

The role of subjective knowledge and perceived trustworthiness in fair trade consumption for fashion and food products

Purpose: The aim of this study is to examine how subjective knowledge about fair trade products and the perceived trustworthiness of information about fair trade goods influence purchase intention and reported purchase behaviour across two product categories: fashion and food.

Design/methodology/approach: Data were collected from an online survey with a sample of 1616 consumers in four European countries: Germany, Italy, Austria, and the UK.

Findings: The results show that subjective knowledge moderates the positive relationship between intentions to purchase and reported purchase behaviour of fair trade products, however, the moderating role of perceived information trustworthiness was not significant. Furthermore, both the intention to purchase and reported purchase behaviour are significantly lower for fair trade fashion products than for fair trade food products.

Research/practical implications: This paper shows how fair trade consumption behaviour is mainly influenced by subjective knowledge about fair trade products. It reveals existing differences in both the buying intentions and reported purchase behaviour in different European markets.

Originality/value: This research broadens the understanding of consumers' fair trade consumption behaviour across two different product categories and four different countries, with a focus on the interaction effect of consumers' subjective knowledge and information trustworthiness.

Keywords: Fair Trade, Fashion, Food, Subjective Knowledge, Perceived Trustworthiness

INTRODUCTION

Ethical consumption has received increasing attention in recent years and its desirability and importance are commonly agreed upon (Beldad and Hegner, 2018; Govind et al. 2017). With regard to consumer behaviour, an ethical consumer should translate moral and ethical considerations (Bray et al., 2011) into the purchase of ethical products (Beldad and Hegner, 2018). Nevertheless, despite an overall awareness of their responsibility (Lauritsen and Perks, 2013), consumers do not necessarily transfer their considerations, concerns and motivations into actual purchase behaviour, leading to the perception-, attitude- or intention-behaviour-gap (Auger and Devinney, 2007; Carrington et al., 2010; Zabkar and Hosta, 2013) also known as the ethical purchase gap (Bray et al., 2011). Similar to conventional products, brand familiarity, price, quality and convenience remain the main factors influencing ethical consumption decisions (Andorfer and Liebe, 2015; Bray et al., 2011; De Pelsmaker et al. 2005). These factors alone, however, fail to explain the full variance of ethical consumption and the varying levels of success of ethical products in terms of market share and growth rates across countries and product categories.

Consumption of fair trade products is seen as a manifestation of ethical consumption emerging from consumers “*moral or ethical considerations*” (Bray et al., 2011). Fair trade is defined as a “*product certification and labelling system that seeks consumers’ recognition through quality labels and public and/or private certification (...) by standardizing and unveiling the conditions of production*” (Ruggeri et al., 2019), which included fair prices, the payment of fair trade premiums to producers, humane working conditions and also basic ecological methods of production (Schenk, 2019). The market for fair trade products has grown significantly over the past few decades. For instance, while global fair trade products’ sales amounted to €2.9 billion in 2008, they more than tripled within a decade, totalling €9.8 billion in 2018 (Fairtrade International, 2019a).

The main objective of this study was twofold: a) to explore the variables that potentially moderate the relationship between intentions to buy fair trade products and reported purchase behaviour; b) to examine consumers' heterogeneity in purchase intention and reported purchase behaviour across product categories – fashion and food - thus broadening and deepening existing knowledge about fair trade consumption behaviour (Herédia- Colaço et al., 2019; Ruggeri et al., 2019). Two important consumer constructs were selected as potential moderators for empirical testing: consumer subjective knowledge, and the perceived trustworthiness of information on fair trade products. Subjective knowledge refers to consumer-perceived or self-rated knowledge, indicating what individuals perceive they know about fair trade products (Brucks, 1985; Utkarsh et al., 2019). People with high levels of subjective knowledge tend to be confident in purchasing decisions, hence may potentially enhance the link between purchase intention and behaviour (Aertsens et al., 2011). Similarly, perceived trustworthiness of product information may increase consumer confidence (Priester and Petty, 2003), leading to a stronger link between purchase intention and behaviour. The categories of food and fashion were focused on, as fair trade fashion and food products might behave like different product categories. The greater variety of fair trade food items and the frequent exposure to fair trade information in the food category leads to consumers' association that food is the 'prototypical' category of fair trade products.

This study contributes to the consumer marketing literature by revealing the important role of subjective knowledge and the perceived trustworthiness of information in turning fair trade purchase intention into actual purchase, and suggesting that improving consumer knowledge and trust of firms' fair trade claims by disclosing and publicizing quality information such as retailers and producers' fair trade involvement and related activities is particularly effective in boosting fair trade product sales. The article is structured as follows: First, we discuss the differences between fair trade fashion and food products. Subsequently,

the theoretical concepts of subjective knowledge about fair trade products and the perceived trustworthiness of fair trade information are introduced. After summarizing the research hypotheses, details on the background of our study and methods are given. These details are followed by a description of hypothesis testing and the presentation of findings. The article closes with a summary of results and managerial implications, as well as a discussion on limitations and directions for future research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Fair trade fashion vs. food

Consumers are often motivated to consider ethically-related communication and information (Aertsens et al., 2011; Grunert et al., 2014; Paul and Rana, 2012), because of their concerns about society and the environment (Zabkar and Hosta, 2013). At the same time there seems to be an imbalance in sales between fair trade food and fashion products. While fair trade products mainly cover bananas, coffee, sugar and cocoa (≈ 95 percent), cotton represents less than a single-digit percentage share of sales quantity of fair trade products, making fair trade fashion still a niche market (Fairtrade International, 2019b). This imbalance could be directed to three essential differences:

First, for consumers, the fair trade label is most frequently associated with food products such as coffee, chocolate, fresh fruit and cocoa, but less with other agriculture-related products such as cotton, textile or fashion clothing (Shaw et al., 2006). This is because in general there is a greater variety of fair trade food items than fair trade fashion products. In addition, while the distribution of fair trade fashion is still limited and consumers often have to seek for specialist retailers, fair trade food is widely available in conventional supermarkets – with an increasing product range as retailers respond to the growing demand (Paul and Rana, 2012) – making fair trade products relatively convenient to buy.

Second, food items are normally fast moving consumer goods, thus consumers purchase them more frequently. According to the Associative Network Theory of Memory (Krishnan, 1996), the frequent exposure to fair trade information in the food category in contrast to the fashion category leads to stronger consumers' association between the nodes of 'fair trade' and 'food'. Thus, with repeated activation, food becomes the 'prototypical' category of fair trade products (Puccinelli et al. 2009).

Third, many fair trade certified food products are also certified organic products (Fairtrade International, 2019b). This attribute is helpful to increase the attractiveness of fair trade food products to consumers that are conscious of health-related issues, a benefit not particularly applicable to non-food products (Ma and Lee, 2012).

Against this, fair trade fashion and food products might act as distinctive product categories, which in consequence affects consumers' purchase intention and behaviour differently. Therefore, we hypothesise that:

H1a: The intention to purchase fair trade fashion products is significantly lower than the intention to purchase fair trade food products.

H1b: The reported purchase behaviour for fair trade fashion products is significantly lower than the reported purchase behaviour for fair trade food products.

Factors bridging the link between fair trade purchase intentions and reported purchase behaviour

The relationship between intention and behaviour

One of the gold standard models to assess consumption behaviour is the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991). Central to the TPB is the assumption that actual behaviour is the result of an individual's intention to perform that particular behaviour. This intention, in turn, is determined by the individual's attitude toward that behaviour, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). The TPB or its extended versions are

prominent models that have been tested in various studies regarding fair trade consumption (e.g., Panico et al., 2015; Beldad and Hegner, 2018).

The positive connection between attitude, intention and behaviour postulated in the TPB is regularly discussed in the literature. In the area of consumer research, it has already been shown that the stated attitudes and intentions of the participants do not always lead to the predicted (purchasing) behaviour (White et al., 2012). For example, a consumer's ethical buying motives rarely lead to ethical buying behaviour (Auger and Devinney, 2007; Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Carrington et al. 2010; Luchs et al. 2010). By introducing subjective knowledge (Brucks, 1985) and the perceived trustworthiness of information (Priester and Petty, 2003) as potential moderators of the relationship between the intention to purchase and reported purchase behaviour of fair trade products, our main research objective is to add further insights to this particular issue.

The moderating role of subjective knowledge

Consumers' knowledge is an important factor in studying consumers' purchase behaviour and ethical consumption (Brucks, 1985; Utkarsh et al., 2019). Research has shown that higher knowledge of environmental issues is associated with a higher engagement in pro-environmental behaviours (i.e. purchase behaviour) (Dursun, et al., 2019; Han, 2019) or that the level of knowledge about fair trade products affects fair trade purchase behaviour (De Pelsmacker and Janssens, 2007). Based on their subjective knowledge, individuals categorize themselves and construct their own (i.e. ethical) identity (Côté and Levine, 2014; Ramarajan, 2014). The lack of knowledge of the fair trade system has been cited as the second most important reason why consumers do not buy fair trade products, after price premium (Castaldo et al., 2009).

Consumers' subjective knowledge or perceived knowledge is considered to be a more important driver of purchase behaviour than "objective knowledge", i.e. consumers' actual

knowledge. A higher degree of subjective knowledge enables consumers to transfer their intentions into actual behaviour by giving them confidence in their decision (Aertsens et al., 2011), whereas a lower degree of subjective knowledge could lead to the perception of the information as too complex or too ambiguous (Chen and Chang, 2013). Furthermore, research shows that consumers' subjective knowledge is one of the most important factors in ethical purchase decisions (Gleim et al., 2013). Therefore, this research focuses on subjective knowledge as a potential moderator for the relationship between purchase intention and purchase behaviour and we hypothesise that:

H2a: The positive relationship between the intention to purchase fair trade fashion products and the reported purchase behaviour of fashion products is moderated by a consumer's subjective knowledge. Thus, a higher level of subjective knowledge leads to a stronger relationship between intention and reported behaviour, compared to a lower level of subjective knowledge.

H2b: The positive relationship between the intention to purchase fair trade food products and the reported purchase behaviour of food products is moderated by a consumer's subjective knowledge. Thus, a higher level of subjective knowledge leads to a stronger relationship between intention and reported behaviour, compared to a lower level of subjective knowledge.

The moderating role of the perceived trustworthiness of information

In the obtention of information, consumers have to rely on information such as advertising, product information and labelling provided by retailers, producers or other organizations (Gleim et al., 2013). Although on the one hand prior research reports a demand for more, and more specific information about ethical-related issues (Meise et al., 2014), on the other hand, the proliferation of promotional ethical-related messages and certification labels

may result in information overload and confusion (Borin et al., 2011; De Pelsmacker and Janssens, 2007; Grunert et al., 2014) and might impact the credibility of such information.

When consumers search for purchase information, they turn to the information and sources they trust. Trust is an important component of belief that influences consumer purchase decisions, particularly in the case of unfamiliar products, which are associated with risk. Fair trade claims along with other moral claims such as ethics and sustainability are credence claims (Andorfer and Liebe, 2015; Fernqvist and Ekelund, 2014). Credence refers to the credibility of the seller (Grunert, 1997), and cannot, in contrast to most other product attributes, be verified before or after purchasing. Instead, consumers have to rely on peripheral cues to decide either to trust or not trust the moral claims (Atkinson and Rosenthal, 2014; Tampe, 2016). Perceived trustworthiness of information reflects the level of one's confidence about the information and its source being accurate and sincere (Priester and Petty, 2003). Without confidence in fair trade claims and related fair trade information, consumers are not likely to convert their intention into purchase behaviour. Therefore, we hypothesise that:

H3a: The positive relationship between the intention to purchase fair trade fashion products and the reported purchase behaviour of fashion products is moderated by a consumer's perception of the trustworthiness of information. Thus, a higher level of perceived trustworthiness leads to a stronger relationship between intention and reported behaviour, compared to a lower level of perceived trustworthiness.

H3b: The positive relationship between the intention to purchase fair trade food products and the reported purchase behaviour of food products is moderated by a consumer's perception of the trustworthiness of information. Thus, a higher level of perceived trustworthiness leads to a stronger relationship between intention and reported behaviour, compared to a lower level of perceived trustworthiness.

The whole conceptual model is shown in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

METHOD AND RESULTS

Sample and procedures

The empirical analysis is based on data from a standardized online survey which contained a sample of 1,616 participants (970 females; age: $M = 38.62$, $SD = 7.35$). Members of a survey panel were invited to participate in the study via a link on an online survey platform. They could earn rewards in a panel-specific points-based system for their participation in the survey. The data were collected in Germany ($n = 416$; 250 females; age: $M = 39.06$, $SD = 7.77$), UK ($n = 400$; 240 females; age: $M = 38.84$, $SD = 7.21$), Italy ($n = 400$; 241 females; age: $M = 38.77$, $SD = 6.68$) and Austria ($n = 400$; 239 females; age: $M = 37.81$, $SD = 7.61$).

We chose Germany, UK, Italy, and Austria for two reasons: First, all countries have notable but different levels of sales volumes for fair trade products – ensuring customer awareness for this product category. Second, we wanted to increase the variance in the sample with regard to consumers' buying intention of fair trade products and reported purchase behaviour.

With a sales volume of about €2,014 million in 2017, the UK has been the most important market for fair trade products globally, followed by Germany, ranking second with €1,329 million (Austria: €304 million; Italy: €130 million; Fair Trade International, 2018). Furthermore, most of the studies on fair trade have been conducted in the USA or the United Kingdom and other Northern European countries where fair trade consumption is a well consolidated practice (Andorfer and Liebe, 2015; Ruggeri et al., 2019). Only very few studies included the Mediterranean countries like Italy, where fair trade consumption is a growing

phenomenon, but still low in comparison to other European countries (Panico et al., 2015). Thus, the study focuses on a context in which fair trade consumption is relatively common, but shows differences in their potential for future growth (Schenk, 2019). Regarding sample characteristics, no differences between countries were found with regard to age, $F(3, 1612) = 2.30, p = .075$ and gender, $X^2(3, n = 1616) = .022, p = .99$ (see table 1 for an overview of sample characteristics).

Insert Table 1 about here

Participants were asked to answer questions related to the 1) intention to purchase fair trade fashion and food as well as conventional fashion and food (*“What is your willingness to buy the following products: [fair trade fashion/conventional fashion/fair trade food/conventional food]”*) on a 7-point Likert-scale (with 1 = “very low” to 7 = “very high”), adapted in a modified version from Dodds et al. (2000); 2) their general purchase behaviour for conventional fashion and food (*“What is roughly your average spending per month for clothing/per week for food? [in € (£)]”*) and 3) their reported purchase behaviour for fashion and food (*“If you look at your average spending in € per month/week for [clothing/food], what is the share you spent on (i.e., fair trade clothing/fair trade food)? (in %)”*), adapted and modified from Wulf et al. (2001); 4) their subjective knowledge about fair trade fashion and food production (*“How do you rate your own level of knowledge about fair trade [fashion/food]?”*) on a 7-point Likert-scale (with 1 = “no knowledge” to 7 = “very high level of knowledge”) and 5) their perception of the trustworthiness of information related to fair trade fashion and food (*“How credible do you assess information about fair trade [fashion/food] products provided by the companies?”*) on a 7-point Likert-scale (with 1 = “not trustworthy at

all” to 7 = “very trustworthy”). With regard to the different countries, questions were translated and retranslated¹.

Results

Preliminary analysis

A preliminary correlation analysis was applied to test the different buying intentions (*intention to purchase conventional fashion/food products (IntFash_C/IntFood_C); intention to purchase fair trade fashion/food products (IntFash_{FT}/IntFood_{FT})*) and their relation to each other and towards participants’ reported purchase behaviour for fair trade fashion and food products (*PurchFash_{FT}/PurchFood_{FT}*) (see table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here

According to a procedure for testing differences between correlation coefficients (Lenhard and Lenhard, 2014), correlation coefficients between the intention to purchase fair trade products and reported ethical behaviour (fashion: $r=.38$; food: $r=.41$) and between the intention to purchase conventional products and reported purchase behaviour (fashion: $r=.06$; food: $r=-.04$) are significantly different (fashion: $z=9.74$, $p < .001$; food: $z=.41$, $p < .001$). Based on this analysis, we show that participants report different intentions to buy, and reported purchase behaviour associated either with conventional or with fair trade products. Furthermore, age showed no correlation and therefore was excluded from further analysis (see table 2).

Hypothesis testing

¹ We acknowledge that despite a careful check of item comparability, potential issues surround translational and construct equivalence between the selected countries.

First, to test hypothesis H1a – *differences in buying intention between fair trade fashion and food products* - an analysis of covariance for repeated measures (RM-ANCOVA; with product category: fashion, food) was computed with the intention to purchase fair trade fashion or food products. Country and gender were implemented as an inter-subject-factor, because of their potential to extract further differences with regard to the intentions to buy fair trade products (Brough et al., 2016; Fair Trade International, 2018).

The analysis yields a significant main effect of the product category ($F(1, 1608) = 246.13, p < .001$). As hypothesized (H1a), the intention to purchase fair trade fashion products is significantly lower ($M = 4.74, SD = 1.59$) compared to the intention to purchase fair trade food products ($M = 5.16, SD = 1.54$). Furthermore, a significant main effect was observed for gender ($F(1, 1608) = 16.37, p < .001$), but not for country ($F(3, 1608) = 2.54, p = .055$). Significant interaction effects were observed between product category and country ($F(3, 1608) = 25.17, p < .001$), between product category and gender ($F(1, 1608) = 6.09, p = .014$), but not between country and gender ($F(3, 1608) = 0.11, p = .95$) and between product category, country, and gender ($F(3, 1608) = 0.36, p = .78$).

Second, to test hypothesis H1b – *differences in reported purchase behaviour between fair trade fashion and food products* - an analysis of covariance for repeated measures (RM-ANCOVA; with product category: fashion, food) was computed with the reported purchase behaviour for fashion and food products. Country and gender were implemented as inter-subject-factor, because of their potential to extract further differences with regard to the reported purchase behaviour (Brough et al., 2016; Fair Trade International, 2018).

The analysis yields a significant main effect of the product category ($F(1, 1608) = 218.925, p < .001$). As hypothesized (H1b), the reported purchase behaviour for fair trade fashion is significantly lower ($M = 16.88, SD = 21.86$) compared to the reported purchase behaviour for fair trade food ($M = 25.22, SD = 24.30$). Furthermore, a significant main effect

was observed for country ($F(3, 1608) = 11.92, p < .001$), but not for gender ($F(1, 1608) = 0.49, p = .48$). Significant interaction effects were observed between product category and country ($F(3, 1608) = 36.67, p < .001$), between product category and gender ($F(1, 1608) = 5.22, p = .02$), but not between country and gender ($F(3, 1608) = 0.47, p = .73$) and between product category, country, and gender ($F(3, 1608) = 0.14, p = .93$). Table 3 shows an overview of country and gender results with regard to the intention to purchase and the reported purchase behaviour for fair trade fashion and food products.

Insert Table 3 about here

To test H2a – subjective knowledge - and H3a – perceived trustworthiness of information – moderating the relationship between the intention to purchase and the reported purchase behaviour for fair trade fashion products, a moderated regression analysis was applied using the process toolbox (model 3 (for allowing interaction between moderators); Hayes, 2013) with the intention to purchase fashion products as the independent variable, reported purchase behaviour for fashion products as the dependent variable, and subjective knowledge and perceived trustworthiness of information as moderating variables. Moreover, country and gender were used as control variables. All variables (except the control variables) were standardized and constructions of products were mean-centred (Hayes 2013).

The analysis shows that the positive relationship between the intention to purchase and the reported purchase behaviour for fair trade fashion products ($\beta = .20, p < .001$) is significantly moderated by subjective knowledge ($\beta = .12, p < .001$; H2a). No significant moderation effect was found for the perceived trustworthiness of information on the relationship between the intention to purchase and reported purchase behaviour of fair trade fashion products ($\beta = -.01, p = .67$; H3a).

To test H2b – subjective knowledge - and H3b – perceived trustworthiness of information - moderating the relationship between the intention to purchase and the reported purchase behaviour for fair trade food products, a moderated regression analysis was applied using the process toolbox (model 3 (for allowing interaction between moderators); Hayes, 2012; 2013) with the intention to purchase fair trade food products as the independent variable, reported purchase behaviour for food products as the dependent variable, and subjective knowledge and perceived trustworthiness of information as moderating variables. Moreover, country and gender were used as control variables. All variables (except the control variables) were standardized and constructions of products were mean-centred (Hayes, 2013).

The analysis shows, that the positive relationship between the intention to purchase and the reported purchase behaviour of fair trade food products ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$) is significantly moderated by subjective knowledge ($\beta = .14$, $p < .001$; H2b). No significant moderation effect was found for the perceived trustworthiness of information on the relationship between the intention to purchase and reported purchase behaviour of fair trade food products ($\beta = .01$, $p = .76$; H3b). See table 4 for an overview of the results of the moderated regression analyses² and figure 2 for a visualization of the moderation effect of subjective knowledge for fair trade fashion and food products.

Insert Table 4 and Figure 2 about here

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

² In order to test for multi-collinearity and autocorrelation, a linear regression analysis was applied with *intentions to buy fair trade products*, *subjective knowledge*, and *perceived trustworthiness of information* as independent variables and *reported purchase behaviour* as dependent variables. Results showed for both product categories (fashion, food) no violation through multi-collinearity (tolerance values between .63 and .77, variance inflation factor between 1.38 and 1.58) and through autocorrelation (Durbin-Watson tests equals 1.91 (fashion) and 1.99 (food)).

The present research investigates the intention to purchase fair trade products and the reported purchase behaviour using data collected from sampled consumers in four European countries. It concentrates on the difference in purchase intentions and reported purchase behaviour of fair trade products as well as the possible interaction effect of consumers' subjective knowledge about fair trade products and the perceived trustworthiness of information related to fair trade products on purchase intention and behaviour for two product categories: food and fashion. The study has important theoretical and practical implications.

In sum, our study showed that both the intention to purchase fair trade products and the reported purchase behaviour is lower for fair trade fashion compared to food. Furthermore, we showed that subjective knowledge about fair trade moderates the link between buying intention and reported purchase behaviour, thus enhancing the importance of providing consumers with a broad basis of knowledge about the fair trade concept.

Discussion of theoretical implications

The study makes three major contributions to theory. First, the study enhances our understanding of the product-category-dependent nature of fair trade consumption by revealing the difference in fair trade consumption patterns between two different product categories. The results confirm the expected difference between fashion and food regarding both the intention to purchase (H1a), and reported purchase behaviour (H1b). The intention to purchase and reported purchase behaviour for fashion were lower compared to food. Alongside inhibiting factors such as price or brand familiarity there seem to be more obstacles that contribute to the different awareness of and consumption behaviour around fair trade fashion or food. Reasons for a higher buying intention and reported purchase behaviour of fair trade food products compared to fashion products could for instance be due to limited availability, poorer communication of fair trade aspects, differing perception of fair trade information and the

acceptance of ethicality-related issues within the fashion industry (Ritch, 2015; Shaw et al., 2006).

Second, the study contributes to a better understanding of the link between intention and behaviour by examining the impact of consumers' subjective knowledge about fair trade products and the perceived trustworthiness of information. The results support the hypotheses that subjective knowledge acts as a moderator between the intention to purchase and reported purchase behaviour for both fashion and food (H2a-b). Although numerous studies have examined the important role of subjective knowledge in consumer behaviour (e.g. Aertsens et al., 2011, Brucks, 1985; Dursun et al. 2019; Han, 2019; Utkarsh et al, 2019), little research has tested its moderating role. This study is among the first to uncover the moderating effect of subjective knowledge and explicate the link between intention and behaviour. In other words, consumers who perceive themselves as knowledgeable are more aware of advantages and the necessity of fair trade consumption (Murphy and Jenner-Leuthart, 2011) and are more likely to turn their intention into action. Hence, this study helps to explain how the link between intention and behaviour is dependent on consumers' subjective knowledge.

Third, despite the fact that the results of this study do not support the moderating impact of the perceived trustworthiness of information on the relationship between intention to purchase and reported purchase behaviour either for fashion or for food (H3a-b), the results do show that the perceived trustworthiness of information has a direct impact on the reported purchase behaviour for fashion and food. Thus, we provide empirical support for the suggestion that trust is an import factor of purchase in the context of green or corporate social responsibility marketing (Atkinson and Rosenthal, 2014; Castaldo et al. 2009; Chen et al., 2013) and the effectiveness of advertising message (Priester and Petty, 2003). Furthermore, the significant interaction effect of subjective knowledge and perceived trustworthiness of information on reported purchase behaviour for fair trade fashion but not fair trade food

products indicates that subjective knowledge and perceived trustworthiness together may play a greater role in the fashion sector than in the food sector. The results show that both subjective knowledge about fair trade products and the perceived trustworthiness of information related to fair trade goods can boost purchase behaviour (Murphy and Jenner-Leuthart, 2011), especially for fashion products.

Discussion of practical implications

This study investigates the role of subjective knowledge and perceived trustworthiness of information on fair trade consumption behaviour and demonstrates differences in fair trade consumption behaviour between product categories and countries (see table 3). Results confirm, that without enhancing the subjective knowledge of consumers, by providing essential customer education or improving customer literacy, lack of knowledge is likely to impede the growth of ethical consumption (Bray et al., 2011; Grunert et al., 2014). Therefore, one of the most important factors to boost fair trade consumption is not the quantity of information, but particularly the content and the quality of information. This is especially valid for fashion products, where information about fair trade is limited and not well perceived and accepted (Ritch, 2015).

Firms should enable consumers to obtain enough trustworthy information to compare products on the basis of ethical (i.e., fair trade) considerations (Chen and Chang, 2013). This is especially important in complex markets like the fashion market and for consumers with limited knowledge, who hold rather abstract information about resources and fair trade perceptions and feel less confident in their purchase decisions. Producers and retailers could offer more detailed, situational or context-specific information (Atkinson, 2013). Against this and in conclusion, the study of consumer knowledge and the trustworthiness of fair trade information is crucial, if policy makers and marketing managers are to successfully promote ethical consumption behaviour – especially within the textile and fast fashion industry.

The study shows that the differences between product categories are also related to differences between countries. While German and Austrian consumers showed the expected difference between fashion and food consistently for both purchase the intention and behaviour, Italian and British consumers showed high purchase intention but low reported purchase behaviour. This finding suggests that fair trade brands should assess the level of subjective knowledge among consumers in each country, before entering the market or taking any resource-intensive marketing measures (Heredia et al 2019). Fair trade marketing managers need to adapt their marketing objectives such as generating awareness, confidence and/or trust on a country or regional basis rather than adopting a standardised approach. Specifically, as our study shows, more effort in this regard is a need in Italy and Britain than in Germany and Austria to narrow down the intention-behaviour gap.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are several limitations of this study that point to areas for future research. First, despite using a standardized online survey in contrast to face-to-face interviews and by avoiding a priming of the fair trade topic by assessing the relevant items in a questionnaire that was part of a larger research survey in order to ensure greater anonymity, the topic is prone to social desirability (McNeeley, 2012). Current literature on ethical consumption relying on self-administered questionnaires addresses social desirability e. g. by surveying “consumption behavior in isolation” (Govind et al. 2017, 1211) or by simply mentioning it as a limitation (Andersch et al. 2019). Besides the restriction of social desirability, participants might also overstate their frequency of buying fair trade products (Devinney et al. 2010) or the amount they are willing to pay (Ruggeri et al., 2019).

Second, variables were measured by single-item constructs and therefore do not allow for the assessment of construct reliability, convergent and discriminant validity. However,

there is no indication that this approach leads to an over- or under-estimation of the true correlations (Schenk, 2019). Besides, content validity supports the distinction of the constructs. Future research could nevertheless use alternative measures to assess the robustness of the findings.

Third, this study did not focus on different social orientation cultures (e. g. individualism/collectivism) or values (power, hedonism etc.), but acknowledges their potential to add further understanding about how consumers perceive fair trade products and their communication. Future research could address this issue by including cultural dimensions in the research model for empirical examination.

Fourth, although we conducted the survey in four European countries, none of the samples is representative of the population of each country. Therefore, though helping to enhance the generalisation of research findings by assessing different fair trade product markets, the generalisability of our findings is limited. Future research could use more representative sampling techniques to reduce the sampling bias.

Fifth, nevertheless, the results indicate that differences between product categories are also related to differences between countries (see table 3). Therefore, the results emphasize the importance of understanding and considering individual cultural differences as potentially relevant factors affecting ethical consumption behaviour (see also Herédia-Colaço et al., 2019).

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