

The Fair Trade consumer as a citizen-consumer: civic virtue or alternative hedonism?

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore Fair Trade consumer orientations by focusing on the 'citizen-consumer' dimension. Those who buy Fair Trade products are often regarded as consumers who are motivated by social responsibility and an altruistic spirit. However, some studies show that such consumers are not necessarily altruistic or political, but rather hedonistic and individualistic. In order to examine what kinds of people purchase Fair Trade products, we analyse the Fair Trade consumer's attitude using social survey data from Japan. The result of this analysis demonstrates that the variables concerning 'alternative hedonism' (creativity, quality of products, post-materialism) have positive effects on response in purchasing Fair Trade products. On the other hand, the variables concerning 'civic virtue' (dedication to the public interest, altruism, social support) have no significant effect on it. This result shows that Fair Trade consumers do not always internalise the movement's principles, but pursue their individual lifestyle in different ways. In other words, consumers' 'little narratives' are not an obstacle to the realisation of 'grand narratives', but rather a condition of the latter.

Keywords: ethical consumption; citizen-consumer; alternative hedonism; quantitative analysis; social survey

Introduction

The Fair Trade movement has developed over the past two decades and the consumption of such products has become more mainstream. Total sales of Fairtrade-certified products reached 7.8 billion euros in 2016 (Fairtrade International, 2017) and many of them were purchased in mass markets such as supermarkets and convenience stores. During the process of mainstreaming, the profile of Fair Trade consumers has also gradually changed. When mainstreaming began, some researchers suggested that Fair Trade consumers have maintained their original counter-hegemonic character (Taylor, 2004; Low & Davenport, 2006). However, Fair Trade has been penetrating consumers' daily lives ever since and has been supported by 'non-activist' consumers (Wheeler, 2012). This probably means that the gap between the movement's principle and consumers' motivations has increased.

This kind of gap has already been discussed as 'the myth of ethical consumption', since ethical consumption has been conceptualised as a frontier of consumer research (Devinney, Auger & Eckhardt, 2001). Some studies have indicated that people who buy organic or Fair Trade foods at stores that emphasise sustainability, such as the Whole Foods Market, tend to be motivated by their own pleasure and related lifestyle choices (Sassatelli, 2006; Varul, 2008; Johnston & Szabo, 2011). According to another study, ethical food is linked to gastronomic culture, thus ethical consumption is now pervasive in the gourmet market (Groszlik, 2017). From the

perspective of moral economy, this problem has been treated as a kind of contradiction because it is not normative but, rather, self-interested behaviour (Bowles, 2016). On the other hand, behavioural psychologists consider this gap to be a duality problem, which indicates that ethical consumers have implicit, as well as explicit, attitudes (Govind, Singh, Garg & D'Silva, 2017). Thus, this kind of gap has been discussed in various fields and several approaches coexist; however, at any rate, we can no longer presume that all Fair Trade consumers' motivations align with the principles of Fair Trade.

This paper considers the gap in Fair Trade consumption by applying the explanatory model of the *citizen-consumer* to the analysis of social survey data available in Japan. The Fair Trade movement in Asian developed countries, including Japan, has grown over the last two decades and is now gradually mainstreaming (Watanabe, 2010; Hatayama, 2016). Identifying the characteristics of consumers in this new market will clarify the current Fair Trade consumption situation and contribute to a deeper understanding of the significance of the gap in Fair Trade consumption. The term *citizen-consumer* is used to describe how acts of Fair Trade consumption are performed according to consumers' private interests as well as public awareness. Clarifying the profile of Fair Trade consumers as *citizen-consumers* could achieve a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of today's Fair Trade.

Theory and Hypothesis

'Consumer citizen' or 'citizen-consumer'?

Those who buy Fair Trade products have been conventionally regarded as *consumer-citizens* who are motivated by social responsibility and an altruistic spirit. Therefore, most studies have focused on Fair Trade consumption as a form of political engagement and participation (Micheletti, 2003; Shaw, Newholm & Dickinson, 2006; Barnett, Cloke, Clarke & Malpass, 2011). Michele Micheletti, who pioneered the study of ethical consumption, used the term 'political consumerism' to describe consumer choices that aim to change objectionable institutional or market practices. Political consumers have certain attitudes towards justice and fairness, and non-economic issues that involve an ethical or political assessment of business and government practices (Micheletti, 2003, p. 2). Political consumerism theory implies that ethical choices are generally an expression of 'civic virtue', which is distinct from reciprocity or self-interest. Ethical consumption like Fair Trade, therefore, has been described as political behaviour that entails 'voting' for ethical companies and stores. From the point of view of political consumerism, the rise of Fair Trade consumption can be interpreted as a shift in consumers' identities from private needs to public norms, resulting from political awareness and a sense of social responsibility.

The theory of the *consumer citizen* discovered that civic virtue is embodied in individuals' everyday consumption choices. However, some studies have shown that such consumers are not necessarily altruistic or political, but rather hedonistic and individualistic (Trentmann, 2007; Soper, 2007; Soper, 2008; Humphery, 2011). These research studies focused on *citizen-consumer* theory rather than the *consumer citizen*. The term *citizen-consumer* generally refers to a 'hybrid' of citizenship and consumption, but fundamentally prioritises the consumer. Frank Trentmann (2007) argued that the rise of ethical consumption doesn't always mean that people refrain from satisfying their desires, but rather that ethical objects become the source of their satisfaction or desire. Kate Soper (2007; 2008) pointed out that the motivation of the ethical consumer is based on a kind of hedonism, and she called it 'alternative hedonism'. This means that moral concerns coincide with more self-interested forms of disaffection with consumerist consumption. This theory allows for a consumer whose privately experienced and self-interested needs come to encompass public goods and the gratifications of a more socially accountable consumption.¹ In other words, Fair Trade consumers appear to conform to

¹ Humphery explains that 'Soper points to the way in which enjoyment of affluent consumption has become compromised by its unpleasant byproducts (noise, pollution, stress, health risk, excessive waste and esthetic impact on the environment) and has thus promoted revisions in thinking about the good life' (Humphery, 2011, p. 46).

progressive social norms and responsibilities when observed objectively, but when examining their inner motivation they seem to be pursuing their own self-interest.

Recent research has gradually become more likely to focus on the *citizen-consumer* dimension of Fair Trade consumption. Kathryn Wheeler (2012) suggested that Fair Trade consumers can be understood as *citizen-consumers* when we realise that individuals who have no real commitment to the Fair Trade movement are increasingly consuming Fair Trade products without necessarily being aware of their actions. More 'non-activist' consumers tend to engage in Fair Trade, and it seems that such a tendency is penetrating new markets, such as Japan. This study proposes that we can obtain a more nuanced understanding of Fair Trade as a social phenomenon by applying *citizen-consumer* theory.

Hypotheses

As described above, explanatory models of Fair Trade consumption have been largely divided in two. This paper applies two theoretical categories used in previous studies and considers what kinds of attitudes affect Fair Trade consumption by using those categories as additional explanations.

Consumer citizen theory proposes that the rise of Fair Trade consumption is an embodiment of civic virtue; namely, people's altruistic or political attitudes. Micheletti suggests that a political consumer's civic virtue is based on republicanism and communitarian, democratic theories (Micheletti, 2003, p. 20). Under this theory, civic virtue is distinct from self-interest and is conceived as a citizen's dedication to the common welfare of the community, even at the cost of individual interests (Putnam, 2000; Delanty, 2000). Therefore, civic virtue cannot be reduced to self-interest. In line with previous research, the relationship between Fair Trade consumption and several such attitudes can be hypothesised (H-1, H-2, H-3).

First, dedication to the public interest is an important variable in the context of civic virtue, especially in the theory about commons. Therefore, an attitude toward acting in the public interest, even at the cost of individual interests, will stimulate purchases of Fair Trade products (H-1). Second, an altruistic attitude is distinct from reciprocity or self-interest in the civic virtue tradition. Fair Trade consumption supports others, even with no return (Oxfam, 1992). Therefore, an altruistic attitude has a positive effect on Fair Trade purchasing (H-2). Third, the idea that vulnerable people should be socially supported is a value officially registered in the Fair Trade movement. It has been assumed that Fair Trade consumers internalise and share the principle of the Fair Trade movement. If Fair Trade consumers internalise and share the principles of this movement, their attitudes about social support will positively affect Fair Trade purchasing (H-3).

Conversely, *citizen-consumer* theory describes the rise of Fair Trade consumption as the pursuit of individuals' self-interests that encompass the public interest. Ray and Anderson (2000) analysed people called 'cultural creatives' and defined their new lifestyle as LOHAS (lifestyles of health and sustainability), which involves the positive consumption of sustainable goods or foods to improve their healthy bodies and creative lives. Moreover, Inglehart and Welzel (2005) regarded such consumption as one dimension of post-materialism, a lifestyle that entails the pursuit of self-expression and quality of life over economic and physical security. According to such previous studies, in considering the base of alternative hedonism as a lifestyle choice, such as LOHAS or post-materialism, the relationship between Fair Trade consumption and several such attitudes can be hypothesised (H-4, H-5, H-6).

First, as presented by Inglehart and Ray, an attitude to create new ideas and lifestyles has been associated with a sustainable lifestyle. In particular, the relationship between Fair Trade and creativity has been noted in the context of ethical fashion (Robbins & Roberts, 1998; Gibson & Stanes, 2011). Therefore, a creative attitude will have a positive effect on the purchase of Fair Trade products (H-4). Second is a preference for quality products. As shown in previous research, the desire to eat and to provide the body with health-friendly goods and delicious foods is associated with eco- and ethical consumption (Johnston & Szabo, 2011; Groszlik, 2017). Therefore, an orientation towards quality will positively affect the purchase of Fair Trade products (H-5). Third

is a post-materialistic attitude. The World Values Survey indicates that people who value spiritual affluence and quality of life more than material affluence and economic success are more likely to develop eco-friendly and ethical behaviour (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). It appears that Soper's alternative hedonism is directly associated with an attitude towards 'affluent' lifestyles in the sense of post-materialism (Soper, 2007). Therefore, a post-materialistic attitude will have a positive effect on Fair Trade purchasing (H-6).

This study uses the above six attitudes as independent variables and examines how they directly relate to Fair Trade consumption. This examination considers the profile of Fair Trade consumers and interprets the results in a discussion.

Data and Analysis

Data and variables

This section examines what kinds of people purchase Fair Trade products by testing the above six hypotheses. Quantitative data from the consumer life survey conducted in Japan in 2016 will be used. Fair Trade has become popular in Japan over the last decade. We administered a comprehensive questionnaire survey about consumption, including Fair Trade, to clarify the reality of consumer life. This survey was administered to people aged from 15 to 69 years and resident in Tokyo. The survey profile is described below.

The survey profile

Survey name: Consumer Life Survey in Tokyo 2016

Primary body: Global Consumption Research Society (Rikkyo University)

Method: Questionnaire survey (mailing method)

Period: From September to October 2016

Sampling: Two-stage random sampling method using the basic residents' register

Population: Aged from 15 to 69 years and resident in Tokyo

Sample number: 4,000

Efficiency percentage: 41.3%

Number of responses: 1,609

We performed a binary logistic regression analysis to examine which variables impact upon Fair Trade consumption. This analysis was conducted to reveal how each controlled independent variable affected the dependent variable: 'buying fair trade products'. We prepared three categories of independent variables: (A) demographic status, (B) variables concerning civic virtue and (C) variables concerning alternative hedonism. We used the demographic variables of *age*, *gender*, *household income*, *education level* and *marital status*. The features of civic virtue and alternative hedonism consist of the subcategories listed in the section above. Civic virtue consists of *dedication to the public interest*, *altruism* and *support for vulnerable people*, and alternative hedonism consists of *creativity*, *quality of products* and *post-materialism*. The former three have been regarded as important variables in the analysis of ethical consumption according to *consumer citizen* theory; the latter three have been regarded as important variables of ethical consumption according to *citizen-consumer* theory. These two categories and their subcategories were derived from the theoretical contexts described in the section above; therefore, the distinction between civic virtue and alternative hedonism is a kind of ideal type.² A detailed analysis of variables and their concrete sentences in the questionnaire is presented below. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of all the variables included in this analysis.

² These items were not constructed by factor analysis but were presumed as the features of civic virtue and alternative hedonism in relation to the formulations in prior researches. Therefore, it should be noted that the two categories cannot be called latent variables or factors in a strict sense, but are merely theoretical constructs called 'ideal types' in sociology.

Table 1 The descriptive statistics of all variables

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	
Buying Fair Trade products	1501	.05	.23	binary variable
Age	1609	45.78	15.14	
Female	1609	.54	.50	dummy(ref. male)
Household income	1501	2.56	.34	log-transformed
Education level	1598	14.37	2.00	years of schooling
Married	1596	.69	.46	dummy(ref. non-married)
Dedication to the public interest	1598	2.29	.80	four-point scale
Altruism	1594	2.59	.75	four-point scale
Social support	1598	3.06	.70	four-point scale
Creativity	1593	2.76	.84	four-point scale
Quality of products	1586	3.02	.77	four-point scale
Post-materialism	1594	3.04	.69	four-point scale

Dependent variable

Buying fair trade products

Independent variables

(A) Demographic status

Age, gender, household income, education level, marital status

(B) Variables concerning civic virtue

- (i) *Dedication to the public interest*: Even at the cost of individual interests, some deem it more important to act in the public interest.
- (ii) *Altruism*: Regardless of whether I enjoy it or not, I'd like to do something for others.
- (iii) *Social support*: We should offer more support to the vulnerable people in society.

(C) Variables concerning alternative hedonism

- (i) *Creativity*: It is important to create new ideas and to be creative.
- (ii) *Quality of products*: Even though it's a bit more expensive, I choose good quality products.
- (iii) *Post-materialism*: Quality of life is more important than economic success.

Analysis

Table 2 displays the results of the binary logistic regression analysis. Model 1 shows the pattern when both the features of civic virtue and alternative hedonism are included. The result of Model 1 demonstrates that the three variables of *creativity* ($p < .01$), *quality of products* ($p < .05$) and *post-materialism* ($p < .10$), have positive effects on Fair Trade purchases. On the other hand, *dedication to the public interest*, *altruism* and *social support* have no significant effect on decisions to purchase Fair Trade products.

Model 2 displays the pattern when the features of alternative hedonism are removed from Model 1. The result of Model 2 shows that *dedication to the public interest*, *altruism* and *social support* also have no significant effect, even without the effects of *creativity*, *quality* and *post-materialism*. The results of Model 1 and Model 2 clearly demonstrate that the features of alternative hedonism are significantly associated with the purchase of Fair Trade products, but the features of civic virtue have no significant impact on such behaviour.

Table 2 Binary logistic regression analysis³

Dependent variable: 'Buying Fair Trade products'

	Model 1 (N = 1,353)			Model 2 (N = 1,375)		
	Coefficient		Exp(B)	Coefficient		Exp(B)
Age	.05	**	1.05	.05	**	1.05
Female	.88	**	2.42	.76	**	2.14
Household income	.30	n.s.	1.35	.48	n.s.	1.62
Education level	.26	**	1.30	.29	**	1.33
Married	-.87	**	.42	-.89	**	.41
Dedication to the public interest	.20	n.s.	1.22	.22	n.s.	1.25
Altruism	.03	n.s.	1.03	.17	n.s.	1.19
Social support	.25	n.s.	1.28	.30	n.s.	1.34
Creativity	.43	**	1.54			
Quality of products	.41	*	1.51			
Post-materialism	.34	†	1.40			
Invariable	-14.71	**	.00	-12.17	**	.00
Model χ^2	69.99**			49.70**		
Nagelkerke R^2	.14			.10		

** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ † $p < .10$ n.s. = not significant

Discussion

The results of this analysis are presented as answers to each research question. Firstly, the result of the binary logistic regression analysis supports the three hypotheses (H-4, H-5, H-6) because each of the three variables concerning alternative hedonism (*creativity*, *quality of products* and *post-materialism*) have significant positive effects upon Fair Trade consumption. Secondly, the three hypotheses (H-1, H-2, H-3) are not supported by the results of this analysis, even when examining Model 2. These results do not always permit a conclusion regarding the contribution of the two constructs 'civic virtue' vs 'alternative hedonism' because of the effect of independent variables being examined separately.⁴ However, these results suggest that the attitudes outlined by *citizen-consumer* theory offer a more significant explanation of Fair Trade consumption than those assumed by *consumer citizen* theory.

Almost all researchers have focused solely on civic virtue when examining Fair Trade consumption, but now researchers are recognising the *citizen-consumer* dimension, which explains how consumers pursue their self-interests while upholding the public good. Fair Trade products are consumed to satisfy the desire for creativity and a high quality of life. It follows that the consumption of products that help vulnerable producers is motivated more by consumers' own personal needs. Fair Trade consumers do not always internalise the slogan of the movement, or share the same goals as the wider movement, but pursue their individual interests in different ways. As an unintended consequence, they also contribute to the alleviation of world poverty.

³ Logistic regression is the statistical technique used to predict the relationship between independent variables and the dependent variable where the dependent variable is binary. In this table, Exp(B) expresses odds ratios. Odds ratios can be easier to interpret than the coefficient so these values are used as indicators of the effects of variables.

⁴ As mentioned above, this analysis was aimed at examining the effects of the six independent variables. Organising the independent variables into two categories depends on each theoretical framework of *consumer citizen* theory and *citizen-consumer* theory.

In other words, Fair Trade products are purchased in individuals' local and private contexts, and these 'little narratives' are the driving force of 'grand narratives', such as fairness. Grand narratives refer to social norms or goals in the public sphere, while little narratives refer to personal self-actualisation in the fragmented private sphere. Some researchers have criticised little narratives as a correlate of the collapse of the grand narrative. However, our research demonstrated that the goal of fairness, which is a grand narrative, is experienced as personal self-actualisation in an individual context.⁵ The gap between the principle of Fair Trade and consumers' motivation has not only a negative meaning but also a positive one, because this gap provides opportunities for people to position Fair Trade in their local context.

The picture of Fair Trade revolving around the *citizen-consumer* depicted in this paper has been criticised because such consumers cannot change the consumerist world itself (Heath & Potter, 2004). The analysis presented in this paper aims to explore the profile of Fair Trade consumers, therefore we cannot respond to such criticism directly. However, this analysis reveals one response to this kind of criticism, which is that anti-consumerism denies the local and diverse contexts of each individual as a *citizen-consumer*. The original philosophy of Fair Trade was intended to overcome such narrowness. The slogan 'trade, not aid' indicates that producers should receive fair compensation. On the other hand, it allows consumers to obtain pleasure and self-fulfilment through purchasing their products.⁶ Therefore, although the *citizen-consumer* seems to contradict the original philosophy of Fair Trade at first glance, it does not. Rather, it embodies the philosophy of Fair Trade.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the profile of Fair Trade consumers through an examination of six hypotheses. The result of the binary logistic regression analysis supports the three hypotheses proposed in the context of *citizen-consumer* theory, but does not support the three hypotheses proposed in the context of *consumer citizen* theory. The discussion examined the meaning of the results and emphasised a positive view of *citizen-consumers* because the gap between principles of Fair Trade and consumers' motivations provides opportunities for people to position Fair Trade in their local context. In other words, consumers' little narratives are not an obstacle to the realisation of grand narratives, but are rather conditions of the latter.

Nonetheless, these results must be understood with caution and some limitations should be borne in mind. First, the differences between civic virtue and alternative hedonism in this paper are not constructs but categories, dependent on theoretical perspectives; therefore, this paper cannot examine the 'civic virtue hypothesis' or 'alternative hedonism hypothesis' directly. Second, this paper is based on a self-administered questionnaire and sociological perspective; therefore, it does not explore the ethical purchasing gap as discussed in psychology. Further research is required to test implicit attitudes, which is clearly outside the scope of this paper. Finally, this paper discusses results obtained in Japan that may not be generalisable. It will be necessary to conduct a comparative analysis with European countries and North American countries in the future to investigate whether these findings are common to Fair Trade consumers in other developed countries or are merely regional characteristics.⁷

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⁵ The concepts of 'grand narrative' and 'little narrative' derive from the postmodern theory of French philosopher Lyotard (1979). Postmodern theorists, including Lyotard himself, used these two concepts as polar opposites. However, this paper regards these two concepts as alternative aspects of the same thing; in other words, people play grand narratives as their own little narratives in their subjective worlds. This means that Fair Trade consumption is an altruistic consequence based on personal motivation. This perspective implies that social justice and freedom of the individual can stand *at the same time* in Fair Trade and serves as the turning point for understanding the dynamics of Fair Trade.

⁶ This is one form of the relationship between producers and consumers commonly described as win-win. In essence, all trade is based on such a symbiotic mechanism. As long as Fair Trade is not aid but trade, producers receiving fair compensation do not constitute a zero-sum situation in relation to consumers enjoying their own lifestyle. Rather, they are conditional on each other. In other words, the gap between the movement's ideas and consumers' motivations is not a contradiction of or obstacle to Fair Trade, but a condition for it (Hatayama, 2016).

⁷ Since this paper has focused on analysing consumers' actual situations, the normative problem surrounding the *citizen-consumer* needs to be examined in further detail in a separate paper.

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Biography

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