ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Consumer ethics: An extensive bibliometric review (1995–2021)

Inés Küster | Natalia Vila

Faculty of Economics, University of Valencia, Valencia, Spain

Correspondence
Inés Küster, Faculty of Economics, University of Valencia, Avda Tarongers sn, Valencia 46022, Spain.
Email: ines.kuster@uv.es

Abstract

Nowadays, consumer ethics represents a relevant field of review. There have been some attempts to conduct literature reviews; however, these have been few and incomplete. For this reason, this paper follows two main objectives: (1) to develop a performance analysis to measure the impact/perceptibility of academic production on consumer ethics (most cited authors, journals and themes) and (2) to visually present the scientific structure by themes of research in consumer ethics as well as its evolution along time. Using SciMAT software, a comprehensive thematic review is discussed. 568 scientific papers (2569 keywords and 8642 citations) were retrieved from the Web of Science from 1995 to 2021 (May). Our results show three main periods with two main research themes (consumer and corporate social responsibility), which remain relevant themes at the time. Also, some new themes that promote ethical consumption have gained weight or appear over time, some of which are linked to the marketing field (such as experiences, satisfaction, attitudes or privacy among others).

KEYWORDS
bibliometric analysis, co-word analysis, customer ethics, SciMAT

1 | INTRODUCTION

The subject of ethics in business is not new and has been significant development over the last few decades (DeTienne et al., 2021). However, if we consider the marketing point of view, especially from the consumers' perspective, the research on this theme has followed a different rhythm.

Related to marketing ethics, Honeycutt et al. (1995) point out that ethics in marketing obtained more attention because scholars in the ethics field have concluded that marketing is a functional area most frequently provoked by charges of ethical transgression. In this sense, for example, the work of Javalgi and Russell (2018) carries on a literature review related to international marketing ethics because, as these authors state, as companies develop business internationally, ethical practices and ethics are increasing themes of interest

for academics and practitioners. However, most of the research effort has focused on the seller point of view of the buyer–seller dyad with little attention to consumers (Dodge et al., 1996). As Vitell et al. (2001) state, it is at the end of the past century when considerable attention has been given to marketing ethics in areas such as adverting, personal selling, pricing and marketing research. All these tools seem to be helpful, from the seller's point of view, to promote consumers' ethics.

From the consumers' point of view, all facets of consumer behaviour (e.g., the purchase, use and disposition of products) have an inherent ethical element (Vitell, 2003). The growth in publications and research on consumer ethics can be explained by several factors. Nova-Reyes et al. (2020) state that there is a relationship between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and consumer ethics research. Thus, the boom in CSR studies has been accompanied by

an expansion in the number of studies on consumer ethics (Ferrell et al., 2019). Together with this, Newholm and Shaw (2007) point out other reasons for this increasing interest in ethical consumer concern, like the intensified media coverage, increased levels of information and the superior availability of 'alternative' products. In this vein, researchers have asked consumers about ethics-related issues in their research for a long time ago, but usually, they have not asked about their perceptions of consumer practices (Vitell et al., 2001). As Newholm and Shaw (2007) state, researchers have become interested in studying this field because of the apparent growth of 'ethical consumption' during the last quarter of the 20th century and it is since the last decade of the past century that we can find academic papers published in Web of Since database. So, "while some consumer ethics research certainly existed prior to 1990, the bulk of the extant consumer ethics literature has appeared since that date" (Vitell, 2003, p. 33).

In sum, as previous literature shows, this concept is of interest to academia, and it is relevant to know under which approaches it has been studied and together with which other concepts/topics it can be studied. For this reason, this paper analyses how consumer ethics research has advanced.

The reviewed literature points out that there is still a gap that gives scope for research in this issue, which offers opportunities for the development of new research lines, and for developing those that have emerged. According to Vitell et al. (2001) and Vitell (2003), there is a break in marketing ethics literature regarding consumers' points of view. Moreover, to our knowledge, and although academia offers some literature review related to ethics and business (for example, De Bakker et al., 2019; Javalgi & Russell, 2018; Vallaster et al., 2019), this is the first attempt to analyse the theoretical evolution of consumers' ethics considering a comprehensive compilation of all prior academic studies. Additionally, this paper applies a bibliometric procedure where performance analysis and science mapping are employed (Gutiérrez-Salcedo et al., 2018) in this particular research field.

Considering previous lines, the main objective is to advance knowledge about consumer ethics research, contributing to the investigation of the research in this field and offering more information about the themes to which it has been related and opening future lines of research. To do this, we propose a bibliometric study. From the pioneering work of Pritchard (1969) where the classical 'statistical bibliographies' were replaced, there have been relevant advances in bibliometrics analyses (Moral-Muñoz et al., 2020).

To achieve this objective, a review of the literature on consumers' ethics has been carried out, following a similar methodology that Cobo et al. (2011) and Cobo et al. (2012). In this sense, a bibliometric analysis of research into consumer ethics considering all the publications in Web of Science (WoS) between 1995 and 2021 (May) was done, following the work of other authors in the field of ethics, such as Michalos and Poff (2013). In this sense, the first paper on the search for customer ethics in the WoS database dates to 1995.

Therefore, Section 2 offers the literature review and proposes the research questions. Section 3 shows the methodology used.

Section 4, a bibliometric analysis of customer ethics, tries to answer RQ1, and Section 5, a science mapping analysis of customer ethics, tries to answer RQ2 and RQ3. The last section shows the main conclusions, implications and further research.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

According to Tsalikis and Fritzsche (2013) throughout history, there have been "unethical" acts (i.e., Christianity has Adam or Cain, or Greek philosophers dedicated time and efforts to build on theories of ethics), but the study of ethics in business and, specifically, consumer ethics, is more recent. As these authors state, research on business ethics and marketing has further grown and varied. In this sense, when a researcher wishes to analyse consumer ethics and turns to the literature, he/she finds that most of the works that appear do not refer specifically to consumer ethics. Because as stated before and according to Vitell, Lumpkin & Rawwas (2013, p. 448), "consumers have often been surveyed in ethics-related studies, but usually they have been surveyed regarding their ethical perceptions of business and marketing practices, not regarding their ethical perceptions of consumer practices". In this sense, we can find articles that indicate that they do research on consumer ethics, but what they actually do is use a sample of consumers to analyse consumer perceptions of business practices and not of consumer practices. For this reason, investigation into consumer ethics has been reduced (Vitell & Muncy, 2013).

In the field of consumer ethics, and according to Vitell et al. (2013) and Vitell and Muncy (2013), three major categories of studies related to consumer ethics can be found: (1) some authors examine one element of unethical consumer behaviour (for example, shoplifting or ecologically related consumption), (2) other authors propose normative rules, related to ethical aspects, for business and consumers and (3) others focus on rising theoretical and empirical advances for thoughtful consumers' ethical decision-making.

Related to the first category, **unethical behaviour**, we can find two kinds of studies. On one side, the first set of studies focuses on the ethical/unethical behaviour of consumers towards certain business practices, such as the recent studies of Chang and Lu (2019) or Huang et al. (2022). Huang et al. (2022) analyse, based on the stimulus–organism–response paradigm, how discourtesy among employee during customer encounters influence customer citizenship behaviour and opportunistic behaviour. Their results prove that these staff misbehaviours during face-to-face encounters cause more customers' unethical behaviour (i.e., opportunistic behaviour) and less customer permissive behaviour (i.e., customer tolerance of employee-induced errors). Chang and Lu (2019) base their study on CSR and relationship marketing and propose a framework focused on consumer ethical purchasing behaviour. These authors, with a sample of 495 consumers, demonstrate the CSR social benefits and a good service quality impact, directly and indirectly, on ethically questionable consumer behaviours in the East Asian retailing

market. Additionally, they propose a modification of the scale proposed by Muncy and Vitell (1992) to measure consumer ethics.

On another side, the second group of studies focuses on investigating those **co**nsumer characteristics that may explain their unethical behaviour. In this sense, we can find, for example, the studies of Van Kenhove et al. (2003), Singh (2018) or Ribeiro et al. (2020). Van Kenhove et al. (2003), with a sample of 59 consumers, explain how individual characteristics (age and gender), and relationship marketing outcomes (affective commitment and behavioural loyalty) influence customer (un)ethical behaviour. The study of Singh (2018), with a sample of 426 young consumers in India, test the impact of religiosity, spiritual well-being and attitude towards money on the ethical beliefs of young consumers. And, in Portugal, the study of Ribeiro et al. (2020) investigates the grade of acceptance of and justifications causing dishonest behaviour related to diverse sectors (i.e. health insurance or automobiles).

Within the second category of studies, **normative guidelines for business and consumers**, an outstanding author is Gene Laczniak. Together with other colleagues, this author has focused his research on this subject. For example, Laczniak and Murphy (2019) proposed a theoretical article to highlight the role of normative beliefs in marketing ethics. The authors differentiate between positive and normative ethics and identify four groups of normative ethical theories named consequentialism, duty-based ethics, contract-based morality and virtue ethics. One year later, Laczniak and Shultz (2021) publish a conceptual article, where they apply normative ethical theory at a macro-level to try to explain a doctrine of socially responsible marketing (SRM). Their "conception offers three essential elements of SRM—corporate citizenship, stakeholder orientation and social/ecological sustainability—each of which augers a pro-social rather than instrumental-financial approach to marketing practice" (Laczniak & Shultz, 2021, p. 201).

Finally, in the third category of studies about consumers' ethics, **theoretical and empirical basis for understanding consumers' ethical decision-making**, we can find studies that analyse business and consumer practices. For example, Lee (2014) carries out a pilot study with 55 students from a university in the Midwestern United States to analyse the effect of environmental issues in the fashion industry on consumers' purchase behaviours. Her study analyses both business and consumers' ethical aspects related to environmental issues. Campbell et al. (2015) also study both, business and consumers, through two different studies. First, following a price growth because of a fair-trade commitment, they investigate perceived fairness and intentions. Second, they evaluate the green attitude–behaviour difference in consumer behaviour, adding a real-world experiment to examine actual consumer behaviour in opposition to said intentions.

Focused only on the consumers' perceptions, we can find the work of Riquelme et al. (2016), which used a sample from 409 online and offline consumers. The authors, based on the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm and the attribution theory, investigate the consequences of consumers' perceptions of retailers' deceitful practices on their evaluations of offline and online retailers. Their results demonstrate that these perceptions influence on consumers' evaluations (i.e., product and retailer satisfaction or word-of-mouth).

In addition, within the field of consumer ethics, the review of the literature shows that there are three other sub-fields of research in this area: sales, employees and CSR.

Related to **sales**, we can identify diverse studies that analyse unethical salespeople's behaviours. These studies can be classified into two main groups. The first group includes articles where the seller's point of view is considered. In this group, the paper of Honeycutt et al. (1995) is the first that appears in the WoS, focused on business ethics and a cross-cultural comparison in the automotive sector. The second, on the other hand, includes papers that contemplate the customer's point of view. In this group, the work of Román and Ruiz (2005) is one of the most cited, where the authors study how the perception of an ethical salesperson's behaviour can influence a better-quality relationship between the salesperson and the customer.

Other studies analyse the **employees**, basically focused on the unethical behaviour of personnel in contact with customers. One of the most relevant works is that of Greenberg (2002) centred on 270 customer-service representatives. In this paper, the author analyses the problem of employee theft considering employee that has ethics programmes in their companies and those that do not. Additionally, other papers analyse how some organizational policy programmes influence employees' ethics. For example, the work of Schwepker and Hartline (2005) focused on contact service employees in an international context. In this case, the authors conclude that the implementation of ethical codes and the analysis of ethical issues at work improve the internalization of the code, which, in turn, improves the perception of the ethical climate, decreases role conflict and raises commitment to service quality. Or the work of Scott (2003) through interviews with flight attendants, that analyses a person-situation pattern of organizational dishonesty. The author states that organizational characteristics affect directly and indirectly (through flight characteristics) the probability of dishonesty motivations, grades and behaviours.

Related to **CSR**, there are numerous studies that relate CSR to consumer ethics. One of the most recent is the work of Tolentino et al. (2019). With a sample of 270 respondents, the authors analyse the effect of a corporation's ethical behaviour on the consumers (trust, commitment and loyalty). Their results show that, in ethical situations that foster loyalty, the ethics-trust-commitment relationship runs in an integrated way promoting loyalty. Additionally, it is possible to find papers, where the focus is on CSR and the issue related to ethics is analysed more tangentially. For example, one of the most cited works is the paper of Pirsch et al. (2007), where the authors propose an exploratory study to analyse two kinds of CSR programmes: institutionalized programmes and promotional programmes.

In sum, consumers' characteristics, sales, employees and CSR appear to be key themes under which consumer ethics research has been conducted. These pillars seem to be determinant to understand consumer ethics.

In view of the above, it can be stated that scientific production in this field has shown solid development in multiple issues. There is no doubt that scientific journals exemplify maybe the most relevant source of research and added value information and offer a new point of reference to perform further research. According to Herrera-Viedma, López-Robles, Guallar & Cobo (2020, p. 2), "complete bibliometric analysis thus becomes a key tool to evaluate ongoing actions and research, organizations, countries, sources, and researchers". In this context, this paper tries, mainly, to offer a bibliometric analysis of consumer ethics research, reporting authorship, production and thematic analysis, from its first publication, on the WoS, in 1995 to the present day.

More specifically, this paper state two main objectives: (1) to develop a performance analysis to analyse the impact/visibility of the scientific production on consumer ethics (most cited/relevant authors, journals and themes) and (2) to present visually the thematic scientific structure of consumer ethics research and its evolution over time. To reach them, this paper tries to answer the following research questions with a marketing focus:

> **RQ1**: Which (1) **authors and (2) journals** have achieved the highest impact and visibility in the field of consumer ethics?

> **RQ2**: Which **themes** have achieved the highest impact and visibility in the field of consumer ethics?

> **RQ3**: What are (1) the **main themes** and (2) their evolution in the field of consumer ethics?

3 | METHODOLOGY

Following the seminal work of Noyons et al. (1999), and as stated before, to answer the research questions and to reach the objectives of this paper, we conducted a bibliometrics study applying two main methods: performance analysis and science mapping. The first method is used to answer RQ1 (most dynamic and mentioned authors and journals and citation classics: H-Classics) and RQ2 (content analysis) and the second one is for RQ3 (conceptual evolution analysis). In particular, and as explained below, a co-word analysis has been carried out.

3.1 | Co-word analysis

Literature states that, in any field of scientific research, co-word analysis is a robust and useful bibliometric method for detecting, explaining and picturing the relations between themes, keywords and terms (Del Barrio-García et al., 2020; Nova-Reyes et al., 2020). This tool identifies the subsequent phases: (a) bibliometric data retrieval, (b) data handling and abstraction, (c) normalization and estimation of bibliometric indicators, (d) mapping, (e) assessment and (f) visualization of science maps and thematic networks (Cobo, 2011). In sum, a content analysis technique, whose methodological foundation is the idea that the co-occurrence of keywords explains the contents of the documents in a file, was used (Callon et al., 1991).

Although there is different software for science mapping analysis, this paper applies SciMAT because it allows to carry out of performance analysis and science mapping and because of its advantages related to obtaining, analysing and showing the data (Herrera-Viedma et al., 2020).

This programme offers scientific maps through the study of the keywords' co-occurrence that describes each article (Nova-Reyes et al., 2020) and allows to (1) know their social, intellectual, cognitive and conceptual frameworks and (2) analyse their structural evolution (Cobo et al., 2012). Each cluster can be described by two dimensions: centrality (interaction of a network with other networks) and density (inside the intensity of the network) (Callon et al., 1991). This value shows the development of the subject. The expressions of both concepts are as follows (Callon et al., 1991):

$$\text{Callon centrality} = c = 10 \sum e_{kh}$$

k keyword that belongs to the theme, *h* keyword that belongs to other themes.

$$\text{Callon density} = d = 100 \sum \frac{e_{ij}}{w}$$

i and *j* are keywords that belong to the theme and *w* are the number of keywords in the theme.

Considering both parameters, a field of research can be mapped on a two-dimensional strategic diagram with those parameters (Figure 1) and grouped into four categories (Küster, 2020; Nova-Reyes et al., 2020):

- Motor themes (I): Show a robust centrality and high density. It means that can be considered well-established and essential for the research field in question.
- Basic/general/transversal themes (IV): They are relevant and stable for a research field, but they are not very established.
- Marginal themes/Emerging or declining themes (III): They are not very developed and are marginal. These themes correspond to emerging or disappearing themes. They show little density and centrality.
- Peripherical themes/Highly developed and isolated themes (II): They show present very well-established internal connections, but their external networks are irrelevant.

As Del Barrio-García et al. (2020) state, the keywords and their interconnections are represented in one graph called the "thematic network" where spheres symbolize all the keywords and their co-occurrences. The size of the spheres is related to the number of documents associated with each keyword and the citations' number, and the thickness of the connection between the two spheres is proportional to the co-occurrence of both (Nova-Reyes et al., 2020). In this
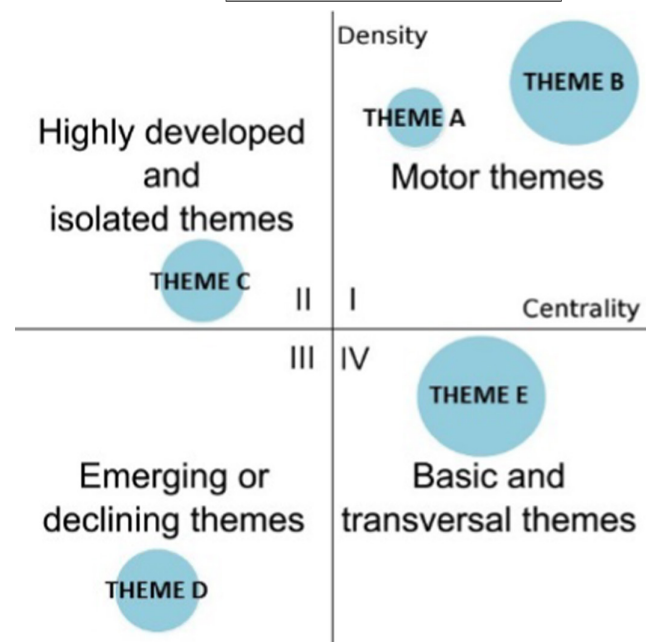
FIGURE 1 Strategic diagram. This figure presents the two-dimensional strategic diagram where themes are classified into four groups (motor themes, basic and transversal themes, highly developed and isolated themes and emerging or declining themes), as a function of two variables: density and centrality. Callon et al. (1991). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

sense, and following Vila and Küster (2021), the simple center algorithm was chosen to create a scientific map. To do this, the keywords of the documents were previously classified. In this sense, the algorithm studies the similarity between documents considering their keywords' co-occurrence values. The normalization of the co-occurrence values allows for estimating the similarity between two keywords. For example, a high value indicates that a keyword usually co-occurs with the same keyword, even if the keyword presents low frequency. This paper uses the equivalence index as a determinant of similarity to standardize a bibliometric network (Vila & Küster, 2021).

Completing the previous analysis, and following Herrera-Viedma et al. (2020)'s proposal, the present paper also tries to identify the highly mentioned articles. In this sense, we use the H-Classics (Martínez et al., 2014). This index can be defined as "H-Classics of a research area 'A' could be defined as the H-core of 'A' that is composed of the 'H' highly cited papers with more than 'H' citations received" (Martínez et al., 2014, p. 8).

In sum, and according to previous works (Del Barrio-García et al., 2020; Nova-Reyes et al., 2020), this study follows the subsequent steps: (1) data collection and analysis, (2) bibliometric analysis and (3) science mapping analysis.

3.2 | Data collection and analysis

The sample was formed from all the documents in the major compilation of WoS for the period 1995–2021 (May) because the first

scientific article in this database about consumers' ethics dates from 1995. This database is one of the most important repositories of scientific publications in the areas of science, social sciences and arts and humanities with more than 18,000 high-impact journals (Baier Fuentes et al., 2018). The WoS database has been used in previous recent works (for example, Montero-Díaz et al., 2018; Rodríguez-López et al., 2020; Vila & Küster, 2020, 2021), because it is considered the most relevant repository of scientific publications in different fields as social sciences (Baier Fuentes et al., 2018). Additionally, the WoS database has the oldest temporal coverage (from 1900) and the total number of records exceeds 90 million (Moral-Muñoz et al., 2020).

In this sense, we consider the contributions in the social science field and the articles related to consumer ethics in the WoS. The publications containing the word "customer ethics" and the word "consumer ethics" were used. Thus, this selection yields a total of 568 papers. After the filtering process, where duplications and documents unrelated to consumer ethics were eliminated, we have a final sample of 567 papers (h-index = 50; total citations = 8642). Next, the data were introduced into SciMAT software, containing information for each paper related to the source, title, authors, abstract, keywords, citation count, year, etc.

After a review process, 1318 keywords were selected, out of 2569 keywords, to delimit the study. In this sense, we completed a normalization procedure to merge singular and plural forms (e.g., 'ethic/ethics') and to transform acronyms into their complete forms. We employed words frequently used by previous theoretical and bibliometric reviews. We also carry out a semantic for grouping together words that appear in different ways (keeping the meanings unchanged). Some keywords were eliminated for being meaningless, and others were discarded (stop group true) for being too generic or for being outside the scope of business. To make simpler the identification of different thematic groups and ensure a better results' presentation, 'customer ethics' was not considered. Must be noticed that a keyword is considered a thematic area if it shows five times or more and if co-occurrence frequency is at least three times (Del Barrio-García et al., 2020).

After this and following Herrera-Viedma et al. (2020) to prevent data uniformity, the complete period of years was divided into two consecutive periods. Because of the reduced number of publications in the initial years, we decided to split the study period (1995–2021, May) into three comparable consecutive periods, where there has also been a minor growth in the number of publications: 1995–2012 (199 papers), 2013–2016 (164 papers) and 2017–2021 (May) (204 papers).

4 | BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS OF CUSTOMER ETHICS (RQ1)

To answer RQ1, it is necessary to analyse the most dynamic and mentioned authors and journals. It is useful to evaluate the progress of the research field, but also and following the proposal of Martínez et al. (2014), it is interesting to analyse the H-Classics. For this reason, we follow two steps: first a quantitative analysis of the authors and journals and a second analysis using the H-Classics.

4.1 | Most dynamic and mentioned authors and journals

To answer RQ1.1, Table 1 shows the most dynamic and mentioned authors, according to the WoS. Schwepker (7 publications and 227 citations) is the most productive author and Jaramillo (6 publications and 281 citations) is the most cited. It should be noted that some of these authors work together. For example, among the authors with the highest number of papers, 3 research teams can be identified: (1) Arteaga, Gallarza and Gil-Saura, (2) Iglesias, Markovic and Singh and (3) del Bosque and Pérez.

To answer RQ1.2, Table 2 shows the 19 journals with the greatest number of publications in customer ethics during the period from 1995 to 2021 (May); highlighting the diversity of the journals where researchers have published their studies on this theme. Perhaps because of the journal's specificity, *The Journal of Business Ethics* is the one with the highest number of publications. *The Journal of Business Research* and the *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management* follow it, with 15 and 12 publications each. In the 20th position is a group of 13 journals with 3 publications each.

Considering these results, the most prominent authors and publications in terms of citations according to the h-index (based on the H-Classics method) are discussed below because this index helps as an unbiased criterion for finding classic papers in any field of research (Herrera-Viedma et al., 2020).

4.2 | Citation classics

As stated before, based on the H-Classics method, the h-index has been used to identify the most relevant publications and authors related to the research on customer ethics.

TABLE 1 Most dynamic and mentioned authors.

Author	Publications	Citations
Schwepker, CH	7	227
Gallarza, MG	7	88
Arteaga, F	6	84
Jaramillo, JF	6	281
Gil-Saura, I	5	87
Perez, A	5	177
Iglesias, O	4	172
Markovic, S	4	172
Singh, JJ	4	172
Agarwal, J	4	121
Roman, S	4	273
del Bosque, IR	4	174
Harris, LC	4	187

Note: This table shows the most productive and cited authors, ordered by the greatest number of publications. It is interesting to observe the number of citations.

TABLE 2 Journals with the highest numbers of publications.

Journals	Publications
Journal of Business Ethics	72
Journal of Business Research	15
Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management	12
Journal of Islamic Marketing	7
Sustainability	7
International Journal of Bank Marketing	7
International Journal of Hospitality Management	6
International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	6
Journal of Services Marketing	6
European Journal of Marketing	5
Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing	5
Social Responsibility Journal	5
Journal of Marketing Management	5
Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	4
Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management	4
Marketing and Management of Innovations	4
Marketing Theory	4
Business & Professional Ethics Journal	4
Geneva Papers on Risk and Insurance-Issues and Practice	4

Note: This table offers a list with the journals with the highest number of publications related to customer ethics. In this sense the *Journal of Business Ethics* has the highest number of publications, followed by *Journal of Business Research* and *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*.

In our database, the search on 'consumer ethics' presents an h-index of 50, with a total of 8642 times cited (8231 without self-citations) and 15.21 as the average of citations per article. Figure 2 shows the total number of citations and the distribution of the most prominent classic publications from 1995 to 2021 (May).

As Figure 2 and Table 3 show, the most relevant publications belong to period 1 (1995–2012) with the highest number of citations. There are references that continue to be cited after its publication. The high number of citations is due to the time elapsed since publication. In addition, some of these papers have laid the foundations for the development of research in this field. Additionally, Table 4 underlines the 10 authors with the highest numbers of publications, considering their h-index. These authors have published not just on customer ethics themes, but also in other research fields.

5 | SCIENCE MAPPING ANALYSIS OF CUSTOMER ETHICS (RQ2 AND RQ3)

To answer RQ2 and RQ3, we have carried out two complementary analyses: a content analysis and a conceptual evolution analysis.
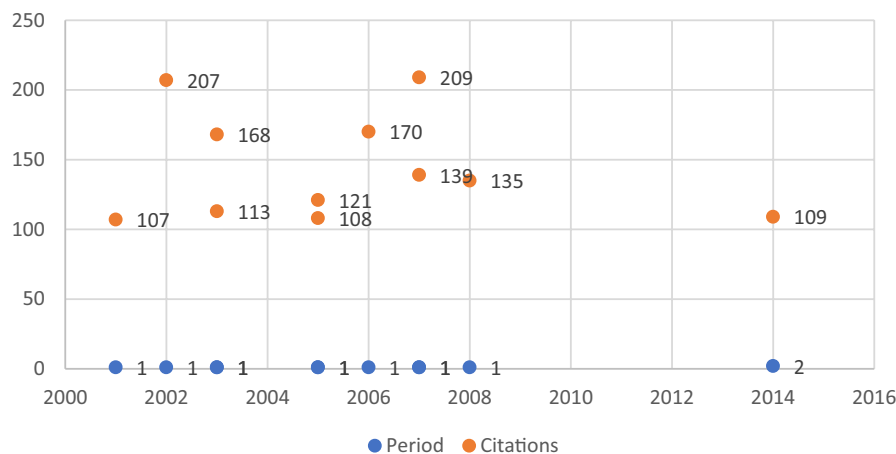
FIGURE 2 Distribution of most prominent publications along the time. In this figure, we can observe the total number of citations and the distribution of the most relevant classic publications from 1995 to 2021. In this sense, the most relevant publications belong to period 1 (1995–2012) with the highest number of citations. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

5.1 | Content analysis (RQ2)

To answer RQ2 and following Cobo et al. (2013), for the three periods, we used three kinds of bibliometric indicators to carry on our content analysis: (1) the number of published records, (2) the number of obtained citations and (3) the h-index (Table 5).

First, considering the number of published documents (Table 5), CONSUMERS is the theme with the greatest number of documents in Period 1 (53 documents) that continue to be a relevant theme also in Period 2 (37 documents) and Period 3 (46 documents). In the 3 periods, it is the theme most investigated. CONSUMER SATISFACTION is the second theme with the second-highest number of publications, in Period 3. There are some themes that appear in one period but not in other periods. For example, the study of BELIEFS was a relevant theme in Period 1 that was changed by the study of ATTITUDES in Period 3.

Second, related to the largest number of citations per theme, in Period 1, the most mentioned theme is CONSUMERS (2142 citations), followed by CORPORATE-SOCIAL-RESPONSIBILITY (949 citations). In period 2, the order is the opposite, CORPORATE-SOCIAL-RESPONSIBILITY (805 citations) and CONSUMERS (482 citations). In Period 3, CONSUMERS is, again, the most cited theme (415 citations), followed by CORPORATE-SOCIAL-RESPONSIBILITY (265 citations). Must be noticed that, as has been stated before, consumer ethics and corporate social responsibility are two themes that have been mostly studied together. That is, many studies analyse the consumers' perceptions of the corporate social responsibility of the firms.

Third, focusing on the h-index, Table 1, Figure 3 and Figure 4 present the progress of themes:

- In Period 1, CONSUMERS is the main theme (h-index=28), followed by CORPORATE-SOCIAL-RESPONSIBILITY (h-index=14), JOB (h-index=13) and SATISFACTION (h-index=12). The first theme represents a motor theme that promotes the research in this field, together with satisfaction and job, while the second, CSR, represents a basic and transversal theme that begins to take centre stage, but is not very well-developed.

- In Period 2, CORPORATE-SOCIAL-RESPONSIBILITY represents the main theme (h-index=17), followed by SALES (h-index=13) that did not appear in Period 1 and CONSUMERS (h-index=12). In this period, CSR, sales, consumers and ONLINE are the motor themes. Must be noticed that there are no high-developed and isolated themes and basic and transversal themes in this period.

- In Period 3, again as in Period 1, CONSUMERS is again the theme with the highest visibility (h-index=11). The position of CORPORATE-SOCIAL-RESPONSIBILITY (h-index=8) indicates that this is consolidating as a relevant theme in the field of consumer ethics. The studies in this field are consolidated and present strong links.

Figure 3 shows three strategic diagrams that summarize the most relevant themes within the customer ethics literature for each period, based on their density and centrality.

During **Period 1 (1995–2012),** five motor research themes linked to customer ethics could be identified. These motor themes can be useful to understand consumer ethics (CONSUMERS, SATISFACTION, E-COMMERCE, JOB and MANAGEMENT). Together with the basic and transversal themes, these are considered key themes because of their contribution to the scientific knowledge of consumer ethics. As stated before, CORPORATE-SOCIAL-RESPONSIBILITY is considered a basic and transversal theme that could be considered relevant for this research field. It is a relevant theme for the research field, but it is not well-developed yet. Not in vain, CSR becomes a motor theme in the following periods.

In **Period 2 (2013–2016),** 4 of the 7 issues identified can be considered relevant themes (CORPORATE-SOCIAL-RESPONSIBILITY, SALES, CONSUMERS and ONLINE) and the other 3 are considered emerging or declining themes (BUSINESS, QUALITY and WORK). Notice that the CORPORATE-SOCIAL-RESPONSIBILITY theme, which in the previous period was not yet a very developed theme, is now considered well-developed and important for the structuring of the research field, a fact that is confirmed by the number of publications and their relevance. So, this theme (the presence of CORPORATE-SOCIAL-RESPONSIBILITY in a company) seems to be key to understanding consumer ethics in this period.

TABLE 3 Most prominent publications during the time.

Authors	Publication	Year	P	Citat	Objective	Sample	Results
Gupta, S, Pirsch, J, Grau, SL	A framework for understanding Corporate Social Responsibility programs as a continuum: An exploratory study	2007	1	209	Classification of CSR programme CSR	Quantitative: 179 subjects	Differences between programmes
Greenberg, J	Who stole the money, and when? Individual and situational determinants of employee theft	2002	1	207	To examine one personal variable and two different kinds of situational variables whose relationship to unethical behaviour have sound conceptual and empirical bases Personel	Quantitative: 270 customer-service representatives	Employees who had attained Kohlberg's conventional level of moral development refrained from stealing money when they worked in an office that had an ethics programme in place. However, those at the preconventional level of development and who worked at an office without an ethics programme stole from their employers. By contrast, participants who believed that the money came from individual managers refrained from stealing under any conditions. These results are explained in terms of the person-by-situation interactionist approach to ethical behaviour
Joergens, C	Ethical fashion: myth or future trend?	2006	1	170	To a better understanding of ethical fashion consumption Consumer	Qualitative: 2 Focus groups: Germany and England	Little evidence that ethical issues have any effect on consumers' fashion purchase behaviour. When it comes to fashion purchase, personal needs motivate consumers primarily to buy garments and take precedence over ethical issues
Spence, LJ, Schmidpeter, R, Habisch, A	Assessing social capital: Small and medium sized enterprises in Germany and the UK	2003	1	168	To analyse the relationships between social capital, business ethics, CSR and SMEs CSR	Qualitative: 30 interviews	There is a considerable amount of further research needed on social capital, SME's and business ethics
Podnar, K, Golob, U	CSR expectations: the focus of corporate marketing	2007	1	139	To investigate the link between individuals' expectations of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and their readiness to support the socially responsible behaviour of companies CSR	Quantitative: 354 respondents from different backgrounds	Expectations of ethical-philanthropic CSR tend to have a significant positive influence on both types of intended CSR support by customers
Vaaland, TI, Heide, M, Gronhaug, K	Corporate social responsibility: investigating theory and research in the marketing context	2008	1	135	To develop an integrating overview of the present status of the theory of corporate social responsibility (CSR) applied in the marketing context CSR	Qualitative: review of 54 articles in marketing journals	Recommendations include a broadened perspective in empirical research to address CSR in its entirety, expand the focus beyond consumers, include a broader range of samples and conduct more inductive, exploratory empirical studies

(Continues)

TABLE 3 Continued

Authors	Publication	Year	P	Citat	Objective	Sample	Results
Roman, S, Ruiz, S	Relationship outcomes of perceived ethical sales behavior: the customer's perspective	2005	1	121	To analyse the role of ethical salesperson behaviour as perceived by the customer in developing a better-quality relationship between the salesperson and the customer SALES	Quantitative: 210 salespersons	Perceived ethical sales behaviour plays a major role in affecting the quality of the buyer–seller relationship as it has a positive effect on customer satisfaction, trust and commitment to the salesperson. In addition, satisfaction with and trust in the salesperson positively influence customer commitment to the salesperson. Finally, perceived ethical sales behaviour has a stronger effect on customer satisfaction with the salesperson when the customer's attitude towards the industry in which the salesperson works is more negative than when it is more positive
Hannafey, FT	Entrepreneurship and ethics: A literature review	2003	1	113	To analyse contributions related to entrepreneurial ethics BUSINESS	Theoretical	All entrepreneurs are not alike, and neither are the ethical dilemmas they confront. As entrepreneurial activity becomes increasingly important to the global economy, there remains the need for carefully designed
Rupp, DE, Shao, RD, Jones, KS, Liao, H	The utility of a multifoci approach to the study of organizational justice: A meta-analytic investigation into the consideration of normative rules, moral accountability, bandwidth-fidelity, and social exchange	2014	2	109	To analyse normative rules, moral accountability, bandwidth-fidelity and social exchange CONSUMERS	Quantitative: meta-analytically ($k=647$, $N=235,682$) comparison of the predictive validities of source- vs. type-based justice perceptions	Results: (a) multifoci justice perceptions more strongly predicted outcomes directed at matched sources than did type-based justice perceptions, (b) multifoci justice perceptions more strongly predicted target similar than dissimilar outcomes, and (c) the relationships between multifoci justice perceptions and target similar outcomes were mediated by source-specific social exchange
Schwepker, CH	Managing the ethical climate of customer-contact service employees	2005	1	108	To study the effects of formal and informal controls on ethical climate EMPLOYEE	Quantitative: 279 hotel units	Enforcing ethical codes and discussing ethical issues on the job enhance code internalization, which, in turn, enhances perceptions of the ethical climate, reduces role conflict and increases commitment to service quality. Ethical climate increases job satisfaction and indirectly affects commitment to service quality by reducing role conflict
Lu, LC, Vitell, SJ, Rose, GM, Blodgett, JG	Ethical sensitivity to stakeholder interests: A cross-cultural comparison	2001	1	107	This study applied Hofstede's typology to examine the effect of culture on ethical sensitivity towards various stakeholders SALES	246 American life and health insurance salespeople and 391 Taiwan managers	Uncertainty avoidance had a positive effect and that power distance and individualism/masculinity had negative effects on ethical sensitivity. The results also indicated that ethical sensitivity to stakeholder interests is dependent on which stakeholder is affected. Although Americans and Taiwanese sales agents were equally sensitive to customer interests, the Taiwanese were more sensitive to the interests of their company and a competitor but were less sensitive to the interests of a colleague

TABLE 3 Continued

Authors	Publication	Year	P	Citat	Objective	Sample	Results
Evans, KR, McFarland, RG, Dietz, B, Jaramillo, JF	Advancing sales performance research: a focus on five underresearched topic areas	2012	1	96	This paper focuses on, among other 4 topics, ethics relative to the buying and selling organization simultaneously SALES	Theoretical	Related to ethics: Ethical behaviour, while explored extensively in sales, has important performance implications
Perez, A, del Bosque, IR	Measuring CSR image: Three studies to develop and to validate a reliable measurement tool	2013	2	89	To develop and to validate a reliable scale based on stakeholder theory CSR	Quantitative: 1124 banking service users	Results demonstrate the reliability and validity of this new scale for measuring customer perceptions regarding the CSR performance of their service providers. With regard to this, CSR includes corporate responsibilities towards customers, shareholders, employees and society
Dholakia, U, Morwitz, VG	The scope and persistence of mere-measurement effects: Evidence from a field study of customer satisfaction measurement	2002	1	88	To examine the scope and persistence of the effect of measuring satisfaction on customer behaviour over time CONSUMER	Quantitative: 945 customer households	The results raise questions concerning the design, interpretation and ethics in the conduct of applied marketing research studies
Matute-Vallejo, J, Bravo, R, Pina, JM	The influence of corporate social responsibility and price fairness on customer behaviour: evidence from the financial sector	2011	1	78	To explore how customers' perceptions of firms' corporate social responsibility (CSR) and fairness in their pricing strategy determine customers' behaviour as users of financial services CSR	Quantitative: 300 customers of banks and savings banks	Results show that both CSR and price fairness contribute to achieving customer loyalty, also confirming the roles of satisfaction and commitment as mediating variables. In addition, it is also shown that CSR influences customer perceptions of price fairness, in such a way that customers perceive that socially oriented firms are also fairer in their pricing strategies
Schweitzer, L	Planning and Social Media: A Case Study of Public Transit and Stigma on Twitter	2014	2	77	To study how media portray public transit services can affect the way voters and stakeholders think about future transit investments CONSUMERS	Quantitative: 63,321 Twitter's comments	Results reflect more negative sentiments about public transit than do the comments about most other public services and include more negative material about transit patrons. However, transit agencies may be able to influence the tone of those comments through the way they engage with social media. Transit agencies that respond directly to questions, concerns and comments of other social media users, as opposed to merely "blasting" announcements, have more positive statements about all aspects of services and fewer slurs directed at patrons, independent of actual service quality. The interaction does not have to be customer oriented. Agencies using Twitter to chat with users about their experiences or new service also have statistically significantly more positive sentiments expressed about them on social media
Smith, NC, Drumwright, ME, Gentile, MC	The New Marketing Myopia	2010	1	76	To present a new marketing myopia CONSUMERS	Theoretical	The authors offer five propositions for practice that will help marketers correct the myopia: (1) map the company's stakeholders, (2) determine stakeholder salience, (3) research stakeholder issues and expectations and measure impact, (4) engage with stakeholders and (5) embed a stakeholder orientation

(Continues)

TABLE 3 Continued

Authors	Publication	Year	P	Citat	Objective	Sample	Results
Mani, V, Agarwal, R, Gunasekaran, A, Papadopoulos, T, Dubey, R, Childe, SJ	Social sustainability in the supply chain: Construct development and measurement validation	2016	2	75	To develop and empirically validate scales for measuring SCSS CSR	Quantitative: 308 supply chain managers	Results suggest that SCSS consists of six underlying dimensions, namely equity, safety, health and welfare, philanthropy, ethics, human rights, in a 20-item valid and reliable scale
Silberhorn, D, Warren, RC	Defining corporate social responsibility: A view from big companies in Germany and the UK	2007	1	73	To explore how large German and British companies publicly define corporate social responsibility (CSR), as well as why and how the respective notion of CSR was developed CSR	Qualitative: content analysis of the CSR web sites of 40 British and German companies and on a series of interviews with senior managers	CSR is now presented as a comprehensive business strategy, arising mainly from performance considerations and stakeholder pressure. Companies focus on how they interact with stakeholders and how business activities impact on society. Most CSR policies addressed community, employee and customer issues
Lacey, R, Kennett-Hensel, PA	Longitudinal Effects of Corporate Social Responsibility on Customer Relationships	2010	1	72	To investigate linkages between customers' perceptions of the CSR performance of an NBA team and the strength of their relationship with this same organization CSR	Quantitative: data collected at both the beginning (n = 750) and conclusion (n = 469) of the 2007–2008 NBA season	The findings show how a firm that engages in CSR initiatives may reap rewards by building trusting and committed customer relationships, which, in turn, help forge desirable customer behaviours. The results also demonstrate how CSR's influence strengthens over the course of the tested business cycle, thus yielding revealing insights to academics and practitioners when it comes to understanding the real-world impact of CSR performance for strengthening customer relationships
Anselmsson, J, Johansson, U	Corporate social responsibility and the positioning of grocery brands An exploratory study of retailer and manufacturer brands at point of purchase	2007	1	70	To enhance the understanding of what significance consumers place on different aspects of corporate social responsibility (CSR) when evaluating and purchasing grocery brands and products CSR	Qualitative: 20 in-store face-to-face interviews with consumers Quantitative: 200 shoppers	Retail brands can indeed, in relation to leading national brands, build a CSR image. Further, this image is shown to have an impact on consumers' intention to buy. This is also the case for "me-too" retail brands. The CSR dimension of greatest impact on overall CSR image is product responsibility, whereas human responsibility influences the customer purchase intentions the most. Environmental responsibility is in this study recognized to exert least impact on both overall CSR image and on purchase intentions
Nunan, D, Di Domenico, M	Market research and the ethics of big data	2013	2	69	To explore key perspectives underlying the emergence of big data and considers both the opportunities and ethical challenges raised for market research BUSINESS	Theoretical	The paper identifies the potential opportunities for market research, together with the challenges for privacy – challenges that we do not believe are fully encapsulated within existing ethics codes
Davenport, T, Guha, A, Grewal, D, Bressgott, T	How artificial intelligence will change the future of marketing	2020	3	67	This paper outlines a framework to understand how AI will impact the future of marketing, specifically to outline how AI may influence marketing strategies and customer behaviours BUSINESS	Theoretical	The authors propose a research agenda covering three broad areas: (1) how firms' marketing strategies will change, (2) how customers' behaviours will change and (3) issues related to data privacy, bias and ethics

TABLE 3 Continued

Authors	Publication	Year	P	Citat	Objective	Sample	Results
Ivanov, S, Zhechev, V	Hotel revenue management a critical literature review	2012	1	64	The paper presents a literature review of the main concepts of hotel revenue management (RM) and current state-of-the-art of its theoretical research BUSINESS	Qualitative: literature review	The paper highlights special attention to ethical considerations in RM practice, the connections between RM and customer relationship management and the legal aspect of revenue management

Note: This table offers more detailed information that Figure 3 and shows the most relevant classic publications from 1995 to 2021. The papers are ordered from more cited to less cited. P = Period.

TABLE 4 Authors with the highest h-index.

Authors	h-index	Citations
Perez, A	24	177
del Bosque, IR	24	174
Harris, LC	22	187
Schwepker, CH	18	227
Gil-Saura, I	17	87
Roman, S	17	273
Jaramillo, JF	10	281
Markovic, S	15	172
Iglesias, O	14	172
Gallarza, MG	12	88

Note: This table could be related to Table 3. In this case, this table shows the authors with a highest h-index and the number of citations, two related variables.

Period 3 (2017–2021, May) offers 12 themes. The most relevant themes are related to CONSUMERS, CORPORATE-SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, ORGANIZATION, EXPERIENCES, ATTITUDES and PRODUCT. Compared with the previous periods, CUSTOMER SATISFACTION, ORGANIZATION and EXPERIENCE appear as motor themes, and other themes disappear. Additionally, PRIVACY presents highly established inner connections, but its external connections are irrelevant. It means that privacy represents an isolated theme in the consumer ethics field of research, which can be also a helpful term to better explain ethical consumption from its own approach As Figure 3 and Figure A1 in Appendix show, we can observe that in comparison to previous periods, there is a marketing focus in the studies of consumer ethics in period 3. That is, the role of marketing becomes determinant to explain ethical consumption nowadays. As our results show, consumers, experiences, attitudes and consumer satisfaction are well-developed and relevant themes that are investigated together and related to other aspects such as marketing and brand strategies.

Figure 4 shows the overlapping map with the number of keywords in each period. As it shows, the keywords have increased (from 519 in Period 1 to 725 in Period 3). This indicates that the researchers have focused their research, at each moment, on diverse aspects. It is observed that in the first period there are 719 keywords, 223 of which are collected also in the second period, and, in this second period, there are also 352 new words that were not collected in the first period. In the second period, there are 578 keywords, 255 from the previous period and 459 that appear new. These results indicate that this field of research is a field that continues to show interest in the scientific community, seeking to advance knowledge in this field by studying additional topics and concepts.

5.2 | Conceptual evolution analysis (RQ3)

As Martínez et al. (2014) state, the themes identified in each period were analysed together through their theoretical evolution, i.e., by

TABLE 5 Performance measures (bibliometric indicators) for 3 periods of time.

Themes	1995–2012			2013–2016			2017-2021(may)		
	Doc. count	H-index	Sum. citation	Doc. count	H-index	Sum. citation	Doc. count	H-index	Sum. citation
Attitudes	–	–	–	–	–	–	14	5	90
Beliefs	7	6	152	–	–	–	–	–	–
Business	–	–	–	16	9	315	–	–	–
Conceptualization	–	–	–	–	–	–	10	4	113
Consumers	53	28	2142	37	12	482	46	11	415
Corporate-social-responsibility	17	14	949	45	17	805	38	8	265
Consumer-satisfaction	4	3	101	–	–	–	30	9	283
E-commerce	13	6	193	–	–	–	–	–	–
Job	22	13	714	–	–	–	–	–	–
Experiences	–	–	–	–	–	–	18	5	123
Management	7	7	249	–	–	–	–	–	–
Models	8	7	348	–	–	–	–	–	–
Online	–	–	–	15	10	339	–	–	–
Organization	–	–	–	–	–	–	42	7	173
Quality	–	–	–	14	9	287	–	–	–
Perspectives	–	–	–	–	–	–	10	4	55
Privacy	–	–	–	–	–	–	13	5	130
Product	–	–	–	–	–	–	16	6	112
Reputation	–	–	–	–	–	–	5	3	19
Sales	–	–	–	21	13	461	8	5	86
Satisfaction	18	12	790	–	–	–	–	–	–
Social-responsibility	6	5	286	–	–	–	–	–	–
Values	9	8	296	–	–	–	–	–	–
Work	–	–	–	4	4	197	–	–	–

Note: This table shows the values for three bibliometric indicators (number of published documents, number of received citations and h-index) for the three analysed periods to help in the identification of (1) the number of published documents, the (2) number of received citations and (3) h-index the most relevant themes.

finding the common words and how they change over time. In this sense, and to answer RQ3 (1. Main themes and 2. Evolution), we have carried out a conceptual evolution analysis considering the themes of the three consecutive time periods as input (Figure 5).

Figure 5 illustrates the conceptual evolution map where the volume of the spheres is related to the number of publications in each theme (density), and the thickness of the lines indicates the linkage with other themes (centrality) and is proportional to the inclusion index. In this sense, the solid lines reveal a thematic nexus, that is, if the two linked themes share the same name, or if the name of one theme is part of the other. A dotted line indicates that the linked themes share keywords that are not the names of the themes (Murgado-Armenteros et al., 2015, p. 536).

It is interesting to see the evolution of certain themes, especially those that have proven to be more relevant within the field of ethics research. As Figure 5 shows, two main themes (CONSUMERS and CORPORATE-SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY) have aroused the interest

of researchers over the three time periods in the field of consumer ethics. The first one, CONSUMERS, focuses on research where the interest is the consumers as subjects; that is, these publications analyse consumers' attitudes, values, intentions, behaviours, trust and brand perceptions. This theme has remained stable over the three periods. During the last period, the interrelation between the terms became stronger, for example, between consumers and attitudes.

The second one, CORPORATE-SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, is more concerned with researching company strategies and policies aimed at implementing corporate-social responsibility. They use the customer's point of view as a sample of their studies. As with the above theme, CSR remains stable over the three periods. Although this theme has been used to investigate CSR and its effects on business, in the last period, as Figure 5 shows, CSR gave rise to consumer satisfaction as another relevant theme. In this sense, CUSTOMER SATISFACTION was an emergent theme in Period 1, but in Period 2 does not carry enough weight to be a relevant research theme. It is in

period 3 when it becomes a motor theme. So, this theme is analysed jointly with CSR.

More information on the relationships between these two themes with other research themes is provided in the Appendix (Figure A1).

In addition, there are other themes that have undergone a different evolution. For example, SATISFACTION arose in the first period as a motor theme and moved towards QUALITY in the second period as an emerging theme that evolves to studies focused on EXPERIENCES in Period 3 (see the evolution map in Figure 5). Or, for example, E-COMMERCE, which appears as a well-developed and relevant theme in Period 1 evolves to ONLINE (another motor theme). In Period 3, these studies gave rise to PRIVACY as an isolated theme. This is not a very well-defined area in terms of thematic coherence and probably arose as a result of major changes in the market situation.

In sum, during these three periods, the field of consumer ethics has grown exponentially and represents a field of study in vogue. As we have presented before, the research focuses on consumers' characteristics, CSR business policies and employees. So, these three pillars seem to be the basis of ethical consumption. Our literature review shows that the main themes with the greatest continuity since its emergence focus on the consumer profile and CSR. Regarding CSR, attention is dedicated mainly to issues related to strategies (in the three periods), stakeholders (in the three periods) and their relationship with business ethics (Period 3). Related to consumers, ethical/unethical behaviour and normative issues have been the more analysed themes, particularly in Periods 1 and 2. Regarding the employees, the studies focus mainly on salespeople.

6 | CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The present paper tries to offer the evolution of customers' ethics research over time, considering the publications on the WoS, the most important repositories of scientific publications in the areas of science, social sciences and arts and humanities (Baier Fuentes et al., 2018).

6.1 | Theoretical implications

As stated before, the literature underlines that there is still scope for research in the field of consumer ethics because there is a gap in marketing ethics literature regarding consumers' points of view. In this sense, and following a similar methodology that previous studies (Vila & Küster, 2020, 2021), this paper contributes to the literature in two main ways. First, it represents the first bibliometric study on customer ethics since the first publication in 1995 on the WoS, following a rigorous methodology. Second, this paper applies the two methods available in bibliometrics studies: performance analysis and science mapping. And third, the use of SciMAT software with a great preprocessing and exporting capabilities, and the

visualization through the strategic diagram and thematic areas, has allowed to focus deeply on some specific research topics (Moral-Muñoz et al., 2020).

With a final sample of 567 papers (h-index = 50; total citations = 8642) from the WoS database and the results reached, we can point out the following theoretical implications.

First, the search in the WoS database offers, under the theme of customer ethics, publications that really do not focus on this theme. For example, when we search for articles about customers' ethics in the WoS, the platform proposes the work of Honeycutt et al. (1995) as the first article published on the subject at the WoS. However, a deep reading of the article reveals that the authors do not really analyse issues related to customers' ethics, but rather this paper is a study about salespeople's ethics in two countries: the USA and Taiwan. Something similar happens with the work of Thumin et al. (1995), where they analyse the perceptions of diverse kinds of employees (professionals and academics) regarding ethical behaviour, but considering also many other concepts. Or the study of Williamson and Jauch (1995) that focuses on the need to analyse ethical decision-making in health care management. In this sense, none of the 3 papers that appear on the WoS in 1995 considers specifically consumer ethics per se. Thus, the first article appearing in WoS where consumers' ethics are really analysed is that of Dodge et al. (1996). The authors use a sample of 532 consumers and assess 15 several circumstances that reflect questionable behaviours by consumers.

Second, we can observe that there is a link between consumers' ethics and corporate social responsibility (CSR) research (Nova-Reyes et al., 2020). In this vein, the three periods identified in this paper are in line with the proposal of Nova-Reyes et al. (2020). Recent research has followed a similar pace in both fields in terms of the number of publications as far as many of the articles that analyse CSR, also consider ethical aspects.

Third, two main areas/fields of research can be highlighted in the 3 periods. One related to consumers and another related to corporate social responsibility. But, if we analyse the centrality between both themes, it is low. Even more, there is not a strong relationship between these two themes. Despite this, it is possible to find studies that analyse the effect of CSR on consumers. For example, the work of Pirsch et al. (2007), the most cited publication in Period 1; where the authors carry on an exploratory study with 179 consumers to analyse the impact of two kinds of CSR tools (institutionalized and promotional programmes) on consumers' attitude to the organization, consumer scepticism and consumer loyalty. Additionally, they study the ethical and managerial implications.

Fourth, and related to consumers, the focus has been the study of consumers as subjects; that is, the publications analyse their attitudes, values, intentions, behaviours, trust and brand perceptions related to ethical aspects. During the three periods, the number of publications has increased, denoting that it continues to be a relevant research theme for customer ethics research.

For example, in Period 1, the work of Joergens (2006) stands out. The author conducts her research using focus groups with young

Period 1: 1995-2012
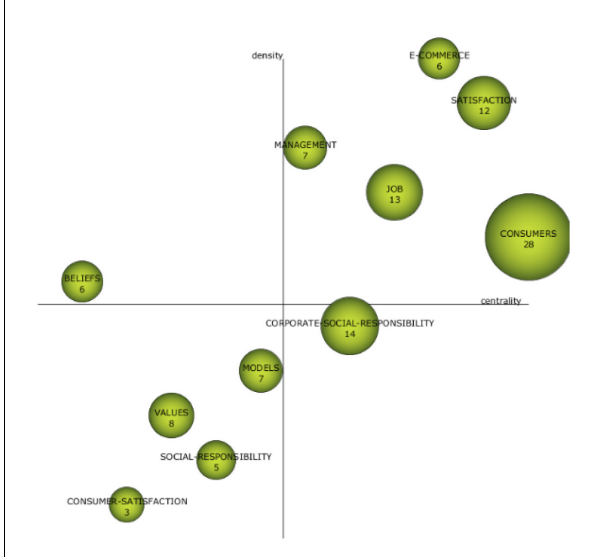
Theme	Centrality	Centrality range	Density	Density range
E-commerce	55.32	0.82	48.09	1
Satisfaction	64.78	0.91	26.48	0.91
Consumers	82.14	1	20.17	0.64
Job	52.79	0.73	21.91	0.73
Management	45.97	0.55	22.16	0.82
CSR	52.4	0.64	11.1	0.45
Models	45.88	0.45	7.59	0.36
Beliefs	21.64	0.09	11.44	0.55
Social-responsibil	37.33	0.36	4.58	0.18
Values	33.1	0.27	4.77	0.27
Consumer-satisfaction	28.87	0.18	1.11	0.09

Period 2: 2013-2016
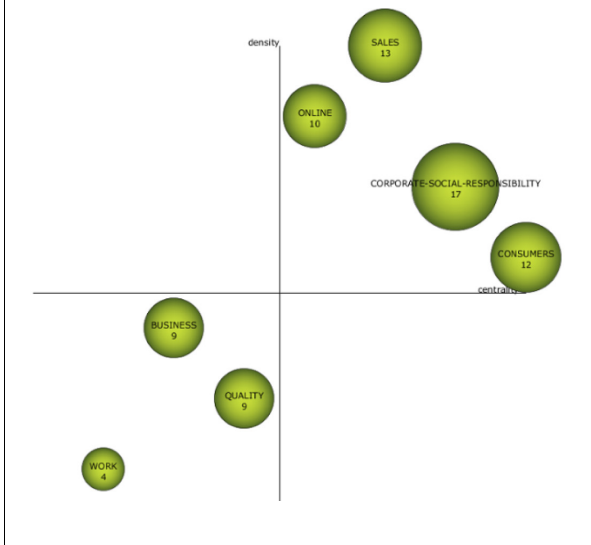
Theme	Centrality	Centrality range	Density	Density range
Sales	44.07	0.71	33.06	1
Online	35.53	0.57	31.13	0.86
CSR	50.93	0.86	21.56	0.71
Consumers	52.22	1	11.33	0.57
Business	33.91	0.29	10.23	0.43
Quality	35.19	0.43	5.88	0.29
Work	10.38	0.14	4.23	0.14

Period 3: 2017-2021 (May)
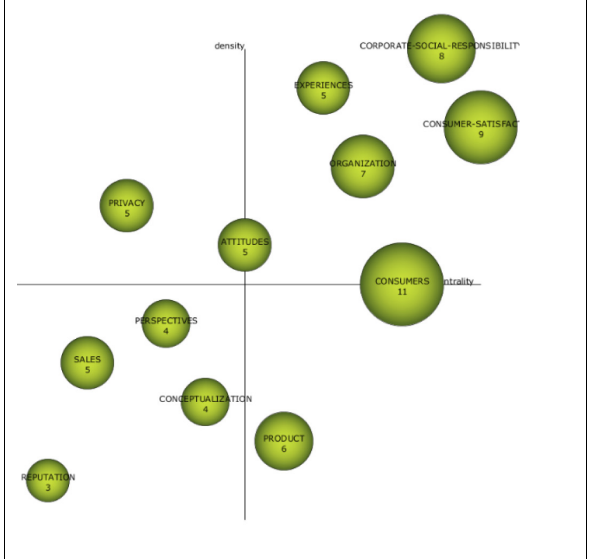
Theme	Centrality	Centrality range	Density	Density range
Corporate-social-responsibility	75.22	0.92	18.29	1
Organization	63.63	0.75	16.21	0.75
Consumer-satisf	76.68	1	17.24	0.83
Experiences	49.16	0.67	18.11	0.92
Consumers	69.64	0.83	10.9	0.5
Privacy	30.15	0.25	15.18	0.67
Conceptualization	40.84	0.42	6.53	0.25
Perspectives	34.88	0.33	9.52	0.42
Attitudes	42.78	0.5	13.07	0.58
Sales	28.89	0.17	7	0.33
Product	46.09	0.58	5.79	0.17
Reputation	19.27	0.08	5.52	0.08

FIGURE 3 Themes with the highest impact/ visibility and evolution (h-index). This figure presents three strategic diagrams that summarizes the most important themes within the customer ethics literature for each period. Additionally, we have added, in each strategic diagram a table with the centrality and density indicators of each theme. The most prolific themes can be considered helpful tools to understand ethical consumption. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

FIGURE 4 Overlapping map. Evolution of the themes from period 1 to period 3. This figure shows the overlapping map where we can observe the evolution of the keywords in the three periods. This map probes the increased interest on customer ethics.
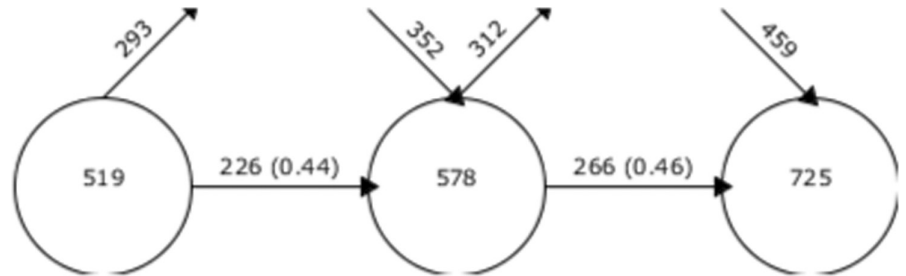
FIGURE 5 Conceptual evolution map of themes used to explain consumer ethics. This figure shows the concept evolution map, where we can observe the evolution of the main relevant themes through the periods analysed. The size of the spheres is proportional to the number of publications (density) and the thickness of the lines indicates the linkage with other topics (centrality). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
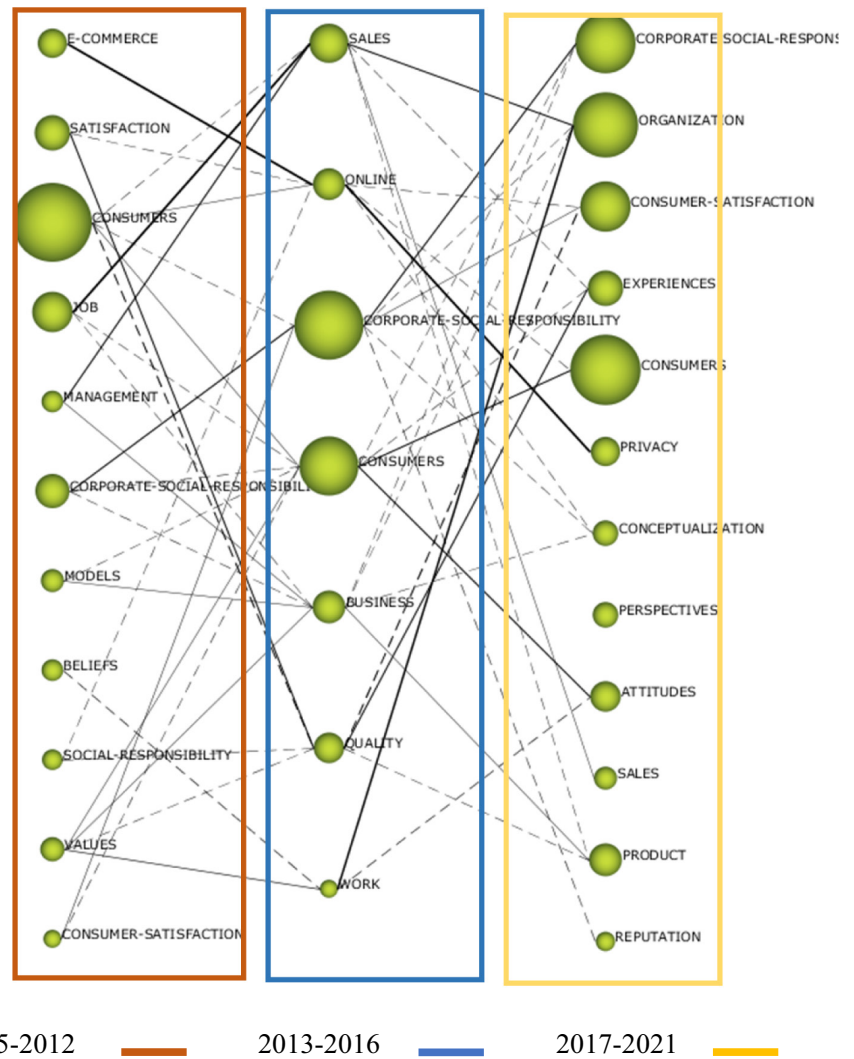
people between 18 and 26 years old in Germany and UK. The aim of her study is a better understanding of ethical fashion consumption. One of the main conclusions is that consumers think that they are often unable to make an ethical choice. Hence, they need more information to let them make better ethical judgements, and fashion companies can play a determinant role.

One interesting work in Period 2 is the one of Greenbaum et al. (2014), where the authors analyse the impact of unethical customers' behaviours on employee emotional exhaustion. They carry out two studies: one using multisource field data from customer-service professionals in a variety of industries, and the other uses multisource, longitudinal field data from governmental employees.

In Period 3, Nadeem et al. (2020) test their proposed model with 342 Generation Y consumers. Their model is built on social support theory, relationship quality theory, value co-creation and marketing ethics literature and their results show that social support impacts ethical perceptions, which, in turn, affect value co-creation and that ethical perceptions also impact consumers' trust, commitment and satisfaction.

Fifth, we can observe the evolution of the research themes. Some of them have disappeared, while others have gained prominence in recent publications. In the first group, themes like beliefs, e-commerce, management or models that were relevant in Period 1, cease to be so in the following periods. In the second group, themes like attitudes, conceptualization, privacy or reputation became relevant themes for customer ethics research.

Sixth, there is a link between the most prolific and most mentioned authors (Schwepker, Gallarza, Arteaga, Jaramillo, Gil-Saura, Perez, Iglesias, Markovic, Singh, Agarwal, Roman, del Bosque and Harris), which suggests the quality and balance of the publications studied. Moreover, the most prolific countries (USA, England, Spain, Australia, China, India, Canada, Germany, Taiwan Malasya, Romania) and the most prolific organizations/institutions (University of Valencia, North-eastern University, University Central of Missouri, University Texas Arlington, Bucharest University) mirror the situation of the key agents in this research field.

Seventh, and finally, there is a specialized publication that concentrates part of the research on customer ethics, the *Journal of Business Ethics*. But there are two other journals, one more generalist (*Journal of Business Research*) and the other more specialized (*Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*), which have also collected much of the research on this subject.

In sum, this paper attempts to provide an overview of the scientific contributions to what the authors have called consumer ethics. A detailed study of these contributions shows that this issue is not always discussed. As stated before, two main themes can be identified: consumers and CSR. Additionally, during the last years, some studies show the relationship between branding strategies and ethics, and their impact on consumers' perceptions and behaviours (i.e., Hunt, 2019; Tolentino et al., 2019).

6.2 | Practical implications

Based on the findings and theoretical implications, this paper proposes the following practical recommendations for academia and professionals.

First, and because consumer ethics studies often neglect consumer ethics, researchers concerned with ethical consumer behaviour should focus on it. It is also important that in the article review process, both reviewers and editors check that the keywords used really represent the subject matter of the studies carried out.

Second, our results suggest that although customer and CSR are two main research themes that go hand to hand in the study of customer ethics, there are still new opportunities for further research in both fields. Academics could consider studies along these lines, trying

to see how both lines of research can be aligned for the study of consumer ethics.

Third, and related to the previous lines, managers must not forget this link between ethics and corporate social responsibility (CSR). They must consider the impact of their CSR strategies on customer perceptions of the company's ethical behaviour.

Fourth, we have found the application of traditional theories in actual scenarios in diverse studies. Researchers and managers must consider and investigate how new contexts, such as technological developments or new business models, can affect customer ethics.

Fourth, and related to consumers, future research should continue on the study of consumers as subjects by developing customer ethics research. The focus could be on topics like attitudes, reputation or privacy. Along the same line, managers should consider how the ethical/unethical consumers' perceptions and behaviours can affect their companies.

And finally, we would like to invite researchers to give visibility to their studies on this topic both in specialized journals and in more general economic journals.

6.3 | Limitations and further research

As with any research, this investigation presents some limitations. The most important is related to the WoS database used. In this sense, and although our work follows previous works where this database is used, further research should consider another database. Additionally, other keywords could be considered, opening the study to future research. In both proposals (database and keywords), languages other than English could be considered.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
There is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

PEER REVIEW
The peer review history for this article is available at https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/beer.12558.

ORCID
Inés Küster 🆔 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8688-9175
Natalia Vila 🆔 https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9438-3337

REFERENCES
Baier Fuentes, H., Cascón Katchadourian, J., Martínez Sánchez, M. Á., Herrera Viedma, E., & Merigó, J. (2018). A bibliometric overview

of the International Journal of Interactive Multimedia and Artificial Intelligence. *International Journal of Interactive Multimedia and Artificial Intelligence, 5*(3), 9–16.

Callon, M., Courtial, J. P., & Laville, F. (1991). Co-word analysis as a tool for describing the network of interactions between basic and technological research: The case of polymer chemsitry. *Scientometrics, 22*, 155–205.

Campbell, C. L., Heinrich, D., & Schoenmüller, V. (2015). Consumers' reaction to fair trade motivated price increases. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 24*, 79–84.

Chang, H. H., & Lu, L. C. (2019). Actively persuading consumers to enact ethical behaviors in retailing: The influence of relational benefits and corporate associates. *Journal of Business Ethics, 156*(2), 399–416.

Cobo, M. J. (2011). *SciMAT: Herramienta software para el análisis de la evolución del conocimiento científico. propuesta de una metodología de evaluación.* PhD Thesis. University of Granada, Granada, Spain.

Cobo, M. J., Herrera-Viedma, E., Herrera, F., & López-Herrera, A. (2012). SciMAT: A new science mapping analysis software tool. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, 63*(8), 1609–1630.

Cobo, M. J., López-Herrera, A. G., Herrera-Viedma, E., & Herrera, F. (2011). An approach for detecting, quantifying, and visualizing the evolution of a research field: A practical application to the fuzzy sets theory field. *Journal of Informetrics, 5*(1), 146–166.

Cobo, M. J., Chiclana, F., Collop, A., de Ona, J., & Herrera-Viedma, E. (2013). A bibliometric analysis of the intelligent transportation systems research based on science mapping. *IEEE Transactions on Intelligent Transportation Systems, 15*(2), 901–908.

De Bakker, F. G., Rasche, A., & Ponte, S. (2019). Multi-stakeholder initiatives on sustainability: A cross-disciplinary review and research agenda for business ethics. *Business Ethics Quarterly, 29*(3), 343–383.

Del Barrio-García, S., Muñoz-Leiva, F., & Golden, L. (2020). A review of comparative advertising research 1975–2018: Thematic and citation analyses. *Journal of Business Research, 121*, 73–84.

DeTienne, K. B., Ellertson, C. F., Ingerson, M. C., & Dudley, W. R. (2021). Moral development in business ethics: An examination and critique. *Journal of Business Ethics, 170*(3), 429–448.

Dodge, H. R., Edwards, E. A., & Fullerton, S. (1996). Consumer transgressions in the marketplace: consumers' perspectives. *Psychology & Marketing, 13*(8), 821–835.

Ferrell, O. C., Harrison, D. E., Ferrell, L., & Hair, J. F. (2019). Business ethics, corporate social responsibility, and brand attitudes: An exploratory study. *Journal of Business Research, 95*, 491–501.

Greenbaum, R. L., Quade, M. J., Mawritz, M. B., Kim, J., & Crosby, D. (2014). When the customer is unethical: The explanatory role of employee emotional exhaustion onto work–family conflict, relationship conflict with coworkers, and job neglect. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 99*(6), 1188–1203.

Greenberg, J. (2002). Who stole the money, and when? Individual and situational determinants of employee theft. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 89*(1), 985–1003.

Gutiérrez-Salcedo, M., Martínez, M. Á., Moral-Munoz, J. A., Herrera-Viedma, E., & Cobo, M. J. (2018). Some bibliometric procedures for analyzing and evaluating research fields. *Applied Intelligence, 48*, 1275–1287.

Herrera-Viedma, E., López-Robles, J. R., Guallar, J., & Cobo, M. J. (2020). Global trends in coronavirus research at the time of Covid-19: A general bibliometric approach and content analysis using SciMAT. *El profesional de la información, 29*(3), e290322. https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2020.may.22

Honeycutt, E. D., Siguaw, J. A., & Hunt, T. G. (1995). Business ethics and job-related constructs: A cross-cultural comparison of automotive salespeople. *Journal of Business Ethics, 14*(3), 235–248.

Huang, Y. S., Wei, S., & Ang, T. (2022). The role of customer perceived ethicality in explaining the impact of incivility among employees on customer unethical behavior and customer citizenship behavior. *Journal of Business Ethics, 178*, 519–535.

Hunt, S. D. (2019). The ethics of branding, customer-brand relationships, brand-equity strategy, and branding as a societal institution. *Journal of Business Research, 95*, 408–416.

Javalgi, R. G., & Russell, L. T. M. (2018). International marketing ethics: A literature review and research agenda. *Journal of Business Ethics, 148*(4), 703–720.

Joergens, C. (2006). Ethical fashion: Myth or future trend? *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal, 10*(3), 360–371.

Küster, M. A. (2020). *La gestión de quejas y reclamaciones B2B en el contexto internacional.* [Tesis Doctoral]. Universidad de Valencia.

Laczniak, G., & Shultz, C. (2021). Toward a doctrine of socially responsible marketing (SRM): A macro and normative-ethical perspective. *Journal of Macromarketing, 41*(2), 201–231.

Laczniak, G. R., & Murphy, P. E. (2019). The role of normative marketing ethics. *Journal of Business Research, 95*, 401–407.

Lee, J. (2014). Will make consumers reward or punish companies. Proceedings of INTCESS14- International Conference on Education and Social Sciences, 3–5 February, Istanbul, Turkey.

Martínez, M. A., Herrera, M., López-Gijón, J., & Herrera-Viedma, E. (2014). H-classics: Characterizing the concept of citation classics through H-index. *Scientometrics, 98*(3), 1971–1983. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-013-1155-9

Michalos, A. C., & Poff, D. C. (2013). *Citation classics from the Journal of Business Ethics. Celebrating the first thirty years of publication.* Springer.

Montero-Díaz, J., Cobo, M. J., Gutiérrez-Salcedo, M., Segado-Boj, M., Herrera, F., & Viedma, E. (2018). A science mapping analysis of 'Communication' WoS subject category (1980–2013). *Comunicar: Media Education Research Journal, 26*(55), 81–91.

Moral-Muñoz, J. A., Herrera-Viedma, E., Santisteban-Espejo, A., & Cobo, M. J. (2020). Software tools for conducting bibliometric analysis in science: An up-to-date review. *Profesional de la Información, 29*(1), 1–20.

Muncy, J. A., & Vitell, S. J. (1992). Consumer ethics: An investigation of the ethical beliefs of the final consumer. *Journal of Business Research, 24*(4), 297–311.

Murgado-Armenteros, E. M., Gutiérrez-Salcedo, M., Torres-Ruiz, F. J., & Cobo, M. J. (2015). Analysing the conceptual evolution of qualitative marketing research through science mapping analysis. *Scientometrics, 102*(1), 519–557.

Nadeem, W., Juntunen, M., Shirazi, F., & Hajli, N. (2020). Consumers' value co-creation in sharing economy: The role of social support, consumers' ethical perceptions and relationship quality. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change, 151*, 119786.

Newholm, T., & Shaw, D. (2007). Studying the ethical consumer: A review of research. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour, 6*(5), 253–270.

Nova-Reyes, A., Munoz-Leiva, F., & Luque-Martinez, T. (2020). The tipping point in the status of socially responsible consumer behavior research? A bibliometric analysis. *Sustainability, 12*(8), 3141.

Noyons, E. C., Moed, H. F., & Luwel, M. (1999). Combining mapping and citation analysis for evaluative bibliometric purposes: A bibliometric study. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science, 50*(2), 115–131.

Pirsch, J., Gupta, S., & Grau, S. L. (2007). A framework for understanding corporate social responsibility programs as a continuum: An exploratory study. *Journal of Business Ethics, 70*(2), 125–140.

Pritchard, A. (1969). Statistical bibliography or bibliometrics? *Journal of Documentation, 25*(4), 348–349.

Ribeiro, R., Silva, B., Pimenta, C., & Poeschl, G. (2020). Why do consumers perpetrate fraudulent behaviors in insurance? *Crime, Law and Social Change, 73*(3), 249–273.

Riquelme, I. P., Román, S., & Iacobucci, D. (2016). Consumers' perceptions of online and offline retailer deception: A moderated mediation analysis. *Journal of Interactive Marketing, 35*, 16–26.

Rodríguez-López, M. E., Alcántara-Pilar, J. M., Del Barrio-García, S., & Muñoz-Leiva, F. (2020). A review of restaurant research in the last two decades: A bibliometric analysis. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 87, 102387.

Román, S., & Ruiz, S. (2005). Relationship outcomes of perceived ethical sales behavior: The customer's perspective. *Journal of Business Research*, 58(4), 439–445.

Schwepker, C. H., Jr., & Hartline, M. D. (2005). Managing the ethical climate of customer-contact service employees. *Journal of Service Research*, 7(4), 377–397.

Scott, E. D. (2003). Plane truth: A qualitative study of employee dishonesty in the airline industry. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 42(4), 321–337.

Singh, R. (2018). Money, religiosity, and spiritual well-being: Does it impact consumers' ethical beliefs? Evidence from India. *Decision*, 45(3), 259–269.

Thumin, F. J., Johnson, J. H., Jr., Kuehl, C., & Jiang, W. Y. (1995). Corporate values as related to occupation, gender, age, and company size. *The Journal of Psychology*, 129(4), 389–400.

Tolentino, R. D. D., Goncalves, C., & La Falce, J. L. (2019). Does corporate ethical behavior affect relationships with their brands? Influence of ethical consumer perception on Consumers' Trust, commitment and loyalty. *Teoria e Pratica em Administracao-TPA*, 2(9), 121–136.

Tsalikis, J., & Fritzsche, D. J. (2013). Business ethics: A literature review with a focus on marketing ethics. In A. C. Michalos & D. C. Poff (Eds.), *Citation classics from the Journal of Business Ethics* (pp. 337–404). Springer.

Vallaster, C., Kraus, S., Lindahl, J. M. M., & Nielsen, A. (2019). Ethics and entrepreneurship: A bibliometric study and literature review. *Journal of Business Research*, 99, 226–237.

Van Kenhove, P., De Wulf, K., & Steenhaut, S. (2003). The relationship between consumers' unethical behavior and customer loyalty in a retail environment. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 44(4), 261–278.

Vila-López, N., & Kuster-Boluda, I. (2021). Product placement bibliometric study: Generic journals versus specific-communication journals. *International Journal of Business Communication*, 23294884211055840. https://doi.org/10.1177/23294884211055840

Vila-Lopez, N., & Küster-Boluda, I. (2021). A bibliometric analysis on packaging research: Towards sustainable and healthy packages. *British Food Journal*, 123(2), 684–701.

Vitell, S. J. (2003). Consumer ethics research: Review, synthesis and suggestions for the future. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 43(1), 33–47.

Vitell, S. J., Lumpkin, J. R., & Rawwas, M. Y. A. (2013). Consumer ethics: An investigation of the ethical beliefs of elderly consumers. In A. C. Michalos & D. C. Poff (Eds.), *Citation classics from the Journal of Business Ethics* (pp. 447–462). Springer.

Vitell, S. J., & Muncy, A. (2013). Consumer ethics: An empirical investigation of factors influencing ethical judgments of the final consumer. In A. C. Michalos & D. C. Poff (Eds.), *Citation classics from the Journal of Business Ethics* (pp. 549–564). Springer.

Vitell, S. J., Singhapakdi, A., & Thomas, J. (2001). Consumer ethics: An application and empirical testing of the Hunt-Vitell theory of ethics. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 18, 153–178.

Williamson, S., & Jauch, L. R. (1995). Research on hospital administrators' ethics: An agenda. *Medical Care Research and Review*, 52(1), 134–144.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Prof. Dr. Ines Kuster is Professor in Marketing in the Department of Marketing - Faculty of Economics, University of Valencia, Spain. She got her PhD in Marketing from the University of Valencia in 1999. Her research attention has focused on the areas of strategic marketing and sales. She has published articles in several refereed journals (i.e. JOUEC; Information & Management, JQR; European Journal of Innovation Management; Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing; Innovative Marketing; Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal; European Journal of Marketing; The Marketing Review; Marketing Intelligence and Planning; Journal of Global Marketing; Journal of Relationship Marketing; Annals of Tourism Research; Sex Roles; Equal Opportunites International, and other relevant Spanish journals). She is the author of diverse books and book chapters related to her investigation field. She has also presented papers at European and Academy of Marketing conferences. She collaborates with several companies, helping them in marketing areas (recruiting salespeople, training sales managers, analysing commercial efforts, etc.).

Prof. Dr. Natalia Vila is Professor in Marketing in the Department of Marketing - Faculty of Economics, University of Valencia, Spain. She gets her PhD in Marketing from the University of Valencia in 1999. She has carried out research on topics such as competitive positioning, identification of strategic groups/competitive groups and the application of Multidimensional Scaling in marketing. Her research work has been published in *the European Journal of Marketing; International Marketing Review, Marketing Intelligence and Planning; Journal of Consumer Marketing; Journal of Relationship Marketing; Innovative Marketing; Journal of Marketing Management; Journal of Strategic Marketing; European Journal of Innovation Management; Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal; The Marketing Review; Journal of Global Marketing; Journal of Travel and Transport Marketing; Equal Opportunities International*, and Spanish refereed journals. She has presented papers at several Conferences suchas *EMAC, AM or AMS*.
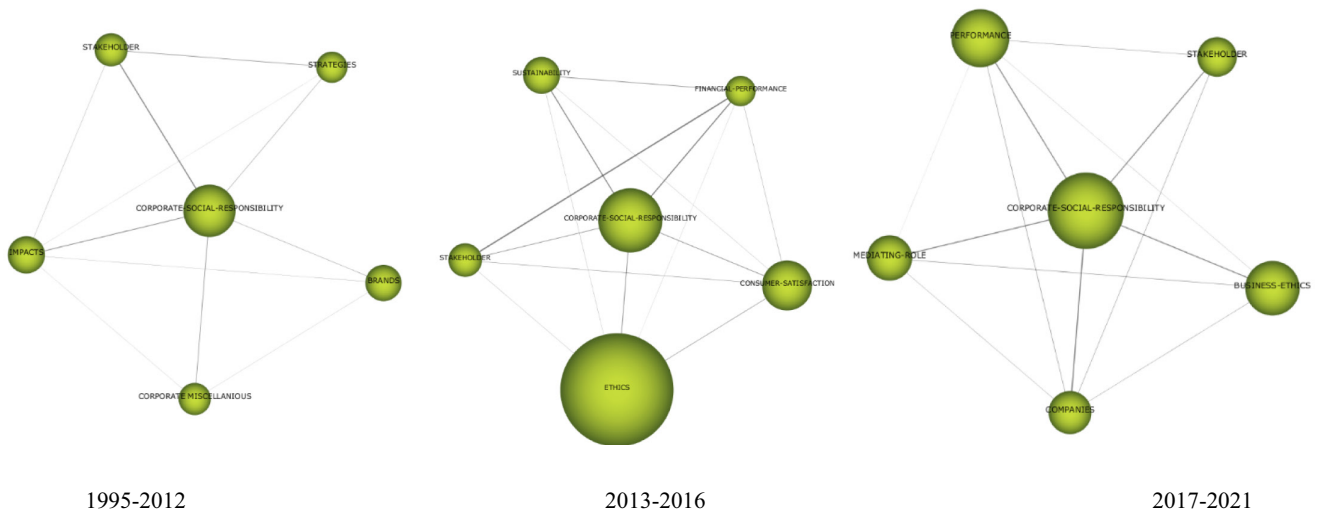
APPENDIX
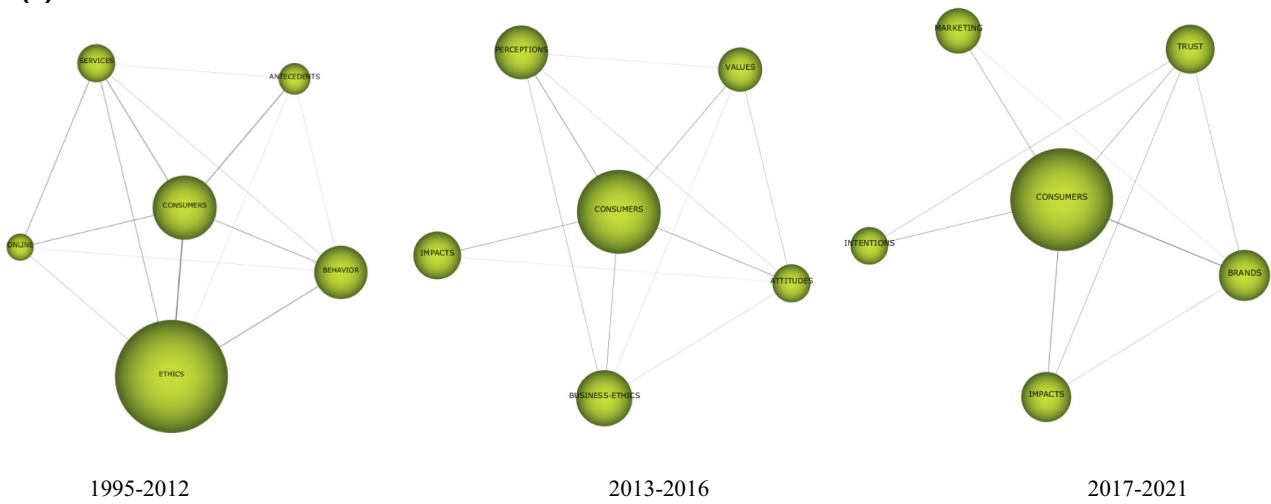
FIGURE A1 Main relationships of consumers and corporate-social-responsibility with other topics. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]