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Fair Is Fair: Consumer Just World Beliefs and Intentions and Behaviors Towards Fair Trade Products

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While a large body of research has examined consumers' perceptions of fairness as they pertain to their own experiences and outcomes (e.g., Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999), research has not examined consumers' fairness beliefs as they relate to concerns for justice for others. We examine consumers' perceptions of fairness for others in the context of fair trade. Fair trade refers to a social movement that encourages the payment of a fair price for products, while aiming to alleviate poverty, promote sustainable development, and assist producers marginalized by the traditional economic model (De Pelsmacker and Janssens 2007). Researchers have recently lamented the fact that it is often difficult to encourage consumers to actually choose and purchase products that are fair trade (Chatzidakis, Andreas, and Smith 2007). We utilize a just world framework (Lerner 1970) to investigate what factors make consumers more likely to support and choose fair trade products when they learn about marginalized coffee and tea producers.

Just World Theory proposes that people are motivated to construe the world as a just place in which individuals get what they deserve and deserve what they get. Further, when evidence is provided that the world is not fair (e.g., learning of an innocent victim's suffering), this threatens just world beliefs. To reconcile evidence that the world is not just, people demonstrate varied reactions, which can range from rationalizing the victim's situation, to engaging in helping behaviors (Hafer and Begue 2005; Lerner and Simmons 1966). We show that the tendency to assist others in need through supporting and choosing fair trade coffees (pilot study, study 1, and study 2) and teas (study 3) can be decreased (increased) by varying factors that heighten (reduce) defensive reactions to just world threat.

One commonly held view among marketing practitioners and researchers is that, when appealing to consumers to engage in prosocial behaviors, highlighting a high degree of perceived need should enhance helping (Bendapudi, et al. 1996; Fisher and Ackerman 1998). However, a just world framework predicts that, in the absence of alternative avenues for ameliorating just world threat, a high degree of need may decrease willingness to engage in prosocial behaviors (Hafer 2000). We tested for this possibility in a pilot study. Participants read about a situation for coffee producers in Malawi that either depicted a high or moderate degree of need. Participants then reported their behavioral intentions towards purchasing a fair trade product—Karma Coffee, which was described as a fair trade coffee that would support coffee producers in Malawi. Consistent with predictions, participants were significantly more inclined to help by purchasing fair trade products when perceived severity of need was moderate versus high ($p < .01$). Following from this study, we set out to test for a series of moderating and mediating variables to elucidate the role that justice concerns play in determining the consumption of fair trade products.

In Study 1, we examined the role of duration of suffering. We predicted that if the situation for marginalized coffee producers is described as being a long-term, chronic issue this should increase just world threat (particularly under high need), whereas if it is more

acute in nature this will be less threatening. Participants took part in a 2(Severity of Need: moderate vs. high) x 2(Duration of Suffering: short-term vs. long-term) design. As anticipated, under conditions long-term suffering, participants reported a lesser willingness to purchase fair trade products when perceived need was high rather than moderate ($p < .001$). These effects were mediated by beliefs about victim deservingness.

In Study 2, we examine a condition under which helping will be more likely when need is high versus moderate—ability to impact justice is high (vs. low). When helping has a larger impact on the ability to restore justice for coffee producers (i.e., a high percentage of the fair trade purchase goes to producers), defensive reactions under conditions of high need should be mitigated. Participants took part in a 2(Degree of Need: moderate need vs. high need) x 2(Ability to Impact Justice: low vs. high) design. Among those who believed that ability to impact justice was low, people were less inclined to purchase fair trade products when need was high versus moderate ($p < .05$). However, when the ability to impact justice was high the reverse effect was found, whereby those in the high need condition were more likely to help than were those in the moderate need condition ($p < .01$). These effects were mediated by justice restoration beliefs.

In study 3, we examine actual choices of fair trade (vs. non-fair trade) teas. In addition, we elucidate the underlying role of justice concerns by directly manipulating whether or not the purchase of fair trade leads to positive justice outcomes (restored justice vs. unrestored justice vs. control) and by examining the moderating role of BJW. A just world framework would predict that when the notion that justice can be restored via choosing fair trade is highlighted, those high in BJW (who are particularly sensitive to fairness information) should be more likely to choose fair trade products (Hafer and Begue 2005). Those high in BJW were more likely to select fair trade teas when justice was restored versus unrestored, or in the control condition ($p < .01$), but no significant differences emerged for those low in BJW.

This research demonstrates that novel factors such as the duration of suffering, ability to restore justice, and justice outcomes predict inclinations towards purchasing fair trade and actually choosing fair trade products. We find that factors that heighten (reduce) defensive reactions to just world threat can decrease (increase) helping responses. This research also has practical implications for marketers. Although a common assumption is that increasing perceived need should enhance helping, the current work suggests that, under certain conditions, highlighting a high degree of severity of need or injustice for others can be detrimental. Further, highlighting severity of need works best when accompanied with information that efficacy of helping is high and that justice can be restored.

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