



# The Civic Identity of the Ethical Consumer

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Accepted: 28 February 2024  
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**Abstract** Ethical consumerism describes market transactions where consumers' preferences stretch beyond immediate self-interest to prosocial objectives. How such activities relate to more traditional forms of civic engagement (such as giving or activism) remains unclear; as a market-situated activity, ethical consumerism is often omitted from accounts of civic engagement or predicted to erode commitment to civic action. This paper reports findings from an empirical study of the civic identity of the ethical consumer. Using an online survey instrument, the study explores statistical relationships between individuals' actual participation in ethical consumerism at three sites (Fairtrade, TOMS Shoes and (RED)) and the extent of individuals' wider civic engagement—both philanthropic (giving, volunteering) and activist (campaigning). It finds evidence of a consistent civic identity that stretches across traditional civic engagement activities and ethical consumerism: the greater an individual's civic engagement, the more likely they are to engage in ethical consumerism. The current analytic separation of ethical consumerism and civic engagement, therefore, does not capture the experience of individuals who are expanding their prosocial repertoire from the civic sphere to the market sphere; civic engagement cuts across sectors.

**Keywords** Civic engagement · Ethical consumerism · Philanthropy · Volunteering · Activism · Identity

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## Introduction

Ethical consumerism describes market transactions in which consumers apply additional criteria beyond price and quality to their purchasing decisions; consumer's preferences stretch beyond immediate self-interest to considerations of social justice, the environment or other prosocial objectives (Harrison et al., 2005; Le Grand et al., 2021). The intention can be explicitly political, seeking to create structural change or hold market actors to account (Micheletti, 2003), an apolitical act of care, or simply a desire to do no harm (Gendron et al., 2009). The range of activities is diverse—from deliberately abstaining from purchases to participating in consumption philanthropy (whereby firms allocate funds to charity on the basis of purchases) to buying local produce from a community shop. Ethical consumerism may incur some cost for the consumer (for instance, a higher price), or it may be cost-free (Le Grand et al., 2021). It is therefore a multifaceted sphere in which there are multiple different activities, different types and extents of engagement, different objectives and motivations, and different loci of engagement. It is also a hybrid transaction that draws values and processes from contrasting institutional settings—most obviously from the realm of the market, on the one hand, and the realms of philanthropy and civic activism on the other. The extent of ethical consumerism is inherently hard to measure, but its scale and scope seem to have significantly increased over past decades (for instance, Co-op UK 2022).

There is an analytic conundrum around how this phenomenon and its constituent behaviours should be placed and interpreted in relation to more traditional forms of civic action. Should it be regarded as primarily a consumer act or as an act of civic or political engagement? Scholars of civic action take different positions. Commentators from a non-profit studies perspective have typically remained

focussed solely on activities within civic and political spheres. Recent analytic work on civic action and popular engagement has been dynamic, innovative and rich, as exemplified by the special edition of this journal in 2019 (Evers & von Essen, 2019)—yet ethical consumerism and civic action within the market sphere is overlooked as a relevant activity (for instance, Aiken & Taylor, 2019; Evers & Von Essen, 2019). On the other hand, political scientists tend to place certain types of ethical consumerism, typically termed political consumption, firmly within the sphere of political or civic action, even though they occur in the market (for instance, Micheletti & Stolle, 2012).

This analytic challenge in turn raises multiple empirical questions about individuals' enactment and experience of ethical consumerism. This paper addresses one such question. It focuses upon the identity of those who take part in ethical consumer transactions: are they a distinctively different set of actors from those who engage in traditional civic activities, such as volunteering, giving or activism? Or is there overlap between the actors, so that ethical consumerism is an extension of the civic action repertoire used by certain individuals? The paper reports on the findings of an empirical study into the civic identity of the ethical consumer through exploration of three sites of ethical consumerism (Fairtrade, TOMS Shoes and (RED) products). In each case the study explores connections between individuals' activity as civic actors in more traditional spheres and their participation as ethical consumers. Exploration of such empirical links between traditional civic activities and ethical consumerism in turn informs our conception of the analytic boundaries, if any, between these phenomena.

The first section provides a conceptual background. It describes emerging approaches to analysis of civic engagement, considers how ethical consumerism is contested and problematic as a venue for civic action, and introduces the concept of civic identity as a frame to explore the relationship between civic engagement and ethical consumerism. The paper then reports upon an empirical exploration of the links between participation in ethical consumerism and participation in more classic forms of civic engagement. A discussion explores these findings and considers implications for how we understand and situate ethical consumerism.

### **Civic Engagement, Ethical Consumerism and Civic Identity**

Recent scholarly contributions have presented new approaches to the analysis of civic engagement. Some offer new theoretical understandings (for instance, Evers & von Essen, 2019); others analyse new empirical phenomena (for instance, Lorentzen & Hustinx, 2007). Few offer a full

account of the relationship between traditional civic action and ethical consumerism. This short review explores, first, emerging analytic approaches to civic engagement. It then considers ethical consumerism and notes both its frequent omission from theoretical presentations of civic engagement and also suspicion about its potentially corrupting impact on traditional prosocial activities and activism. A third section introduces the concept of civic identity as a frame to understand and investigate the connection between civic action and ethical consumerism.

### **New Understandings of Civic Engagement**

Civic engagement has typically been understood to encompass two different spheres of action: on the one hand, philanthropic volunteering and giving, a set of private actions characterised by care for individuals or planet, politically neutral, and exemplified by traditional representations of charitable action; on the other hand, social activism aimed at political change, and hence more public and conflictual. Recent scholarship has, however, challenged this separation (Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Evers & von Essen, 2019; Henriksen & Svedberg, 2010). Boundaries between 'regular' volunteering and social activism are seen to be ill-defined or elusive, especially given the emergence of new types of participation (Aiken & Taylor, 2019; Evers & von Essen, 2019). Numerous points of intersection, connection and diffusion are identified both between these areas of action (Eikenberry, 2019; Janowski, 2010) and also between their respective research traditions (Henriksen & Svedberg, 2010). Definitions of civic engagement have thus become broader and more fluid: for Evers and von Essen (2019: 4), "popular engagement... [is] a generic term for public actions voluntarily performed by individuals for the benefit of another individual, a group or some cause".

Such analytical revisions in part respond to observations of change in patterns of contemporary civic engagement. Lorentzen and Hustinx (2007: 102) describe a move away from 'classical' modes of civic association to new mechanisms and behaviours of involvement; Evers and von Essen (2019: 8) identify 'new forms of engagement [that] destabilise the traditional social landscape'. Dimensions of this new engagement include that it is episodic or short-term, individualised, not mediated by an organisation (and therefore not formally collective), and often enabled by technology (Henriksen & Svedberg, 2010; Lorentzen & Hustinx, 2007). These dimensions, it can be noted, are characteristic of ethical consumerism.

### **Civic Engagement—A Place for Ethical Consumerism?**

Where does ethical consumerism sit within these new analytic approaches and changing landscape of civic

engagement? It carries some resonance with civic engagement as earlier described: it is a voluntary action, albeit within a commercial interaction; there can be separate dimensions of political activism and apolitical altruism; motivations stretch beyond self to the other. Yet within the apparently inclusive analyses of civic engagement presented above, there is notable reluctance to embrace ethical consumerism. In the otherwise comprehensive special issue of this journal exploring “the emerging landscape of popular engagement” (Evers & von Essen, 2019: 2), discussion of ethical consumerism was largely omitted. Aiken and Taylor’s (2019) detailed historical overview of popular engagement in England carries no mention of ethical consumerism. Evers and Von Essen (2019), in an otherwise incisive conceptual typology of civic action, also fail to acknowledge this significant area of activity. Dekker (2019) acknowledges the rise of activism in the market, but only in passing as a replacement for conventional political activism. It is an intriguing omission.

This omission is sometimes accompanied, and perhaps explained by, a suspicion of the harmful effects of ethical consumerism, rooted in general concern at ‘neo-liberal’ policies that extend the market into the civic realm (Evers & von Essen, 2019: 10). Far from being an extension of civic action into the market, ethical consumerism is perceived as the opposite—a corruption of traditional civic action by alien forces. There are specific criticisms: ethical consumerism is an individual activity that separates civic behaviour from valued collective action; it is ‘mindless’, divorcing the actor from meaningful engagement with those who are vulnerable and weakening understanding of social problems (Eikenberry, 2013: 302; 2019; Wirgau et al., 2010;); the act of consumption places the actor’s own self and benefit ahead of concern and sacrifice for others (Eikenberry, 2013; Wirgau et al., 2010).

### Civic Identity and Ethical Consumerism

Such analytic debates raise multiple empirical questions about individuals’ experience of ethical consumerism and how this experience relates (if at all) to engagement in more conventional civic activities. To explore these debates analytically and empirically we introduce the concept of civic identity. Drawing on institutional theory (Friedland and Alford 1991), we regard civic engagement outside the state (volunteering, giving and activism) as a central institution of society; we use the term ‘civic identity’ to describe the set of behaviours, roles, values and meanings that an actor feels, recognises or enacts within this institutional setting. Such an identity is distinct from, but may be held concurrently with, other social identities such as market actor and family member.

The relationship between such civic identity and participation in ethical consumerism can be presented in contrasting ways. The criticisms presented above suggest a substitution effect whereby ethical consumerism crowds out actors’ civic identity. Weak contributions to public benefit through ethical consumerism, involving little personal sacrifice, may create a moral licence to draw back from more far-reaching contributions; because the actor has been ethical in one sphere, they have a licence to restrict their potentially costly prosocial behaviour in another. Further, ethical consumerism, along with other market-based mechanisms such as social enterprise, distracts from (and substitutes for) more powerful forms of action, consumption being privileged as the essential mechanism to resolve social problems (Wirgau et al., 2010). The different social identities of civic actor and consumer are in this view antithetical. In consequence, ethical consumerism impoverishes civic engagement—whether activism or philanthropy.

Alternatively, these activities might be complementary and characteristic of a consistent civic identity. Akerlof and Kranton (2010) argue that individuals, within their economic behaviours, are motivated to conform to the norms and expectations of their social identity, in turn derived from the social groups to which they belong. This implies that individuals identifying as civically minded citizens would be more likely to engage in ethical consumer practices. In this sense, ethical consumerism represents a flow through of civic identity into a new context that expands the repertoire for the philanthropist or activist (Horton, 2003; Le Grand et al., 2021). Such effects have been identified in the context of political activism: political consumerism is construed as an extension of civic responsibility and an expansion of the ‘political repertoire’ into the market realm (Micheletti & Stolle, 2012; van Deth, 2014: 122). Akerlof and Kranton (2019) further suggest that actors may adjust their existing identities in order to align more closely with ethical consumption choices. This raises the possibility of a crowding-in effect, whereby ethical consumption choices further strengthen an actor’s civic identity and commitment to civic engagement.

These contrasting propositions of substitution or complementarity assume that it is the same prosocial individuals who undertake both sets of activity. But individuals who engage in ethical consumerism could be a different group from those who participate in conventional civic engagement. Steenvoorden (2018), for instance, finds little overlap between boycotting products in the market and political participation. A third possibility, therefore, is additionality: new modes of prosocial activity in the market might primarily engage new and different actors; they might not be attractive to those already engaged in more conventional activities.

In sum, there are three propositions concerning how participation in ethical consumerism may be related to civic identity. First, ethical consumerism may substitute for other valued forms of civic engagement in which individuals are already engaged; second, it may complement such existing civic activity and extend actors' civic repertoire; and third, it may support civic action among additional actors who do not otherwise civically engage.

### Exploring the Civic Identity of Ethical Consumers

In order to test these propositions, an empirical study was undertaken to explore the civic identity of those who engage in ethical consumer transactions. Empirical studies have typically focussed on demographic predictors for involvement in ethical consumerism, such as gender, age, education and income (Andersen & Tobiasen, 2004; Pedrini & Ferri, 2014; Stolle et al., 2005). There has been insightful exploration of ethical consumers' political motivations, their response to specific ethical narratives and their societal outlook (Brenton, 2013; Park, 2018; Steenvoorden, 2018). But there has been little detailed investigation of the relationship between actors' behaviours as engaged citizens in the traditional civic sphere and their behaviours as ethical consumers in the market.

The present study uses actual ethical consumer behaviour to explore three research questions. First, are those who take part in ethical consumer transactions the same individuals who engage in other, more traditional civic activities, or are those who engage in these two spheres distinctively different sets of actors (the additionality proposition)? Second, is there a relationship between the extent of engagement in conventional civic action and ethical consumerism? Third, does ethical consumerism complement or substitute for philanthropic and/or activist behaviours in the civic space (the complementary and substitution propositions)?

### Methods

This study explores the relationship between civic engagement and ethical consumerism in three ethical consumer settings: (RED), TOMS and Fairtrade. This focus on specific settings has two advantages. First, it enables exploration of actual behaviours rather than ethical consumerism in the abstract, thus giving a strong focus for questions and empirical grounding for findings. Second, ethical consumerism is not a single phenomenon, and therefore, the relationship between civic engagement and ethical behaviours may be different across ethical consumerism contexts. The use of multiple cases enables exploration of such difference.

### Cases

#### *Fairtrade*

Fairtrade describes a system of certification and labelling that seeks to ensure supply chain standards in the production of goods, including protection of workers' rights and the environment. There are over 6,000 Fairtrade products, of which bananas, cocoa beans and coffee are among the most successful (Fairtrade Foundation, 2023). Fairtrade product prices are set independently by manufacturers or retailers and include the premium paid to producers; they may therefore be priced higher than equivalent non-Fairtrade products. The premium generally falls between 10 and 15% of the commercial price for fresh fruits and vegetables, tea, coffee, herbs and spices (Fairtrade International, 2019).

#### *TOMS®*

TOMS® is a for-profit company that embedded ethical consumerism in its business model: for every pair of shoes purchased a pair of new shoes was donated by the firm to a child in a developing country. The policy was given the brand name 'One for One®'. TOMS shoes can be purchased in stores in the UK and the USA, as well as online. Shoes lie in the price range of £36–£110 (2019 prices) depending on the shoe type and materials.

#### *(RED)*

(RED) is a non-profit organisation that licenses retail corporations (including Apple, GAP and Nike) to sell products branded as (PRODUCT)<sup>RED</sup>. A portion of profits or revenue from the sale of (RED) products is donated to the UN Global Fund to fight HIV/AIDS and other diseases in sub-Saharan Africa. In most cases (RED) products are equivalent to non-(RED) products in quality and price—typically consumers do not have to pay a premium ((RED), 2023). Every (RED) product is a vibrant red colour and bears the (RED) label, so that the socially conscious gesture is vividly on display.

Fairtrade, TOMS and (RED) were selected for practical, contextual and analytic reasons. Practically, the cases are relatively well-known (at least in the UK and US), enabling the achievement of a sample of reasonable size. They embrace contrasting products, thus providing diversity of context in the consumer decision. Analytically, these cases encompass different forms of ethical consumerism. TOMS and (RED) are examples of *corporate philanthropy in lockstep with sales*. The consumer good is not itself more ethical or socially impactful than market competitors. Nor is the consumer's behaviour an attempt to alter the

dynamics of the commercial system. Instead, the purchase is linked to an act of philanthropy—an in-kind donation (TOMS) or a cash transfer (RED). The extent of the donation is linked to the extent of consumption. Fairtrade, by contrast, is an example of *supply chain certification*. A Fairtrade product seeks to reduce negative externalities and increase positive externalities in the supply chain compared to the standard product. There is thus a claim that the product is inherently more ethical, and that meaningful change in the commercial system is facilitated.

While capturing some diversity within ethical consumerism, there are similarities between these cases. All encompass ethical consumerism that is positive (buying or boycotting) rather than negative (boycotting). All three focus on ethical or political dimensions around the well-being of populations in the Global South.

### Sample

Primary data were collected through an online survey on Prolific, a web platform established for survey research. The survey targeted adult individuals residing in the UK or the US—the two largest markets for TOMS and (RED) products. There were no other eligibility criteria for taking part. Survey completion took around 10 min, and participants were compensated with a small monetary reward. 2,020 participants completed the survey.

The dominant age group in our sample was 18–40 year-olds (71%), with two-thirds of the sample identifying as women, and two-thirds in employment. 71% of the sample were British, and 21% American. Just over half had an undergraduate or higher qualification; the median income lay between £10,000 and £29,999 per annum. Participants' characteristics are summarised in table 10 in Appendix.

### Data Collection

The survey instrument captured data on involvement in ethical consumerism, attitudes towards ethical brands and products, and participation in civic action. A first section asked participants how frequently they participated in traditional civic engagement activities. Subsequent sections focussed on the three cases. Respondents were asked whether they had heard of (RED), TOMS or Fairtrade, whether they had purchased any of the three, and whether they were aware of each product's ethical dimensions at the time of purchase. Participants were also asked their motivation for the purchase of the product. Finally, they were asked to report any changes in their frequency of participation in civic engagement activities following their purchase of ethical products. A concluding section collected demographic information.

### Philanthropy and Civic Activism Scales

To conduct a quantitative analysis of the correlation between traditional civic behaviours and ethical consumerism, we developed an instrument to measure the extent of participants' civic engagement. Traditional civic engagement activities were categorised into two groups: philanthropy and civic activism. While acknowledging caution against arbitrary analytical divisions (Evers & von Essen, 2019), these categories allowed empirical exploration into the relationship of different subtypes of civic behaviour with ethical consumerism—and in particular its relationship not just to political participation (as typically discussed in the literature) but also to non-political civic engagement.

The survey collected data on five activities categorised as philanthropic. These activities were based on the 20-item Self-Report Altruism (SRA) Scale (Rushton et al., 1981). Due to the scale's length and complexity, we simplified it to a 5-item index, covering distinct forms of philanthropic activity, including giving money to charity, donating goods or clothes, doing volunteer work; helping a stranger (for instance, by helping them across the road), and helping someone who is known, but not family (for instance, by doing shopping for them).

The survey also collected data on the extent of participants' civic activism. Six activities were selected on the basis that they captured a range of activist behaviours and contexts: joining an in-person public protest; creating an online petition; signing an online petition; campaigning for a political party; boycotting the products of a company; and volunteering with organisations that have a social or political cause. For both philanthropy and civic activism activities, respondents were asked how frequently they participated (never, once a year, few times a year, once a month, or once a week).

Using these data, an overall philanthropy score and an overall activism score were constructed for each participant, which aggregated the intensity and diversity of their reported civic behaviours. To address the challenge that the frequency of participation in an activity may not fully capture the intensity of civic engagement, we weighted the frequency of participation. Respondents received a score of zero for never participating in a particular activity, one for 'once a year', and two for 'few times a year', 'once a month', or 'once a week'. Summing the scores for each philanthropic activity resulted in a scale with a minimum score of zero and a maximum of 10 for each respondent. Similarly, for the civic activism scale, encompassing six behaviours, the range was zero to 12. Respondents reported greater participation in philanthropic activities compared to civic activism. The mean, median, and 75th percentile

values of the two scores are presented in appendix Table 11.

This instrument has limitations. The scales and weighting have not been formally tested. There are also limitations in using a composite score as an independent variable. As a remedy, we tested the likelihood of participation in ethical consumerism not only using the aggregated scores but also against each individual item within the scales. A final limitation is that the scales capture only behaviours. They do not capture participants' underlying personality traits or orientations—such as prosociality or self-interest, individual or collectivist orientations, or conservative/liberal dispositions. Such psychological states may plausibly influence attitudes towards ethical consumerism and civic engagement, and how far these different spheres of activity are consistent or dissonant within an individual's identity.

### Statistical Analysis

We analysed the relationship between ethical consumerism and participation in civic behaviours using a logistic regression. The magnitude of the regression coefficient does not indicate the strength of the association; it only indicates the direction of the association (positive or negative). We included five control variables: gender, income, age, education and nationality. Previous studies have found that women are more involved in ethical consumerism (Stolle & Micheletti, 2005; Stolle et al., 2005); income may be relevant whenever ethical products are more expensive; age may affect the purchase of goods such as RED and TOMS, both of which have a younger market demographic. Nationality was included due to geographical differences in the distribution of the products in the study. Variables and their measures are presented in table 12 in the appendix.

### Findings

We analyse the relationship of participants' civic identity with their ethical consumerism behaviours across four sections. We first specify the importance of differentiating between intentional and unintentional purchases of ethical goods when analysing ethical consumerism behaviours in the real world. In the second and third sections we explore how participants' actual engagement in ethical consumer purchases correlates with their involvement in traditional philanthropic activities and civic activism, respectively. In both cases, we find a positive relationship. Finally, in a final section, we report limited findings on whether ethical consumerism crowds out more traditional civic identity and related activities.

### Intended Ethical Consumerism

1,698 (84%) participants reported the purchase of a Fairtrade product, 300 (15%) a TOMS product, and 165 (8%) a (RED) product. 43 (2%) participants had purchased all the products; 250 (12%) had purchased none. The purchase of an ethical good, however, does not necessarily imply an intended act of ethical consumerism. First, there may be *accidental ethical consumerism*: actors buy products without being aware of the ethical dimension. Second, there may be *incidental ethical consumerism*: for purchasers aware of the ethical dimension, there may nonetheless be no civic motivation—the phone, shoe or coffee are bought for their inherent quality without any ethical consideration. Participants were therefore asked to specify whether they were aware of the ethical dimension of the product at the time of purchase, and whether there was any prosocial motivation for the purchase. Some participants acknowledged that they were unaware of a product's ethical dimensions, while others reported an absence of prosocial motivation, despite awareness (Table 1). In terms of actors' intentionality, such purchases are akin to 'standard market purchases' and do not imply any self-identification as an ethical consumer. Such purchases are therefore disregarded, and only *intentional ethical consumerism* is explored in the following analysis.

The following sections explore the characteristics of participants who engaged in intended ethical consumerism behaviours. We explore separately the relationship between, first, reported philanthropic behaviours and, second, reported activist behaviours with intended ethical purchases.

### Relationship between Philanthropic Behaviours in the Civic Space and Ethical Behaviours in the Consumer Space

As described above, an aggregated philanthropy score was created for each participant, based upon the range and frequency of self-reported philanthropic activities. The correlation between this score and participation in ethical consumerism is displayed in Table 2.

#### *Fairtrade*

Just under half the participants (986) reported an intended ethical purchase of a Fairtrade product. Table 2 shows the relationship between intendedly ethical purchases of Fairtrade and participants' philanthropic scores. There is a positive correlation ( $p < 0.01$ ) between reported philanthropic behaviours and intentional ethical consumerism. Greater involvement in 'traditional' philanthropic behaviours thus appears to be associated with an increased

**Table 1** Purchasing ethical products—accidentally, incidentally, or intentionally

<i>N</i> = 2020 (total sample)	Purchases (A)	Accidental ethical consumerism (unaware of ethical dimensions at time of purchase) (B)	Incidental ethical consumerism (aware of ethical dimensions, but no prosocial motivation for purchase) (C)	Intended ethical consumerism (= A minus B minus C for each)
Fairtrade	1698 (84%)	68	644	986
TOMS shoes	300 (15%)	106	22	172
(RED)	165 (8%)	57	7	101

**Table 2** Philanthropy score and intended ethical consumerism (logit)

	(1) Fairtrade ( <i>N</i> = 986)	(2) TOMS ( <i>N</i> = 172)	(3) (RED) ( <i>N</i> = 101)	(4) All three ( <i>N</i> = 12)	(5) Any of the three ( <i>N</i> = 1103)
Philanthropy Score	0.182*** (0.0246)	0.0960** (0.0427)	0.166*** (0.0628)	0.213* (0.110)	0.193*** (0.0245)
Constant	- 2.214 (0.222)	- 3.933 (0.383)	- 4.957 (0.559)	- 10.35 (1.642)	- 2.116 (0.220)
<i>N</i>	2019	2019	2019	2019	2019
Pseudo- <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.070	0.067	0.072	0.168	0.065
Demographic controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Demographic controls: gender, income, age, education, and nationality

Significance levels: \**p* < 0.10, \*\**p* < 0.05, \*\*\**p* < 0.01

likelihood of making an intendedly ethical Fairtrade purchase.

There is also a positive correlation between the philanthropic score and the frequency of intended ethical Fairtrade purchases (using an OLS regression; Table 3). This question was not asked for (RED) and TOMS, as these products are infrequent purchases.

### TOMS

172 (9%) participants reported an intended ethical purchase of a TOMS product. There is a positive correlation (*p* < 0.05) between participants' aggregated philanthropic score and intendedly ethical purchases of a TOMS product (Table 2, column 2). This suggests, in common with findings for Fairtrade, that greater overall involvement in 'traditional' philanthropic behaviours is associated with an increased likelihood of making an intendedly ethical TOMS purchase.

### RED

101 (5%) participants reported an intended ethical purchase of a (RED) product. In common with the findings for Fairtrade and TOMS, there is a positive correlation

**Table 3** Fairtrade: frequency of purchasing and philanthropy score (OLS)

	Frequency of purchasing fairtrade
Philanthropy score	0.055*** (0.012)
Constant	2.960 (0.106)
<i>N</i>	986
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.047
Demographic controls	Y

Demographic controls: gender, income, age, education, and nationality

Significance levels: \**p* < 0.10, \*\**p* < 0.05, \*\*\**p* < 0.01

(*p* < 0.01) between participants' aggregated philanthropic score and intendedly ethical purchases of a (RED) product (Table 2, column 3).

Non-purchase of TOMS or RED products might imply that participants simply do not need or want espadrilles (TOMS' bestseller) or a (RED) iPhone or other (RED) product, a dimension that is not controlled in the current study. (This is less likely to be relevant for Fairtrade

**Table 4** Mean philanthropy score and intended ethical consumerism

Sample $N = 2020$	(1) Fairtrade ( $N = 986$ )	(2) TOMS ( $N = 172$ )	(3) (RED) ( $N = 101$ )	(4) All three ( $N = 12$ )	(5) Any of the three ( $N = 1103$ )	(6) None of the three ( $N = 986$ )
Mean philanthropy score	7.36	7.36	7.61	8.08	7.33	6.39
Percentile	60%	60%	65%	75%	60%	45%
Standard deviation	1.85	1.94	2.11	1.38	1.89	2.18
Range	0–10	0–10	0–10	0–10	0–10	0–10

products, which are generally household staples.) But it remains the case that those who made intended ethical purchases of TOMS and RED products reported higher levels of traditional philanthropic behaviour than those who did not.

#### *Across the cases*

There is a positive correlation ( $p < 0.1$ ) between participants' breadth of involvement in ethical consumerism (indicated by intended ethical purchases of all three products) and their aggregated philanthropic scores (Table 2: column 4). The numbers are small (12). More reliably, there is a positive relationship ( $p < 0.01$ ) between participation in any intended ethical purchase across the cases and aggregated philanthropic scores (Table 2: column 5).

Table 4 offers an alternative presentation of the relationship between philanthropic behaviours and ethical consumerism. It shows that that individuals engaging in a single ethical consumerism activity have mean philanthropy scores in the top half of the sample's aggregated philanthropic scores; those participating in all three products have mean philanthropy scores in the top 25%. Again, those who participate strongly in the traditional philanthropy sphere are also engaging in ethical behaviours in the market sphere. However, non-participants in ethical consumerism are not necessarily non-participants in philanthropy; they simply report less extensive engagement compared to ethical consumerism participants. Further, while overall there is a positive correlation between the extent of philanthropic activities and participation in ethical consumerism, some actors break this pattern. There are individuals who actively engage in traditional philanthropic activities but do not participate in ethical consumerism, and others who do not engage in traditional philanthropy but still participate in intentional ethical consumerism. The latter group indicate a small additional effect—ethical consumerism engaging actors who are not otherwise involved in traditional civic action.

As indicated above, the aggregated philanthropy score is a crude measure of philanthropic activity; there are

limitations in using this composite survey score as an independent variable. To address this and to triangulate these findings, we examined the relationship between individual, non-aggregated philanthropic activities and ethical consumerism, presented in Table 5. It is striking that the extent of participation in *each* of the separate philanthropic activities is positively associated with participation in intended ethical consumerism in at least one of the case products (column 5;  $p < 0.01$ ). There is generally no robust relationship between specific activities and purchase of all three products; the exception is the frequency of volunteering for an organisation, which is positively associated with purchase of all.

Turning to the individual products, we note a statistically significant positive correlation between the extent of participation in all the more formal philanthropic behaviours (donating money, donating goods, volunteering) and intended ethical consumption of each of the products. The findings, however, are different for less formal helping activities: there is an association only with the purchase of Fairtrade, and not with the purchase of (RED) or TOMS.

#### **Relationship between Activism Behaviours in the Civic Space and Ethical Behaviours in the Consumer Space**

We move on to the relationship between self-reported activism and participation in ethical consumerism. The correlation between activism scores and participation in ethical consumerism is displayed in Table 6.

#### *Fairtrade*

There is a positive correlation ( $p < 0.01$ ) between activist scores and intentional ethical consumerism. Greater involvement in 'traditional' activist behaviours thus appears to be associated with an increased likelihood of making an intendedly ethical Fairtrade purchase. There is also a positive correlation between activist behaviours and the frequency of intended ethical Fairtrade purchases (Table 7).



**Table 5** Relationship between specific philanthropic activities and intended ethical consumerism (logit)

	(1) Fairtrade ( <i>N</i> = 986)	(2) TOMS ( <i>N</i> = 172)	(3) (RED) ( <i>N</i> = 101)	(4) All three ( <i>N</i> = 12)	(5) Any of the three ( <i>N</i> = 1103)
Donate money	0.478*** (0.0701)	0.388*** (0.135)	0.468** (0.189)	0.604 (0.619)	0.527*** (0.0691)
Donate goods or clothes	0.249*** (0.0741)	0.301** (0.147)	0.417** (0.192)	− 0.0165 (0.328)	0.313*** (0.0730)
Volunteer for organisation	0.244*** (0.0577)	0.223** (0.0905)	0.410*** (0.117)	0.583** (0.295)	0.293*** (0.0585)
Help a stranger	0.326*** (0.105)	0.0580 (0.172)	− 0.0379 (0.208)	− 0.0426 (0.516)	0.284*** (0.0993)
Help someone I know	0.210*** (0.0551)	− 0.109 (0.0930)	− 0.0252 (0.125)	0.270 (0.450)	0.170*** (0.0545)
Observations	2019	2019	2019	2019	2019
Demographic controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Demographic controls: gender, income, age, education, and nationality

Significance levels: \**p* < 0.10, \*\**p* < 0.05, \*\*\**p* < 0.01

**Table 6** Activism score and intended ethical consumerism (logit)

	(1) Fairtrade ( <i>N</i> = 986)	(2) TOMS ( <i>N</i> = 172)	(3) (RED) ( <i>N</i> = 101)	(4) All three ( <i>N</i> = 12)	(5) Any of the three ( <i>N</i> = 1103)
Activism score	0.163*** (0.0225)	0.115*** (0.0271)	0.187*** (0.0338)	0.271*** (0.0779)	0.189*** (0.0238)
cons	− 1.579 (0.183)	− 3.630 (0.331)	− 4.381 (0.401)	− 9.788 (1.392)	− 1.484 (0.182)
<i>N</i>	2019	2019	2019	2019	2019
Pseudo- <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.074	0.076	0.099	0.221	0.073
Demographic Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Demographic controls: gender, income, age, education, and nationality

Significance levels: \**p* < 0.10, \*\**p* < 0.05, \*\*\**p* < 0.01

*TOMS and (RED)*

There is a positive correlation (*p* < 0.01) between participants’ aggregated activism score and intendedly ethical purchases of TOMS and (RED) products (Table 6, columns 2 and 3). This suggests, in common with findings for Fairtrade, that greater overall involvement in ‘traditional’ activist behaviours is associated with an increased likelihood of making an intendedly ethical purchase of these products.

*Across the cases*

Across the cases, in common with findings for the philanthropy score, there is a positive correlation between participants’ breadth of involvement in ethical consumerism (as indicated by intended ethical purchases of all

**Table 7** Fairtrade: frequency of purchasing and activism score (OLS)

	Frequency of purchasing Fairtrade
Activism score	0.050*** (0.008)
constant	3.150 (0.086)
<i>N</i>	986
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.059
Demographic controls	Y

Demographic controls: gender, income, age, education, and nationality

Significance levels: \**p* < 0.10, \*\**p* < 0.05, \*\*\**p* < 0.01

three of the case products) and their aggregated activism score (Table 8: column 4); again, the numbers are small (12). There is also a positive relationship between

**Table 8** Mean activism score and intended ethical consumerism

Sample $N = 2020$	(1) Fairtrade	(2) TOMS	(3) (RED)	(4) All three	(5) Any of the three
Mean activism score	3.36	4.01	4.90	6.75	3.89
Percentile	65%	75%	80%	90%	70%
Standard deviation	2.55	3.20	3.62	4.14	2.64
Range	0–12	0–12	0–12	0–12	0–12

**Table 9** Specific activism behaviours and intended ethical consumerism

	(1) Fairtrade ( $N = 986$ )	(2) TOMS ( $N = 172$ )	(3) (RED) ( $N = 101$ )	(4) All three ( $N = 12$ )	(5) Any of the three ( $N = 1103$ )
Public protest	0.452*** (0.091)	0.243* (0.124)	0.592*** (0.133)	0.838*** (0.305)	0.486*** (0.094)
Creating a petition	0.124 (0.093)	0.246* (0.133)	0.574*** (0.143)	0.901*** (0.307)	0.204** (0.097)
Signing a petition	0.449*** (0.063)	0.331*** (0.128)	0.327** (0.162)	0.384 (0.545)	0.466*** (0.062)
Campaigning for political party	0.377*** (0.098)	0.468*** (0.123)	0.826*** (0.137)	1.155*** (0.292)	0.526*** (0.105)
Boycotting products/services	0.564*** (0.056)	0.220** (0.092)	0.333*** (0.113)	1.292*** (0.377)	0.552*** (0.057)
Volunteering with organisations that have social or political cause	0.402*** (0.071)	0.393*** (0.098)	0.456*** (0.120)	0.560** (0.238)	0.468*** (0.074)
$N$	2019	2019	2019	2019	2019
Demographic controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Demographic controls: gender, income, age, education, and nationality

Significance levels: \* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

participation in any intended ethical purchase and aggregated activism scores (Table 6: column 5).

Table 8 explores the distribution of the activism score within the sample and its relationship with participation in ethical consumerism. The findings are similar to those for the philanthropy score. Individuals engaging in a single ethical consumerism activity have mean activism scores in the top 40% of the sample, while those purchasing all three products fall within the top quintile. This implies that individuals strongly engaged in civic activism are possibly expanding their prosocial activities into the market sphere. However, non-participants in ethical consumerism are not *entirely non-activist* on average—they simply report less extensive activism than ethical consumerism participants. Despite an overall positive correlation between activism and ethical consumerism, some actors defy this pattern. There are individuals who do not participate at all in activism but nonetheless participate in intentional ethical

consumerism, and also individuals who are strongly activist but do not participate in ethical consumerism.

We turn, finally, to the relationship of non-aggregated individual activist behaviours to intended ethical consumerism (Table 9). The findings are striking. The extent of participation in *each* of the activist activities is positively associated with participation in intended ethical consumerism in at least one of the case products (column 5;  $p < 0.01$ ); with the exception of signing a petition, the extent of participation in every activist behaviour is associated with the breadth of intended ethical consumer activity (the purchase of all three products). The number here is small, so the finding is interesting but not conclusive.

Turning to the individual products, with one exception (creating a petition and a Fairtrade purchase), we note a statistically significant positive correlation between the extent of participation in every activist behaviour and

intended ethical consumption of each product. The correlation is generally stronger in the case of (RED).

### Crowding in and Crowding Out

The findings so far present a snapshot in time. They do not explicitly address the dynamic effect of ethical consumerism upon future philanthropy and activism—the question of crowding in and crowding out. To explore this effect consumers of TOMS Shoes and RED were asked if, following their ethical purchase, their frequency of participation in a range of civic engagement activities had changed (for RED, the list of activities additionally included donating to charity, given the implicit focus on giving within RED transactions; this was not applied to TOMS Shoes.). The question was not presented to Fairtrade consumers: given the likely high frequency of purchase of Fairtrade products (being mostly household items), identifying a change in behaviours from a single purchase would be challenging.

In order to estimate the relationship between intended ethical consumerism and subsequent change in traditional civic engagement, a *pd*lasso regression model was used: this model supports a more robust causal inference by strengthening controls for confounding factors. Control variables were demographic factors (age, income, education, gender, nationality), philanthropy score, activism score, and whether actors bought other ethical products as well (intentional purchases).

We find no evidence of a decrease in the extent of participation in any of the traditional civic identity activities as a result of intended ethical consumerism. This suggests that there is no support for a substitution effect. We found that for certain activities (using the internet to raise awareness of a social injustice, and boycotting a company) intended purchase of TOMS Shoes is correlated with an increase in traditional civic engagement. This suggests that the two can be not only complementary, but perhaps reinforcing. Appendix Tables 13 and 14 exhibit these results, showing the effects on traditional civic activities of intended ethical purchases of RED products and of TOMS Shoes, respectively.

This study therefore offers preliminary evidence that there is no necessary crowding out between conscious participation in ethical consumerism and civic engagement. However, it is important to interpret these results cautiously. The survey only captured self-reported changes in civic activism some time after the ethical consumer transaction. There may be challenges of memory or

attribution of cause and effect within such a data collection process.

### Discussion

This study has explored the relationship between civic behaviours that fall within traditional categories of philanthropy and civic activism, and the emergence of prosocial behaviours in the market sphere (ethical consumerism). A strength of the study is that it moves beyond hypothetical simulations of ethical consumer activity to assess the relationship of actual civic activity to individuals' actual (and intentional) ethical consumer behaviours. The study enables us to paint a portrait of individuals' enacted civic identity, and whether these different arenas of activity are related.

The study finds striking evidence of a consistent civic identity that stretches across traditional civic engagement activities and ethical consumerism. Those engaged in traditional civic engagement tend to be engaged also in intentional ethical consumerism. Specifically, the greater an individual's civic engagement, the more likely they are to engage in ethical consumerism. This positive relationship applies to both philanthropic activities and to activist activities. The study also indicates that more intense engagement in individual civic engagement activities (from volunteering to giving to public protest) predicts a greater likelihood of participation in ethical consumerism in at least one of the ethical consumer cases. This suggests strongly a complementary effect: ethical consumerism is an extension of an existing civic identity.

This inference is further supported by participants' reports of civic engagement intensity after they made an ethical consumer purchase. There are some limitations to this analysis, particularly around attribution and recall. Nonetheless, the analysis suggests no crowding out of traditional civic engagement activities. Indeed, there is limited evidence not only that civic engagement activities and ethical consumerism are complementary, but also that ethical consumerism may reinforce activism in the civic sphere. There is no support for a substitution effect.

There is some limited evidence of an additionality effect—some participants in the study do not engage in traditional activities of philanthropy or activism, and yet engage in intentional ethical consumerism. This effect is not strong—overwhelmingly it is those who are more civically engaged who are likely to be ethical consumers.

The study explored the relationship between civic engagement and ethical consumerism across different types

of ethical consumer context (corporate philanthropy and supply chain certification) and across different products. The relationship is similar and consistently positive across the cases. There are two exceptions: involvement in less formal activities ('helping a stranger / 'someone I know') is only associated with the purchase of Fairtrade; 'creating a petition' is associated with purchasing (RED) and TOMs, but not Fairtrade. A tentative explanation is that more commonplace helping activities are associated with more commonplace purchases (buying tea and coffee in the supermarket); strong activist behaviours are associated with more niche ethical consumer opportunities. We note too that individuals are more frequently unaware of the ethical dimension when purchasing RED and TOMS products. It is unsurprising that Fairtrade's ethical dimension is well-known; consumers' lack of awareness of the ethical dimension at TOMS and RED may be because these products are more established in the US, while this sample is tilted towards UK consumers. From a methodological perspective, it confirms the importance of differentiating between intentional and unintentional ethical purchases.

These findings have implications for the central enquiry with which this paper began—what is the place for ethical consumerism in accounts of civic engagement? They suggest that, within individuals' lived experiences, there exists an interlinked civic identity in which civic engagement as typically understood (volunteering, giving, civic activism) is related to and flows through into the market sphere in emerging forms of ethical consumerism. This finding confirms that civic engagement should be understood as fluid and transcending sectors (Evers & Von Essen, 2019; Lorentzen & Hustinx, 2007). Imposing static frameworks and conventional sectoral boundaries can limit analytical understanding, and, more importantly, fail to acknowledge the intersections and meaning that individuals experience. Therefore, the reluctance to extend the concept of civic or popular engagement to include ethical consumerism activities seems misplaced; it does not represent the experience of prosocial individuals who are expanding their repertoire of civic engagement from the civic sphere (as conventionally understood) to the market sphere. Current analytical frameworks have not yet fully adapted to capture the emergence of prosocial action in an alien field.

There is a second implication. There is a group of individuals who exhibit a powerful civic identity (indicated through their philanthropy and activism scores) and who are also more inclined towards ethical consumerism. In this context, we can invoke the idea of a 'civic core' (Reed & Selbee, 2001: 726)—the proposition, empirically supported in England / Wales (Mohan & Bulloch, 2012) and Canada

(Reed & Selbee, 2001), that small groups of citizens within the population are responsible for a disproportionate amount of civic engagement activities (volunteering, participation in civic associations, giving). The present study suggests that those in such a civic core are most likely to be ethical consumers. The data here cannot determine whether, following the civic core thesis, a disproportionate extent of ethical consumerism is undertaken by a small group of citizens. This would be an interesting question to pursue.

A limitation is the sample's particular profile—predominantly UK and US participants who self-selected into the study through a survey research platform. The relationship between civic engagement and ethical consumerism, and indeed participation in ethical consumerism, may be influenced by cultural, geographic and market factors. Conducting similar studies in different contexts and geographies would have value. Further research could also include underlying personality traits and dispositions as an independent variable; incorporation of such traits can add further depth to analysis of individuals' responses and explain some of the variability in the current results.

There is, finally, a need for qualitative research into civic identity. While this study has traced a statistical correlation between prosocial behaviour in the traditional civic space and in the marketplace, there is much to explore about how individuals experience this civic identity, how these different spheres of activity interrelate in identity formation, and how these activities are categorised by actors themselves (Evers & von Essen, 2019). The civic space and the market remain apparently different spheres of logic and action. Do actors experience ethical consumerism as a separate area of meaning, or is it subsumed into existing social categories of volunteering, philanthropy and activism? How far do the different identities of the civic actor and market consumer coalesce into a single civic identity? An institutional logics framework may be useful as a method of analysis to explore these questions.

Lorentzen and Hustinx (2007) observe contemporary fluidity in civic behaviours, facilitated and enhanced by technological and social change. Arenas of paradox emerge, where apparently exclusive realms of action and meaning collide. Ethical consumerism is a hybrid and ambiguous phenomenon of this kind. Is this a further example of market intrusion into the social space? Or is it an invasion in the opposite direction, a corruption of the economic transaction by prosocial motivations? This study implies the latter—that civic-minded people are gently invading the market by extending their repertoire of civic actions.

## Appendix

See Table 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14

**Table 10** Data summary of participants' characteristics

		%	Count
Age	Below 18	0.15	3
	18–30	38.12	770
	31–40	33.02	667
	41–50	16.63	336
	51–60	8.56	173
	61–70	3.07	62
	70 +	0.45	9
Gender	Female	66.44	1342
	Male	32.87	664
	Non-binary	0.69	14
Employment status	Student	11.29	228
	Homemaker	10.69	216
	Employed, part-time	21.63	437
	Employed, full-time	44.36	896
	Unemployed	4.85	98
	Retired	3.47	70
	Unable to work	3.71	75
Nationality	British	70.64	1427
	American	20.99	424
	Other	8.37	169
Education	Master's degree or doctorate	14.41	291
	Undergraduate degree	41.49	838
	Trade/technical/vocational training	15.50	313
	School education up to 18 years	17.72	358
	School education up to 16 years	8.91	180
	Other	1.98	40
Income	Less than £10,000	24.07	486
	£10,000 to £29,999	45.52	919
	£30,000 to 49,999	20.51	414
	£50,000 to £69,999	5.40	109
	£70,000 +	4.50	91
	Total		2020

**Table 11** Median, mean, standard deviation and 75th percentiles for philanthropy and activism scores

	Median	Mean	SD	75th percentile
Philanthropy score (scale of 0–10)	7	6.91	2.08	8 or below
Activism score (scale of 0–12)	2	2.91	2.54	4 or below

**Table 12** Description of variables

Variables	Measurement
<i>Dependent variable</i>	
Purchase of an ethical product	Have you purchased TOMS Shoes / (RED) / Fairtrade? Dummy variable: Yes = 1; No = 0
<i>Independent variable</i>	
Philanthropy score	Discrete values in the range of 0–10
Activism score	Discrete values in the range of 0–12
<i>Control variables</i>	
Gender	1 = female; 0 = not female
Income	0 = Less than £10,000; 1 = £10,000–£29,999; 2 = £30,000–49,999; 3 = £50,000–£69,999; 4 = £70,000–£89,999; 5 = £90,000–more
Age	1 = 18–30 years of age; 2 = 31–40 years of age; 3 = 41–50 years of age; 4 = 51–60 years of age; 5 = 61–70 years of age; 6 = Above 70 years of age
Education	0 = Schooling up to 16 years of age; 1 = Schooling up to 18 years of age/ BTEC; 2 = Trade/ technical/ vocational training; 3 = Undergraduate degree; 4 = Masters' or graduate degree
Nationality	0 = other; 1 = British; 2 = American

**Table 13** Relationship between buying (RED) intendedly and a change in individual philanthropic behaviours and civic activism (pdslasso)

	(1) Donating to charity	(2) Public protests	(3) Using The internet	(4) Creating petition	(5) Signing petition	(6) Contacting leaders	(7) Campaigning for political parties	(8) Boycotting	(9) Volunteering
Bought RED	0.046 (0.063)	– 0.012 (0.055)	0.093 (0.063)	0.013 (0.064)	0.093 (0.069)	0.040 (0.058)	0.038 (0.058)	0.091 (0.068)	– 0.015 (0.055)
cons	0.133 (0.043)	– 0.236 (0.072)	0.081 (0.040)	0.031 (0.0470)	0.089 (0.048)	0.033 (0.040)	0.041 (0.037)	0.060 (0.041)	– 0.085 (0.054)
<i>N</i>	182	182	182	182	182	182	182	182	182
<i>Controls</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Lasso selected controls include having an American nationality across all activities. In addition to American nationality, activism score was selected for participating in public protests and volunteering, and income was also selected for participating in public protests

Significance levels: \* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table 14** Relationship between buying TOMS intendedly and a change in individual philanthropic behaviours and civic activism (pdslasso)

	(1) Public protests	(2) Using The internet	(3) Creating petition	(4) Signing petition	(5) Contacting leaders	(6) Campaigning for political parties	(7) Boycotting	(8) Volunteering
Bought TOMS	0.004 (0.032)	0.090** (0.042)	0.013 (0.029)	0.011 (0.044)	– 0.007 (0.032)	0.032 (0.033)	0.087** (0.042)	0.011 (0.032)
cons	– 0.126 (0.039)	– 0.011 (0.051)	– 0.084 (0.035)	– 0.029 (0.054)	– 0.089 (0.039)	– 0.057 (0.041)	– 0.110 (0.051)	– 0.122 (0.039)
<i>N</i>	300	300	300	300	300	300	300	300
<i>Controls</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Lasso selected controls include education, activism score and intentional purchase of Fairtrade products across all activities

Significance levels: \* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**Acknowledgements** The authors extend grateful thanks to Julian Le Grand for his comments on this paper.

**Funding** No funds, grants, or other support were received.

#### Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

**Ethical Approval** The authors declare that they comply with the Springer/ Voluntas ethics and responsibility guidelines: [https://www.springer-com.gate3.library.lse.ac.uk/journal/11266/submission-guidelines#Instructions%20for%20Authors\\_Ethical%20Responsibilities%20of%20Authors](https://www.springer-com.gate3.library.lse.ac.uk/journal/11266/submission-guidelines#Instructions%20for%20Authors_Ethical%20Responsibilities%20of%20Authors).

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