Tra Il Dire E Il Are C’È Di Mezzo Il Mare*: an Investigation Into the Ethical Purchasing Gap *Italian Proverb: Between Saying and Doing Is Half a Sea

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Comparing self-reported intentions and observed actual behavior this study contributes to our understanding of the ethical purchasing gap. Consumers who don’t walk their talk are more price sensitive, exhibit more inertia in purchasing behavior, and have a lower income than consumers with consistent Fair Trade purchasing intentions and purchasing behavior.

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INTRODUCTION

Ethical consumption practices such as purchasing Fair Trade (FT) products are common at the turn of the 21st century (Andorfer and Liebe 2015). Just as the consumption of FT products is increasing (Krier 2008) so is research on ethical consumption in general and FT consumption in particular (see Andorfer and Liebe 2012, Papaoikonomou et al. 2011 for reviews). Prior research has investigated the discrepancy between individuals’ self-reported attitudes, intentions or purchasing and actual purchasing behavior under the notions of attitude-behavior gap (e.g., Kim et al. 1997), intention-behavior gap (e.g., Hassan et al. 2016), and ethical purchasing gap (e.g., Bray et al. 2011; Nicholls and Lee 2006). The theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen 1985, 1991) has been the theoretical framework for many studies on ethical consumption. However, many studies on ethical consumption applying this theoretical framework, end up investigating individuals’ buying intentions as the final outcome variable rather than individuals’ actual buying behavior and thus these studies do not fully reflect the TPB (Andorfer and Liebe 2012). To date no study that builds on the TPB has compared the effects of driver and barrier variables on FT purchasing intentions and observed FT purchasing behavior. This study seeks to close this gap by combining observation in the field with a survey in the context of FT coffee consumption.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

In a nutshell, the TPB postulates that attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control impact behavioral intention which in turn impacts behavior in a specific situation (see Ajzen 1985; 1991). In the context of FT consumption several studies build on and extend the TPB (e.g., Chatzidakis et al. 2007; De Pelsmacker and Janssens 2007; Ozcalgar-Toulouse et al. 2006). However, the most prevalent methodological shortcoming of FT studies building on the TPB is that studies investigate consumers’ purchasing intentions but not consumers’ actual purchasing behavior (Andorfer and Liebe 2012). As a consequence, socially desirable responding might lead to an overestimation of FT consumption, which might result in a gap between stated and observed preferences due to unconstrained survey response methods (Auger and Devlinney 2007). While research on ethical consumption grounded in the theoretical tradition of economics employs more incentive-compatible methods for data collection (e.g., choice experiments, Auger et al. 2003; conjoint experiments, De Pelsmacker et al. 2005; field experiments Arnol et al. 2006) these types of studies typically provide willingness to pay estimates but do not investigate consumers’ motivations for their respective willingness to pay (Andorfer and Liebe 2012). In this respect prior research suggests that a combination of research methods could further improve our understanding of ethical consumption and the ethical purchasing gap (e.g., Andorfer and Liebe 2012; Auger and Devlinney 2007). This study seeks to contribute to the extant literature on FT consumption by combining observation in the field with a survey and answering the following research questions (RQs):

RQ 1: Which factors differentially drive and impede FT purchasing intentions and FT purchasing behavior?
RQ 2: How do consumers who are inconsistent in terms of their FT purchasing intentions and FT purchasing behavior differ from consumers who are consistent in their FT purchasing intentions and FT purchasing behavior?

In line with prior research on FT consumption building on the TPB (e.g., De Pelsmacker and Janssens 2007; Ozcalgar-Toulouse et al. 2006; Shaw et al. 2000; Shaw and Shi 2003) this study hypothesizes that attitude has a positive effect on consumers’ FT purchasing intentions and FT purchasing behavior:

Hypothesis 1: Attitude positively affects consumers’ FT purchasing intentions (H1a) and consumers’ observed FT purchasing behavior (H1b).

Building on Shaw et al. (2000), and in line with De Pelsmacker and Janssens (2007) this study disregards the construct subjective norm in its conceptual model. However, this study expects positive effects of both, ethical obligation and self-identity on consumers’ FT purchasing intentions and behavior:

Hypothesis 2: Ethical obligation positively affects consumers’ FT purchasing intentions (H2a) and consumers’ observed FT purchasing behavior (H2b).

Hypothesis 3: Self-identity positively affects consumers’ FT purchasing intentions (H3a) and consumers’ observed FT purchasing behavior (H3b).

Building on Bray (2011) this study investigates the effect of perceived locus of control (Rotter 1966) instead of perceived behavioral control (Ajzen 1991) on FT purchasing intentions and behavior. More specifically, locus of control captures individuals’ beliefs about their control over ethical dilemmas, with an external locus of control indicating an individual believes the ethical dilemma is beyond his control whereas an internal locus of control indicating an individual makes ethical decisions in defiance of conflicting social or situation-al pressures (Singhapadki and Vitell 1991).

Hypothesis 4: Locus of control positively affects consumers’ FT purchasing intentions (H4a) and consumers’ observed FT purchasing behavior (H4b).

Typically, FT products sell at a price premium to conventional products in the respective categories. Several studies indicate that price and consumers’ price sensitivities are among the most important barriers to FT consumption (e.g., Bray et al. 2011; Cailleba and Casteran 2010; De Pelsmacker et al. 2005).

Hypothesis 5: Price sensitivity negatively affects consumers’ FT purchasing intentions (H5a) and consumers’ observed FT purchasing behavior (H5b).

In a focus group study on barriers to ethical consumption Bray et al. (2011) find that inertia in purchasing behavior is a substantial barrier to purchasing ethical products. Likewise, De Pelsmacker and Janssens (2007) find that price, the effort to find FT products, as well as informants’ lack of interest in FT products and breaking their habits of buying their usual brands are barriers to FT consumption.
Hypothesis 6: Inertia in purchasing behavior negatively affects consumers’ FT purchasing intentions (H6a) and consumers’ observed FT purchasing behavior (H6b).

Results on the effects of socio-demographic variables such as gender or age on ethical consumption remain inconclusive (e.g., Bray et al. 2011; De Pelsmacker et al. 2005). Given these inconsistent results, this study does not formulate formal hypotheses on the influences of socio-demographics on FT purchasing intentions and behavior but includes gender, age, and income as control variables. Figure 1 depicts this study’s conceptual model.

![Conceptual Model](image)

**METHOD**

This study combined observation in the field with a survey to test its hypotheses. Coffee vending machines at two campuses of a European university offered a unique data collection opportunity: The vending machines carry both, unlabeled and FT-labeled coffees. More specifically, all sorts of coffee (e.g., Cappuccino) are available both, as an unlabeled and a FT-labeled version. The unlabeled coffees sell at €0.50 for 180 ml while the FT-labeled coffees sell at €1.00 for 300 ml. That is, the price premium for FT-labeled coffees is 20.00%. Data were collected by first observing an individual’s coffee choice (unlabeled vs. FT-labeled) and subsequently administering a questionnaire to willing consumers. Coffee choice was recorded first, to avoid that the questionnaire induces possible demand effects (Orne 1962). To incentivize participation in the survey, participants had the chance to win one of three shopping coupons (€25 each) for a major online retailer upon provision of their e-mail address at the end of the questionnaire. Data were collected on different weekdays, different times of the day, and two different campuses during 6 weeks in spring 2016. In the end the convenience sampling strategy yielded a total of 199 questionnaires.

To measure the drivers of- and barriers to FT purchasing this study either adapted prior studies’ measures or derived measures from prior literature. More specifically, this study used three items to measure attitude (e.g., “In general, my attitude towards purchasing a Fair Trade product is favorable.”, Shaw et al. 2000), two items to measure locus of control (e.g., “My life is determined by my own actions.”, Halpert et al. 2011), three items to measure price sensitivity (e.g., “Fair Trade products should not be more expensive than ordinary products.”, De Pelsmacker and Janssens 2007), and three items to measure inertia in purchasing (e.g., “I am not interested in fair trade products because I prefer my usual brands.”, De Pelsmacker and Janssens 2007). All driver and barrier variables were measured using 7-point Likert-type scales. The questionnaire captured the socio-demographic variables gender, age, and income. As the cup size between regular and FT coffees differed (i.e., 180 ml vs. 300 ml) the questionnaire included an item (i.e., “How important was the cup size for your beverage choice?”) to control for this potential confound in the analysis. The dependent behavioral variable was coffee choice (regular coffee = 0 vs. FT coffee = 1). To compare FT purchasing behavior with FT purchasing intentions the questionnaire additionally included an item to measure FT purchasing intentions (i.e., “The next time you go grocery shopping, how likely are you to purchase a Fairtrade product?”, Shaw et al. 2000).

**RESULTS**

Multiple hierarchical regressions were used to test the hypothesized effects. First, only the demographic controls, then the hypothesized drivers, and finally, the hypothesized barriers were added to the regression model. With the addition of driver and barrier variables, the explained variance improved significantly from model 1 to model 2 (R-square change of .439 F (4, 191) = 41.653, p = .000) and from model 2 to model 3 (R-square change of .036 F (2, 189) = 7.218, p = .001) respectively. The results show significant positive effects of attitude, ethical obligation, and self-identity on FT purchasing intentions. Additionally, age has a significant positive effect whereas inertia in purchasing behavior has a significant negative effect on FT purchasing intentions (see Table 1, Panel A). Consequently, the analysis supports H1a, H2a, H3a, and H6a but rejects H4a and H5a.

In a second analysis this study investigated the effects of the potential drivers and potential barriers on observed FT purchasing behavior, controlling for socio-demographic variables. Furthermore, the control variable for cup-size was included in the hierarchical logistic regression model. First, only the demographic controls, next the control for cup-size, then the hypothesized drivers, and finally, the hypothesized barriers were added to model. With the addition of the control for cup-size as well as driver and barrier variables, the model fit improved significantly from model 1 to model 2 (χ² (1) = 12.199, p = .000), from model 2 to model 3 (χ² (4) = 16.609, p = .002), and from model 3 to model 4 (χ² (2) = 10.880, p = .004) respectively. The results show that the inclusion of the control for cup-size was adequate given its significant effect on observed purchasing behavior. Despite controlling for the effect of cup-size, the results of this analysis show that price sensitivity and inertia are significant barriers to FT purchasing behavior. Furthermore, attitude, ethical obligation, self-identity, and locus of control have no significant effects on FT purchasing behavior (see Table 1, Panel B). Consequently, the analysis supports H5b and H6b but rejects H1b, H2b, H3b, and H4b.

To further elaborate on the ethical purchasing gap this study compared consumers who exhibit consistent FT purchasing intentions and behavior with consumers who exhibit inconsistent FT purchasing intentions and behavior. First the variable purchasing intention was split at its median into a group high in FT purchasing intentions and a group low in FT purchasing intentions (i.e. observations at the median were excluded from this analysis, n = 47). Then, based on the newly calculated binary purchasing intention variable and observed purchasing behavior two groups were com-
pared applying multiple T-Tests with Bonferroni-Holm correction. The respective groups were (1) consumers who bought FT coffee and intended to buy FT products (i.e. consistent consumers, n = 69) and (2) consumers who did not buy FT coffee but intended to buy FT products (i.e. inconsistent consumers n = 41). The dependent variables were the drivers and barriers to FT consumption as well as the socio-demographic variables age and income. The results show that inconsistent consumers are significantly more price sensitive ($M_{\text{cons.}} = 4.35; M_{\text{incons.}} = 3.43, p = .001$), exhibit a higher level of inertia in purchasing behavior ($M_{\text{cons.}} = 2.97; M_{\text{incons.}} = 2.31, p = .010$) and have a significantly lower income ($M_{\text{cons.}} = 2.31; M_{\text{incons.}} = 2.91, p = .018$) than consistent consumers.

**DISCUSSION**

This study contributes to our understanding of FT consumption by showing that drivers of- and barriers to FT purchasing intentions and FT purchasing behavior differ substantially. This study shows that constructs based on the TPB have no effect on actual FT purchasing behavior, supporting prior research suggesting substantial gaps exist between consumers’, self-reported ethical purchasing attitudes, intentions or behavior and actual ethical purchasing behavior (e.g., Auger and Devinney 2007; Bray et al. 2011; Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Hassan et al. 2016). Furthermore, the explained variance of consumers’ FT purchasing behavior was satisfactory, lending support to the adequacy of a model of FT purchasing that takes into account driver as well as barrier variables and controls for sociodemographic variables. Additionally, this study sheds some more light on the ethical purchasing gap by showing that consumers who are inconsistent in their FT purchasing intentions and behavior differ in terms of price sensitivity, inertia in purchasing behavior, and income from consumers who show aligned FT purchasing intentions and behavior. That is, the FT price premium along with consumers’ price sensitivities and income situation is a major obstacle to FT purchasing. Consequently, this study confirms prior research findings showing price and/or price sensitivity are important factors in the context of FT consumption (e.g., Andorfer and Liebe 2015; Bray et al. 2011; Hainmueller et al. 2014) and argues that TPB-based ethical consumption studies should include at least some attitudinal measure that accounts for the FT price premium (e.g., price sensitivity). As suggested by Bray et al. (2011) this study found that inertia is a significant barrier to FT purchasing that should be considered in future studies. This study shows that in the context of FT purchasing, consumers seem to be reluctant to change their usual purchasing and consumption habits. Overall, this study contributes to the literature on FT consumption by combining drivers of- and barriers to FT purchasing in an integrated model, building on the most commonly applied theoretical framework (i.e. TPB), controlling for socio-demographics, and comparing drivers’ and barriers’ effects on both, consumers’ purchasing intentions and consumers’ observed purchasing behavior. Prior research on ethical consumption calls for studies that capture actual behavior (Andorfer and Liebe 2012; Hassan et al. 2016) and this study’s findings support such demands because predictors’ effects differ substantially for purchasing intentions and behavior.

Furthermore, this study provides an implication for practitioners: While organizations promoting FT might not be able to reduce prices or consumers’ price sensitivities, inertia in purchasing behavior is a barrier to FT consumption that could be more amenable to change. In this respect classical measures to raise awareness and motivate consumers to try something new (e.g., short term price promotions, advertising) might be effective in decreasing inertia in purchasing behavior.

**REFERENCES**


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