook 1993, p. 113) is increasing, if slowly (Ethical Consumer Markets Report 2014; McEachern and Carrigan 2012). To further promote ethical consumption, organizations increasingly establish online forums for discussing issues related to ethical consumption (Kaliarnta et al. 2011), many of which exist on the social networking site Facebook. Ethical online communities are important forums for stakeholders such as states, municipalities, organizations, voluntary groups, and individuals who aim to promote ethical consumption. As Foster and Lawson (2013) highlight, “Given such large numbers of the global population are using online social networks regularly, tapping into this audience to raise awareness of, and bring about positive behavior change in, societal issues ... has promising potential” (p. 1).

Despite the importance of online ethical communities, their role in ethical consumption remains understudied, although researchers have identified the urgent need for combined research on ethical consumer behavior and the Internet in general (Chatzidakis and Mitussis 2007), and

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studies on formal, organized ethical spaces, such as Facebook communities in particular (Newholm and Shaw 2007; Papaoikonomou et al. 2012). To date, ethical consumer research has predominantly studied ethical consumerism and its benefits as an individual endeavor (e.g., Antonetti and Maklan 2014; Carrington et al. 2014). In these studies, consumer (ethical/unethical) behavior or judgments are explained through consumer demographics (Vitell and Muncy 1992), values (Haws et al. 2014; Shaw and Clarke 1999), attitudes (Vitell and Muncy 1992), situational constraints (Carrington et al. 2010; Madar et al. 2013), or underlying cognitive processes, such as deontological and teleological evaluations (Hunt and Vitell 1986; Vitell 2003).

However, some researchers suggest that (ethical) consumption can be explained by social variables (Carù and Cova 2003; Cherrier 2007; Cova 1997; Sheth et al. 1991), and thus, researchers have called for studies on ethical consumption as a social phenomenon (Bekin et al. 2006; Carrigan et al. 2011; Shaw and Riach 2011). As Cherrier (2007, p. 323) points out, “consuming ethically links consumers to family members, friends, the state, and the market.” In accordance with this, Burke et al. (2014) acknowledge that consumers purchase ethical products to fit in with peers or become opinion leaders. Online communities that are social by nature (Rheingold 1993) support the social side of ethical consumption: first of all, the consumers are able to reach beyond their immediate social network to a community of like-minded individuals, sharing an interest in the same topic (Hagel and Armstrong 1997). As the interests of the ethical consumers cover a wide spectrum of ethical issues (Cherrier 2007), finding people with similar concerns may be particularly important as they may not exist in one’s immediate social network. Secondly, the interactions often foster collectively held knowledge (Rothaermel and Sugiyama 2001), and enforce a feeling of in-group membership (Kim et al. 2004). For these reasons, consumers ought to benefit from the participatory opportunities in online communities. This is in line with previous research that contends that consumer use of online communities as media in general is driven by the benefits that the users receive (Katz et al. 1974; Grace-Farfaglia et al. 2006; Rokka and Moisander, 2009). These benefits in turn influence subsequent behaviors (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002; Kuo and Feng 2013; Mathwick et al. 2008).

The present study sets out to explore to what extent consumers in fact benefit from the social environment of online communities, and investigates three previously established benefits identified in the online community context: social, informational, and entertainment benefits. However, ethical online communities that exist on Facebook differ from website-based online communities, as the

messages on Facebook are often relatively short, the discussions are organized in timelines rather than topics, and consumers may be exposed to the messages in different degrees. Thus, one may question whether consumers experience benefits from participating in ethical Facebook communities, and if their behavior is influenced in any way.

In addition to consumer-perceived benefits, this study explores two outcomes of community participation: ethical consumption behavior and consumer loyalty to the online community. Participating in a community that promotes ethical consumption should logically enhance the members’ ethical behavior, in the same manner as prior studies have shown that Facebook fan sites influence consumer behavior toward brands (e.g., Kang et al. 2014), but this linkage has not been studied previously. In addition, earlier research has shown that the perceived benefits of participation in online communities lead to community loyalty (Gummerus et al. 2012; Kim et al. 2004; Shang et al. 2006). Studying community loyalty, i.e., the members’ intent to continue using the community is vital, because without use, the members cannot receive any benefits from participation, and thus attempts to reinforce ethical consumption behavior fall short.

Furthermore, consumers vary in their commitment to ethical consumption (Long and Murray 2013), and just as in brand community settings (Algesheimer et al. 2005), ethical community members are expected to exhibit some level of commitment, or else they would not be members. We propose that the more committed to ethical consumption individuals are, the more they benefit from participation in the community, because they perceive the interactions to be more meaningful in general, or experience informational benefits stemming from finding solutions to problems such as difficulty in finding ethically produced goods and services (PriceWaterhouseCoopers 2008; Vermeir and Verbeke 2006). By investigating the outcomes of consumer ethical community participation in online Facebook communities, our study takes a step toward answering the call for a more collective approach to ethical consumerism (Harrison et al. 2005; Papaoikonomou et al. 2012), measured as outcomes of community participation.

We will start by discussing ethical consumer communities on Facebook and what types of benefits consumers may experience through their participation. This will be followed by a discussion on the consumer commitment to ethical communities and its proposed influence on the perceived benefits. The expected outcomes of the benefits, reinforced ethical consumption behavior and community loyalty are presented, and hypotheses are created. In the empirical study, the hypotheses are tested. The article ends with a discussion on the findings, managerial implications, calls for future research, and limitations of the study.

Ethical Online Communities and Ethical Consumption

Online communities are defined as “affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon a shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities” (Kozinets 1999, p. 254). Online communities have been proposed to be suitable for relationship building (Kane et al. 2009), because they enhance relationships between organizations and individuals, between individuals, and as this study proposes, between individuals and causes, such as ethical consumption.

Ethical online communities can be built within Facebook, which belongs to the wider group of social networking sites that enable people to create public or semi-public profiles, connect to other users and view their connections (Boyd and Ellison 2007). Facebook helps consumers to communicate their interests to a large number of other users, either within their friends or with the members of an online community, which makes it a potential platform for sharing and discussing one’s ethical views with a large number of people (Whelan et al. 2013).

Ethical consumption has several characteristics that make it ideal as a basis for online communities. First, ethical consumption is traditionally defined as cognition driven (Burke et al. 2014; Carrington et al. 2014; Harrison et al. 2005; Hunt and Vitell 1986) and therefore information provided in the community is bound to be beneficial for the consumers. Second, in the same manner as consumption in general (Cova 1997; Carù and Cova 2003), as Cherrier (2007) pointed out, ethical consumption is social because it connects consumers to others in the society, from micro-level linkages with family members and friends to the meta-levels of the state and the market. Hence, the activity of ethical consumption is well suited for social media that by nature connect people, although much of their behavior continues offline as well. Secondly, ethical consumption is driven by consumers’ underlying values and ideologies (Bardi Kleiser et al. 2003; Jägel et al. 2012; McIntyre et al. 1995). Consumers with ethical concerns feel responsible for the society and express their concern about the ethical behavior of companies, social justice, human rights, and environmental sustainability by means of ethical buying and consumer behavior, thus being highly interested in ethical consumption-related issues (Pelsmacker et al. 2005; Bray et al. 2011). Social media enable consumers to express their consumption choices and ideologies overtly to others; therefore, they are powerful communicational tools for individuals. In fact, Shang et al. (2006) suggested that online communities are best described as arenas for strangers with weak ties with the purpose to engage in word-of-mouth.

Benefits Derived from Consumer Participation in Ethical Online Communities

It is generally assumed that consumer participation in online community activities is volitional (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002) and that consumers are driven by the benefits that they receive from their (social) media usage (Katz et al. 1974; Batra and Ahtola 1990). In order to identify benefits from consumer participation in ethical online communities, we have to consider both previous social media participation studies, as well as studies on ethical consumption. Previous social media studies have explored a number of benefits that consumers may derive from their online community participation. Fiore et al. (2005) found that consumers received informational (i.e., utilitarian) value due to better product information and convenience. Likewise, studies on online problem solving and product support communities (e.g., Mathwick et al. 2008; Nambisan and Baron 2007) have shown that consumers receive informational and social benefits. In addition, a number of entertainment (often called hedonic) benefits related to relaxation, fun, enjoyment (Nambisan and Baron 2007), and pleasure derived through participation have been identified in online interactions (Fiore et al., 2005; Lee et al. 2009; Overby and Lee 2006). These three benefits: informational, social, and entertainment benefits, have been widely recognized in social media research, and to some extent ethical consumption literature and their importance will be discussed next.

Informational Benefits

It is expected that consumers receive informational benefits, since online communities are particularly suited for creating and sharing collective information (Hagel and Armstrong 1997), and lack of information is a major problem for ethical consumers (Uusitalo and Oksanen 2004). Consumers are more influenced by information embedded in online communities than on corporate web pages, because the former can be seen as a form of word-of-mouth communication, and thus more trustworthy (Bickart and Schindler 2001). In the ethical consumption context, Burke et al. (2014) suggest that more information from credible sources alleviates confusion and skepticism that many consumers perceive in relation to ethical claims, as ethical labels do not seem to do the job (Smithers 2010), which emphasizes the potential importance of informational benefits. The information produced by consumers is constantly evolving and is up-to-date, provided that the user base is knowledgeable and sufficiently large. The users regulate each other either through official feedback systems (Dellarocas 2003) or as in Facebook, by commenting on, liking, or sharing each other’s posts, which

results in more multifaceted information, as claims are moderated by a large number of people (Dholakia et al. 2009). Consequently, online ethical communities could result in substantial informational benefits.

Social Benefits

Social benefits are derived from the interactions between people (Dholakia et al. 2009), and they relate to recognition or even friendship (Gwinner et al. 1998). Several sources of social benefits may exist, such as discussions with peers, giving and receiving personal support (Chung and Kim 2008; Gummerus et al. 2012; Nonnecke et al. 2006; Mathwick et al. 2008). Receiving support has also been recognized as being important for ethical consumers (Shaw and Clarke 1999). The social aspects of community building in ethical consumption communities (Seyfang 2007) include both knowing others and feeling connected to them. In ethical communities, consumers share their concerns about the effects of purchasing choices with others (Harrison et al. 2005), and are able to communicate their support for an organization, cause, or brand widely, even beyond their first-tier relationships (friends). In addition to social support, consumers may seek social enhancement, which Nambisan and Baron (2010) named personal integration benefits. This includes feeling useful, recognized, and needed in the community (Berger 2014; Hars and Ou 2002; Ho and Dempsey 2010). Dunne et al. (2010) reported that the young participants in their study used social networking sites to present and manage their identity in a social context. Furthermore, when trustworthy information is missing, consumers tend to talk about their decisions with each other (Berger 2014), suggesting that social benefits may be particularly important for ethical consumers who lack information to make their decision.

Entertainment Benefits

Entertainment and enjoyment benefits relate to fun and relaxation (Dholakia et al. 2004; Mathwick et al. 2001). Although ethical consumption research has not typically outlined the activity as being fun, or leading to positive emotions (rather concentrating on guilt or other negative emotions, see Bray et al. (2011), entertainment benefits have been found in other types of Facebook communities (Gummerus et al. 2012), among blog readers and writers (Hsu and Lin 2008) and in online shopping (Mathwick et al. 2001). Since consumers seem to derive hedonic benefits from all kinds of online activities, we propose that ethical consumption communities can also generate entertainment benefits. For example, one can visit ethical communities to pass the time or for the enjoyment of catching up on new content.

Next, we will discuss consumer commitment to ethical consumption, which we suggest precedes community participation and acts as an antecedent of the perceived community benefits.

Commitment to Ethical Consumption

Commitment to ethical consumption is in essence commitment to a course of action, i.e., “a state of being in which an individual becomes bound by his actions and through these actions to beliefs that sustain the activities and his own involvement” (Salancik 1977, p. 62). The commitment to persist in a course of action is particularly important for socially desirable behaviors (Ein-Gar 2015) such as ethical consumption, because it ensures that the consumer behaves in a consistent way, and it has been found in consumers engaging in ethical consumption (Adams and Raisborough 2010).

In addition to its linkage to behavior, commitment is a psychological state (Meyer and Allen 1991, 2004) with multiple dimensions. In marketing literature, commitment is most prominently conceptualized through affective and continuance commitment (Fullerton 2003). *Affective commitment* refers to a person’s emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in an organization, product, or idea, and it emerges in response to emotions and perceived closeness (Meyer and Allen 1991). Marketing studies often measure affective commitment due to its positive consequences for a firm. Consumers who are affectively committed tend to stay loyal and advocate the firm to others (Evanschitzky et al. 2006), and consequently, literature on ethical consumption has also studied how firm commitment influences consumer reactions toward firms’ (un)ethical activities (Ingram et al. 2005) or enhances consumers’ ethical behavior (Steenhaut and Van Kenhove 2005).

However, consumers may also be committed because they feel locked in ethical consumption, as measured by *continuance commitment*. It entails a negative connotation of being bound to an action, whether one wants to be or not (Fullerton 2003), and it entails both calculative and normative commitment. Calculative commitment reflects consumers’ need to stay committed due to high switching costs, or because of contractual relationships (Geyskens et al. 1996; Wetzels et al. 1998; Zhou et al. 2012). Previous studies have shown that calculative commitment has positive effects also on consumer perceptions and behavior toward companies (Li et al. 2006; Liljander and Roos 2002) and work (Mathieu and Zajac 1990). Often the negativity of calculative commitment relates to the feeling of being locked in the current course of action because the alternatives are perceived as worse (such as abandoning ethical consumption), and hence, calculative commitment is not negative per se. It is a need to stay committed where

consumers weight the benefits of being committed (in this case to ethical consumption) with the sacrifices that have to be made and compare those with alternatives. Thus, this commitment is more of a cognitive, rational choice rather than being based on feelings, like affective commitment is. These types of commitment are independent of each other (Geyskens et al. 1996). Normative commitment in turn concerns the sense of obligation to stay committed. In ethical consumption studies, a perceived obligation to consume ethically has been shown to affect consumer attitude and ethical choice (Bray et al. 2011; Shaw et al. 2000; Shaw and Shiu 2002). We will use the general dimension of continuance commitment as a proxy for both calculative and normative commitments, because both entail a sense of necessity rather than free choice.

To the best of our knowledge, neither affective nor continuance commitment to ethical consumption itself has been studied within the realm of ethical consumption. The present study investigates consumer commitment to consuming ethically as an antecedent to community benefits and loyalty, which follows the same logic as Algesheimer et al. (2005), who proposed that the consumers who become community members likely have a prior relationship to the brand (in this case, ethical consumption). Similarly, previous studies have shown that consumer commitment to the community partially explains why consumers produce content for it (Wiertz and de Ruyter 2007; Jin et al. 2010), suggesting that commitment precedes community participation.

Consumers' prior affective commitment to ethical consumption may influence community consumption experience and the benefits that the consumers perceive from the community. Previous research has suggested that consumers' affective commitment has a positive influence on the subsequent relationship. For example, Johnson et al. (2008) found affective commitment to have a positive relationship with satisfaction and a negative one with risk perceptions. Along the same line of thinking, we propose that the more affectively committed to ethical consumption the consumer is, the more s/he will perceive (informational, social, entertainment) benefits due to feeling more positive toward the community. The consumer not only is likely to provide and receive useful information in relation to ethical consumption, discuss ethical issues of interest, but also simply enjoy reading and taking part in the community. Thus, Hypothesis 1 is as follows:

H1 Affective commitment to ethical consumption has a positive influence on the perceived benefits (informational, social, and entertainment) of participating in the community.

Whereas affective commitment is positive, and is perceived as being good for both consumers and companies (e.g., Morgan and Hunt 1994), continuance commitment

represents a darker side of commitment. It is often characterized by "a sense of being locked in" (Meyer and Herscovitch 2001, p. 307). Previous studies have shown that continuance commitment compels consumers to remain in the relationship because the switching costs would be too high, or because they expect future benefits from the relationship (Anderson and Weitz 1992; Meyer and Allen 1991). Giving up ethical consumption is not likely to cause negative economic outcomes, but may relate to negative social and ego consequences. Ethical consumption may form an important part of consumers' self-image and be therefore difficult to give up, despite potential drawbacks such as paying higher prices (Pelsmacker et al. 2005). Consequently, consumers who have negative feelings of guilt, anxiety, or normative pressures related to ethical consumption might not enjoy the benefits of an ethical community to the same extent as consumers with affective commitment. Still, consumers exhibiting continuance commitment may use the community to reduce negative feelings and to receive reassurances from other community members that they are doing the right thing. For example, people with cancer have been reported to benefit from community membership, although they most likely do not perceive the sickness itself as positive (Setoyama et al. 2011). Hence, continuance commitment is expected to lead to perceived benefits of being part of the community, although some negative feelings may carry over and reduce the obtained benefits. Therefore, we propose that the effect of continuance commitment on perceived benefits will be positive, producing Hypothesis 2:

H2 Continuance commitment to ethical consumption has a positive influence on the perceived benefits (informational, social, and entertainment) of participating in the community.

Next, the proposed relationship between online community benefits and the members' loyalty to the community and reinforced ethical consumer behavior will be outlined.

Outcomes of Ethical Community Benefits

When members experience the benefits of community participation, they are likely to assume behavioral patterns that ensure they continue receiving these benefits, in line with the behavioral psychology that suggests a respondent to behave in a way that has resulted in positive outcomes in the past (Skinner 1948). Consequently, perceived benefits result in members' becoming more loyal to the community and recommending it to others, similar to the findings on the influence of perceived benefits in other domains (Gwinner et al. 1998; Hsu et al. 2012). The more consumers benefit from participation in the community, the more likely they want to maintain their relationship with it. This is important for

online communities, since they need a base of loyal members that are active in the community and produce, share, and use the published content. This leads to Hypothesis 3:

H3 Perceived benefits (informational, social, and entertainment) have a positive influence on consumer loyalty to the ethical community.

In addition to fostering loyalty to the community, a well-functioning community that provides benefits to its members is likely to strengthen the consumers' commitment to ethical consumption. Previous research has established that virtual community participation enhances consumers' commitment to the brand around which the community was built (Casaló et al. 2010), and we propose that the same logic applies for the cause around which ethical Facebook communities are built. Collective efficacy, that is, perceived collective power through a shared belief in the power to produce effects, can foster the community's motivational commitment to its mission (Bandura 2000). An ethical community gathers like-minded consumers, who can provide reassurance and attest that one is making the right choices; this is something that may not be found among acquaintances (cf. Shaw and Newholm 2002). Furthermore, the social benefits that reflect the strengthened emotional ties with other community members may exert positive effects on the interest around which the community has been developed (Casaló et al. 2008; Kavanaugh et al. 2005). Hence, we propose that the benefits of belonging to the community will also reinforce the consumer's decision to consume ethically. Informational and social benefits affect consumption by forming and supporting beliefs, but also by calling one to action. Thus, Hypothesis 4 is as follows:

H4 Perceived benefits (informational, social, and entertainment) of belonging to an ethical community will strengthen the consumer's ethical consumption.

It is further proposed that the construct of reinforced ethical consumption behavior is positively related to future community loyalty, since consumers are likely to attribute the reinforcement to the positive experiences of participating in the community. Hence, Hypothesis 5 is as follows:

H5 Reinforced ethical consumption has a positive influence on community loyalty.

In summary, this study contributes to research on ethical consumer behavior by exploring how community participation affects the members' ethical consumption. The study investigates (1) whether the consumers' prior commitment to ethical consumption influences the benefits obtained from participating in the ethical Facebook community (H_1 ; H_2), and (2) the impact that the perceived benefits have on the consumers' ethical consumption behavior and community

loyalty, as well as their interdependent relationship (H_3 ; H_4 ; H_5). The study also contributes to online community research, since the antecedents and outcomes of online community participation remain under-researched (Casaló et al. 2010). The proposed model can be used as a base model to measure the functionality of ethical online communities, and can be easily extended to include individual variables. The proposed model is depicted in Fig. 1.

Method

A questionnaire was designed to capture consumer commitment to ethical consumption, perceived benefits, loyalty to the online community, as well as reinforced ethical consumption due to community participation. The statements were taken from previous studies when possible and modified to fit the studied context (see Appendix). A 5-point Likert-type scale was used for the items, ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). The participants' gender, age, education, and degree of participation in community activities were collected as background variables.

Data Collection

An online survey was administered to four ethical consumer online communities on Facebook that concentrate on consumption-related issues. The communities are among the most influential in the national market in terms of the number of participants and the activity level. Three of the communities concentrate on the fair trade aspects of ethicality, namely, assuring fair income and living conditions for producers/workers, whereas one arranges "buycotts," that is, positive purchasing campaigns to redeem companies that commit to becoming more ecological. Consequently, the ethical consumption communities studied here mainly concern fair trade, although other types of ethical consumption have been identified, such as environmental issues (Vitell and Muncy 2005). Two of the communities are run by nonprofit organizations—one is a joint effort of several nonprofit organizations and one is run by a non-organized voluntary group. The Facebook communities are open to the public, which means that consumers do not have to be members of the organization to join the communities. The studied communities have moved their online communities from organizational sites to Facebook.

The data collection took place in March–April 2012. Links to the survey were posted on each of the online community walls, with reminders within a week. In total, 205 responses were collected, out of which 7 responses were unusable due to missing values, resulting in a sample of 198 usable responses. The background of the respondents is shown in Table 1. The

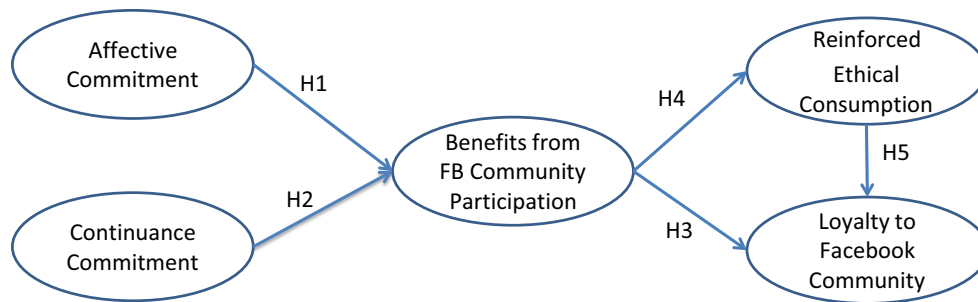


Fig. 1 The proposed model

Table 1 Background statistics

	Scale	Percentage
Age	16–24	19.2
	25–34	43.4
	35–44	23.7
	45–54	8.1
	55–	5.6
Gender	Female	89.4
	Male	10.6
Education	High school	5.6
	Vocational school or college	23.2
	Polytechnic	24.2
	University	47.0
Visits the community	4–7 times/week	11.1
	1–3 times/week	17.2
	2–4 times/month	19.2
	Once a month	23.2
	Seldom	29.3
Community activities		Mean*
I participate as an active member		1.85
I am mainly engaged in lurking		4.31
I read posts on the community wall		3.92
I post messages that are important to me personally		2.06
I comment on posts on the community wall		1.89
I “like” posts on the community wall		3.27

* Completely disagree–completely agree (1–5)

majority of the respondents were female (89.4 %), which aligns with the community member profile and the profile of ethical consumers (e.g., Isenhour and Ardenfors 2009; Bateman and Valentine 2010). Furthermore, most of the respondents (43.7 %) were in the age group 25–34 years and almost half (47.2 %) had a university degree. The respondents were more likely to be lurkers and information seekers than active content creators, apart from producing “likes.” It is widely established that a large part of community users are typically lurkers, although the proportion varies between communities

and depends also on the used typology (Brandzaeg and Heim 2011; van Mierlo 2014).

Measurement and Structural Models

A two-step approach was used to evaluate the validity of the measurement models. In the first step, the measurement model was subjected to an exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation. This step aimed to assure the unidimensionality of the latent variables. Based on the results, one item for informational benefits and four items for social benefits were omitted because they did not load on a distinct dimension and/or did not correlate highly with other items of the same construct. In addition, two items in the loyalty construct were omitted because they failed to load properly.

In the second step, confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were performed on the retained variables to assess whether the purified scales reliably measured the latent factors. First, CFA was run on the endogenous commitment variables, resulting in an excellent fit (Chi-square = 5.01, $df = 4$, P value = 0.286, RMSEA = 0.036). As the aim was to investigate the relationship between latent variables and their indicators, the indicator loadings were inspected and found to be significant. Further, the composite reliabilities of the latent variables were calculated, all exceeding 0.6 as desirable (Bagozzi and Yi 1988), except for continuance commitment with a loading of 0.59, which was deemed to be sufficient.

As the third step, the informational, social, and entertainment benefits that function both as endogenous and exogenous variables were studied. The model yielded a good measurement fit (Chi-square = 59.06, $df = 41$, P value = 0.03, RMSEA = 0.047), but one item from the informational benefits had a factor estimate of 0.44, which is clearly below the minimum level of 0.60 for convergent validity (Bagozzi and Yi 1988), and thus had to be dropped. The model was rerun without this item, which resulted in an excellent model fit (Chi-Square = 23.98, $df = 32$, P value = 0.845, RMSEA = 0.000).

Table 2 Confirmatory factor analyses on the exogenous and/or endogenous variables

Construct	Std estim. (<i>t</i> value)	Model fit
Affective commitment (CR = 0.72)		$\chi^2 = 5.01$, $df = 4$, P value = 0.286, GFI = 0.990, AGFI = 0.962, RMSEA = 0.036
I feel emotionally attached to ethical consumption	0.830 (5.43)	
I really feel that ethical consumption problems are my own	0.661 (*)	
Continuance commitment (CR = 0.59)		
Staying with ethical consumption is a matter of necessity as much as desire	0.681 (*)	
It would be very hard for me to leave ethical consumption right now, even if I wanted to	0.631 (6.44)	
I feel that I have no other options but to continue ethical consumption	0.688 (6.65)	
Perceived Benefits		$\chi^2 = 23.98$, $df = 32$, P value = 0.845, GFI = 0.976, AGFI = 0.959, RMSEA = 0.000
Informational benefits (CR = 0.759)		
The information provided by the online community is useful	0.582 (7.132)	
The knowledge obtained from the online community has made the tackling of ethical problems easier	0.735 (*)	
I have obtained ideas through the online community	0.819 (8.564)	
Social benefits (CR = 0.739)		
I like the social aspects and the interactions with people who share my values in this online community	0.619 (6.522)	
I derive satisfaction from influencing other consumers in this online community.	0.661 (*)	
I feel useful when sharing information	0.701 (6.949)	
I aim at presenting a good image of myself to others in the online community	0.592 (6.327)	
Entertainment benefits (CR = 0.865)		
I have entertained and stimulated my mind by reading the topics of the online community	0.878 (*)	
I have used the online community site for relaxation	0.836 (13.105)	
I have spent some enjoyable time browsing the Facebook community site	0.761 (11.884)	
Loyalty to FB community (CR = 0.737)		$\chi^2 = 6.56$, $df = 8$, $P = 0.585$ GFI = 0.989 AGFI = 0.971 RMSEA = 0.000
In the future, I will be loyal to this community	0.666 (*)	
I will visit the community in the future	0.715 (7.402)	
I would recommend this community to others	0.704 (7.350)	
Reinforced ethical consumption (CR = 0.889)		
The community has affected my shopping behavior	0.794 (*)	
The community has strengthened my ethical consumption choices	0.927 (13.954)	
The community has strengthened my beliefs about the importance of ethical consumption	0.833 (12.892)	

* Fixed estimate

Then the exogenous variables (loyalty and reinforced ethical consumption) were analyzed, also yielding an excellent fit (Chi-square = 6.56, $df = 8$, P value = 0.585, RMSEA = 0.000). Discriminant validity was also tested by constraining the relationships between each variable and inspecting the resulting alternative models. These models consistently led to significantly weaker models, supporting discriminant validity. After these purifications, the reliabilities of the scales were recalculated with coefficient alphas. The final items included in the analysis are reported in the Appendix. The final CFA results are reported in Table 2.

Overall, the respondents showed relatively high affective commitment to ethical consumption ($M = 3.80$), whereas continuance commitment ($M = 3.01$) was somewhat lower. Further, the respondents rated the social benefits rather low ($M = 2.62$), whereas the informational benefits received the highest mark ($M = 3.43$), followed by entertainment benefits ($M = 3.05$). Reinforced ethical consumption behavior was on a similar level to the benefits ($M = 3.47$), whereas loyalty to the community was higher ($M = 3.75$). Table 3 reports the correlations and mean values of the constructs.

Table 3 Pearson correlation and mean values of constructs

<i>N</i> = 198	Mean	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(1) Commitment _{affective}	3.80	1						
(2) Commitment _{continuance}	3.01	.434**	1					
(3) Informational benefits	3.43	.240**	.046	1				
(4) Social benefits	2.62	.144*	.104	.301**	1			
(5) Entertainment benefits	3.05	.071	−.028	.451**	.237**	1		
(6) Loyalty _{Fbcommunity}	3.75	.194**	.078	.491**	.372**	.437**	1	
(7) Ethical consumption	3.47	.321**	.117	.702**	.320**	.455**	.520**	1

* $P < .05$, ** $P < .01$ **Table 4** Proposed structural model estimation results

	Stand. coefficient	<i>T</i> value	Hypothesis
H1: Commitment _{affective} -benefits			H ₁ supported
Commitment _{affective} -informational benefits	2.152	3.388	
Commitment _{affective} -social benefits	1.058	3.092	
Commitment _{affective} -entertainment benefits	1.484	3.617	
Hypothesis 2: Commitment _{continuance} -benefits			H ₂ not supported, significant negative relationship
Commitment _{continuance} -informational benefits	−1.847	−2.959	
Commitment _{continuance} -social benefits	−0.837	−2.473	
Commitment _{continuance} -entertainment benefits	−1.422	−3.383	
H3: Benefits—community loyalty			H ₃ partially supported
Informational benefits—community loyalty	0.272	1.182	
Social benefits—community loyalty	0.226	2.441	
Entertainment benefits—community loyalty	0.215	2.295	
H4: Benefits—ethical consumption (EC) behavior			H ₄ partially supported
Informational benefits—EC behavior	0.832	6.833	
Social benefits—EC behavior	0.058	0.786	
Entertainment benefits—EC behavior	0.012	0.154	
H5: Ethical consumption behavior—community loyalty	0.215	1.060	H ₅ not supported

Goodness-of-fit: $\chi^2 = 257.836$, $P = 0.000$; NNFI = 0.969; CFI = 0.974; IFI = 0.974; GFI = 0.889; RMSEA = 0.049

Bolded values represent significant relationships

The study proceeded by testing the hypotheses with a structural model.

Findings

The hypothesized relationships (see Fig. 1) were tested using LISREL 8.80 with the Maximum Likelihood methodology. The results are reported in Table 4. The structural model fit to the data was good ($\chi^2 = 257.84$, $df = 175$, $P < 0.00$). The Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI = 0.89) is close to the suggested value of 0.90 (Kelloway 1998) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of 0.049 is below the threshold value of 0.05, indicating a good fit to the data (Steiger 1990). Other fit indices showed acceptable levels (AGFI = 0.85, NFI = 0.93, CFI = 0.974, RMR = 0.072).

The final model is depicted in Fig. 2. The straight lines depict significant relationships, the dotted lines non-

significant relationships. Loadings are marked next to the relationship, with *t* values in parentheses. The model shows that Affective Commitment influences all benefit types, meaning that H1 was supported. However, Continuance Commitment has a negative influence on all benefit types, meaning that H2, which proposed a positive influence, was not supported. This controversial finding means that the more a person feels s/he is locked into consuming ethically, the less informational, social, and entertainment benefits that person perceives from community participation. Informational benefits were to a large degree explained by affective and continuance commitment ($R^2 = .825$), whereas social benefits were far less dependent of commitment types ($R^2 = .212$), entertainment benefits being in between ($R^2 = .392$).

The proposed model explains 74.7 per cent of the variance of the reinforced ethical consumption construct,

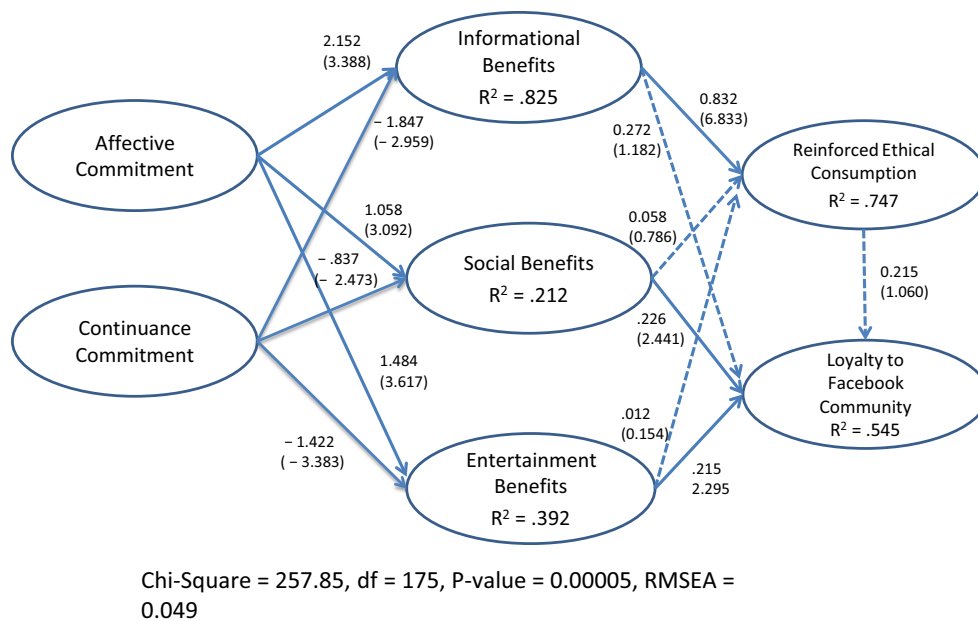


Fig. 2 Structural model

and 54.5 per cent of loyalty to the Facebook community. Loyalty to the Facebook Community is driven by social benefits (factor estimate 0.226) and entertainment benefits (factor estimate 0.215), but not by informational benefits, partially supporting H3. By contrast, only informational benefits influence reinforced ethical consumption behavior (factor estimate 0.832), rendering partial support for H4. Reinforced Ethical Consumption Behavior was not significantly related to Facebook Community Loyalty, and thus H5 was not supported.

Discussion and Conclusions

Whereas previous research on ethical consumption has explained why individual consumers make (or do not make) ethical choices (Carrington et al. 2010, 2014; Hunt and Vitell 1986, 2006), this study takes a more communal approach, exploring whether the benefits from participating in an ethical online community influence ethical behavior. This study contributes to the research on ethical consumption and social media, consumer commitment, and the benefits and outcomes of online community participation, answering the call for more research on the antecedents and outcomes of online community participation (Casaló et al. 2010), and on collective ethical consumerism (Harrison et al. 2005; Papaoikonomou et al. 2012). Our findings, although exploratory, due to the small number of respondents and the specific type of ethical communities studied, indicate that ethical consumption behavior can be strengthened by online community participation. The proposed

model serves as a basis for future studies to investigate the role of online community participation in influencing ethical consumption behavior. In addition, it offers a perspective on ethical consumption as a socially embedded behavior that at least partially depends on the consumer-perceived benefits of media use, and thus enriches the current ethical consumption literature which emphasizes the influence of consumers' internal values, attitudes, and demographic factors on their ethical consumption choices.

We proposed based on the premise that community membership requires prior commitment (Algesheimer et al. 2005) that the participants have a prior commitment to ethical consumption, and that this commitment influences the perceived benefits derived from participation. The findings demonstrate that the psychological commitment to ethical consumption has, depending on its nature, different effects on the perceived benefits of the ethical community. As suggested, affective commitment had a positive effect on all three community benefits. When members are affectively committed to ethical consumption, they get more out of the community in terms of the informational, social, and entertainment community benefits. This is in line with Ashley et al. (2011), who found that consumers' general interest toward a service provider aided their receptiveness to firm marketing tactics, which together with our findings suggests that previous levels and types of disposition influence subsequent reactions to stimuli.

In contrast to our prediction that continuance commitment would lead to consumers seeking and getting support as well as comfort from the community, the opposite seems to be the case. The higher the continuance commitment, the

less informational, social, and entertainment benefits members perceive. In the context of ethical consumption, continuance commitment represents a strong behavioral side of commitment; the more consumers feel that they have to consume ethically, the lower the perceived benefits from their community participation. Although it was not studied here, it is likely that the needs of consumers with high continuance commitment differ from the needs of members who are mainly affectively committed. For example, members may have different views on which topics should be discussed and how ethical consumption should be supported in the community. Also, the consumers with high continuance commitment may have higher expectations of what a community should achieve, or their feelings of having to consume ethically overshadow their evaluations of community benefits. In many cases, consumers have to make purchases that involve an ethical dilemma, and if they cannot solve the dilemma, they experience guilt (Antonetti and Maklan 2014), or they do not feel that their actions will make a difference (Bray et al. 2011). Consumers may try to cope with negative emotions by finding new groups with which they mingle or change the views of the existing group members (Valor and Carrero 2014). If online community participation fails to ameliorate consumers' negative feelings, it may feel insufficient or outright disappointing, therefore leading to low perceptions of benefits.

It is important to recognize that the respondents were rather passive in their participation, reporting high levels of lurking behaviors. This is not highly unusual—Gummerus et al. (2012) found that in a Facebook community context most members do not post content, but rather read it. Research in highly involving topics such as breast cancer has also reported high lurking levels of 50 % (Setoyama et al. 2011). Although user passivity is common, it may still influence the results. For example, Shang et al. (2006) reported that lurking and posting led to different effects. As they studied brand loyalty, the results are not directly comparable—nevertheless, they showed that lurking was more positively related to brand loyalty than posting, and the intention of lurking was to find information regarding product function/performance. Another study revealed that although there was no difference between people in their personal motivation to join the community, people who never posted perceived less benefits than other users (Nonnecke et al. 2006). These findings indicate that consumers who join ethical communities will likely have a similar interest in ethical consumption, although their commitment varies, and that their level of engagement in the online activities will further affect the perceived benefits from community membership.

Secondly, by studying ethical consumption community participants, we tapped to the collective side of ethical consumption that is present on the Internet (Chatzidakis and Mitussis 2007; Papaoikonomou et al. 2012). The results

showed, however, that the perceived social benefits were low, although Facebook is said to be particularly well suited for finding like-minded consumers to interact with. Instead, the primary benefits obtained from ethical communities were informational benefits, in line with findings from other communities (Dholakia et al. 2009). Limited information is a key issue when making ethical consumption choices (e.g., Uusitalo and Oksanen 2004) and online communities can provide up-to-date information and timely answers from the other community members. The participants primarily seem to meet individualistic goals; in other words, they are able to inform themselves about issues related to ethical consumption, which strengthens ethical beliefs and actions.

Thirdly, the study showed that different online community benefits drive future ethical consumption versus loyalty to the community. Informational benefits were positively related with reinforced ethical consumption, whereas social and entertainment benefits showed no significant relationship with it. This finding seems to disagree with Broniarczyk and Griffin (2014), who suggested that the different views of other users, which may conflict with the consumers' preferences and reasons for purchasing ethical products, add cognitive complexity to decisions and may make consumers less satisfied with their final choice. This does not seem to take place in the studied communities. Rather, when the consumer perceives the information useful, gets ideas from others and is able to make better ethical decisions, also ethical consumption behavior is reinforced. While social benefits did not reinforce ethical consumption, this does not mean that the other community members are not important, only that the social interactions do not strengthen individual ethical consumption behavior. The role of other consumers as information providers may still be important, but this could not be inspected further, as the study did not differentiate between information from the site provider and that from the other users.

In contrast, social and entertainment benefits had positive and similar effects on loyalty to the community, leaving informational benefits with no effect. The results partially contrast the findings from Gummerus et al. (2012) study, where social benefits did not influence loyalty to the Facebook community, but entertainment benefits did. In the present study, social benefits in terms of giving and receiving of support and the forming of friendships with other community members affect community loyalty. In addition, the results show that entertainment benefits have an important role in this context. It seems that consumers use all kinds of online activities for entertainment purposes. The differences between impacts of benefits on reinforced ethical consumption versus community loyalty demonstrate also the importance of acknowledging other outcomes than those that are directly related to the community itself.

Implications for Ethical Consumption Communities

The findings have several important implications for ethical consumption communities. First, the results are mixed when it comes to the consumer benefits from participation in ethical online communities. On the one hand, the levels of perceived benefits were low, which indicates that the communities may need to question whether they fulfill the members' needs. On the other hand, the findings were encouraging, because they do demonstrate that the communities perform an important role in providing valuable information and that they influence offline ethical consumption behavior. In particular, then, ethical consumption communities have an important role in informing consumers on the available ethical choices and providing up-to-date facts in response to consumers' ethical concerns. This is particularly important as past research has shown that there is a gap between the willingness to consume ethically and making actual ethical choices (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Carrington et al. 2010). Although ethical consumption is increasing, it is still a niche market, and the frequently mentioned reasons why consumers do not buy ethically are perceptions of ethical goods being overpriced as well as concerns about who profits from the high pricing—many believing it to be the distribution chain rather than the producing farmers or workers. Since all consumers are not equally committed, the ethical consumption communities could provide simplified, easily available facts, explanations, and guides to answer common questions and help all interested consumers make informed about ethical decisions that fit their resources. Furthermore, the users may share practical tips and ideas on ethical consumption, or arrange offline meetings, making ethical consumption a shared project that exceeds the boundaries of online and offline behaviors.

Second, the communities need to openly recognize that consumers have different needs and therefore need different kinds of content and support. The communities should create an atmosphere where all consumers feel welcome. Rather than only reinforcing the benefits of affectively committed ethical consumers, the community should cater to those who have doubts about ethical consumption, or those who have concerns that are not currently dealt with in the community. This could entail creating new discussion groups for different ethical concerns and encouraging consumers to express their needs and desires regarding the community offering.

Third, it is encouraging for communities that they do help to reinforce ethical consumption beliefs and behavior. They play a strong and important role in providing informational input regarding consumers' ethical consumption. By providing answers that address members' concerns, the communities can dissolve doubts and educate consumers on how to consume ethically. With most companies wishing to show that they are "green," consumers may

struggle to obtain factual information from company web pages or the daily press. Hence, consumers are likely to place greater trust in information from an ethical community site. It is important to monitor the communities so that consumer trust in the information will not be violated.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has its limitations. First, the examined communities mostly concern fair trade, but a number of other ethical issues exist, such as avoidance of consumption (Valor and Carrero 2014), protecting nature, organic food, or animal rights (see Bray et al. 2011). These must be included in future studies to uncover whether there are differences in the effectiveness of online communities across ethical domains. Furthermore, ethical consumers are driven by different ideologies and also show dissimilar patterns of information processing (McIntyre et al. 1995). For example, individuals who believe that bending rules is justifiable, if the consequences are positive (Hunt and Vitell 1986), may be more prone to change their behavior on the basis of the information in the community than those who believe that universal moral rules exist and must not be violated, and therefore adhere to their established behavioral patterns, despite information on the community. It is also possible that these different types of consumers would simply perceive different benefits or exert different behavioral patterns online. Therefore, future studies should look into these aspects.

The study was conducted as an online survey in one country only; however, there are differences between countries regarding consumer spending on ethical goods (Thøgersen 2010). In the studied country, spending is rather low, which is likely due to high prices as well as the belief that the nationally produced products are ethically produced. It is possible that consumers in other countries have different concerns and hence attribute a different level of importance to the obtained benefits of online communities. The current study also measured the expressed commitment to ethical consumption, and no measures on what they consider ethical, or their actual consumption, were applied. Also, the individual characteristics were not investigated, since the study was performed on an ethical community which gathers like-minded consumers. However, we acknowledge that individual consumer characteristics, as well as consumer perceptions of other community members, could affect the relationships between constructs. For example, the degree of engagement in ethical behavior, what kind of ethical consumption consumers engage in, and the fit between the consumer's own values and those of the community members, may moderate the effect of ethical consumption commitment on perceived benefits of and loyalty to the community.

It would also be worthwhile to study what types of online community interactions are most beneficial for the members.

For example, bringing the conflicting reasons of others to the consumer's attention has been shown in previous research to add consumer uncertainty and deter the consumer from making the intended choice (Broniarczyk and Griffin 2014). Instead of finding like-minded consumers who feel an obligation to consume ethically for the same reasons, the consumer may find that the community content reflects a wide variety of reasons that the consumer cannot agree with. In addition, consumer distrust in social media marketing is growing (Lomas 2013). Hence, the benefits that online media have been assumed to bring consumers may be declining with more (negative) online experience.

The study was limited to two types of commitment and three types of benefits. Future studies should include additional measures, such as normative commitment and more specific types of ethical consumption behaviors, as well as subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and perceived ethical obligation (Shaw et al. 2000). With a larger sample, it would be possible to classify the members and investigate the differences in how their needs are met by the community, and differences in the relationships between the constructs. Further research would also be needed in order to evaluate whether Facebook as a medium influences the way that consumers communicate.

Furthermore, qualitative studies on the role of online community participation as part of everyday consumption might reveal interesting insights, as ethical consumption may be less cognitive and self-conscious than generally assumed (Adams and Raisborough 2010). In particular, our finding of the role of entertainment benefits in enforcing community loyalty may suggest that the current emphasis on perceived guilt of exploitation or anxiety over whether one's actions make a difference (Bray et al. 2011) may have overshadowed positive aspects and effects of ethical community participation and consumption.

Another factor that needs to be explored is whether there are differences between the members of social media communities and other online communities. While Facebook can help consumers create and maintain larger, diffuse networks

of relationships, it can still be thought to serve as a platform for the formation of only weak social ties (Ellison et al. 2007). Today, it may be easier to join a Facebook community, regardless of one's personal commitment to the cause, than to seek out and join other communities of interest. This may result in more heterogeneous community participants. In particular, many brand communities have changed into social media communities. Others are following suit. However, the consequences of the participants' demands on community content and their effects on user responses need to be studied further.

Finally, since this study suggests that ethical consumer online communities primarily cater to individual needs, future studies could investigate how ethical consumer online communities could better make ethical consumption a collective project instead of an individual one: how collectivity could be used to help the rise of ethical consumption. As consumption is rooted in social relations and norms (Carrigan et al. 2011), online communities where people can foster relationships and negotiate norms may prove particularly powerful in influencing individual behavior. Online communities might even reduce the influence of higher prices as barriers for purchasing ethical products (Bray et al. 2011; Burke et al. 2014), since recent research demonstrates that perceived social support reduces consumers' perceived importance of money as well as the pain felt about spending it (Xu et al. 2015). Consequently, future studies could explore the broad spectrum of potential uses of online communities, and whether different member participation styles influence benefits and outcomes of participation. Qualitative studies are particularly welcomed to reveal how online communities develop over time and influence ethical consumption behavior.

Appendix

See Table 5.

Table 5 Final scales

Construct	Item	Adapted from
Commitment _{affective} Corr. = .549	I feel emotionally attached to ethical consumption	Allen and Meyer (1990) and Meyer et al. (1993)
	I really feel that ethical consumption problems are my own	
Commitment _{continuance} Alpha = .705	Staying with ethical consumption is a matter of necessity as much as a desire	Allen and Meyer (1990)
	It would be very hard for me to leave ethical consumption right now, even if I wanted to	
	I feel that I have no other options but to continue ethical consumption	

Table 5 continued

Construct	Item	Adapted from
Informational benefits Alpha = .751	The information provided by the online community is useful	Dholakia et al. (2009)
	The knowledge obtained from the online community has made the tackling of ethical problems easier	
	I have obtained ideas through the online community	
Entertainment benefits Alpha = .863	I have entertained and stimulated my mind by reading the topics of the online community	Nambisan and Baron (2007)
	I have used the online community site for relaxation	
	I have spent some enjoyable time browsing the Facebook community site	
Social benefits Alpha = .738	I like the social aspects and the interactions with people who share my values in this online community	Dholakia et al. (2009) and Nambisan and Baron (2007)
	I derive satisfaction from influencing other consumers in this online community	
	I feel useful when sharing information	
Community loyalty Alpha = .730	I aim at presenting a good image of myself to others in the online community	Yoo and Donthu (2001)
	In the future, I will be loyal to this community	
	I will visit the community in the future	
Reinforced ethical consumption Alpha = .885	I would recommend this community to others	
	The online community has affected my purchase decisions	
	My ethical consumption choices have been reinforced through the online community	
	My opinion on the importance of ethical consumption has been reinforced through the online community	

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