The Ethically Conscious Flower Consumer

The entry discusses key factors which are relevant to consumers that are interested in buying fairtrade cut flowers and builds on the work of Meike Rombach, David Dean, Nicole Widmar and Vera Bitsch.

1. Concern for Floriculture Worker Treatment and Environment Practices in the Flowers' Country of Origin

Singh (2013) discusses the behaviour of flower consumers living in wealthy countries where labour rights are respected and where political actors and media reports voice concern about the negative externalities commonly associated with cut flower production in the flowers' country of origin (CoO) [1]. These include child labour, health risks, soil and water pollution, sexual exploitation of women, and unfair distribution of water resources. The study highlights the adverse effects of boycotting flowers from CoOs with poor environmental and labour reputations, like those in Latin America and Africa, as banning and boycotting these products leads to adverse effects such as job losses, subsequent destitution, and starvation [1]. Also, Werren (2015) addresses Australian consumers' concerns about labour treatment and payment in global cut flower chains [2]. Given that cut flowers from CoOs with poor environmental and labour reputations are imported to Australia, and Australian consumers favour sustainable practices and social responsibility, businesses in the Australian floricultural industry need to be more attentive to their product assortment and advocate country-of-origin labelling and product certification [2]. Both studies corroborate the findings of Holt and Watson (2008) who investigated local versus international sourcing of food and flowers in retailers [3]. Their study outlines the complexity of global value chains and emphasizes growing consumer concern towards the production practices and dependencies occurring in production. The authors called for research on certification and social/environmental impacts in order to assure consumers of the legitimacy of the products they purchase [3]. Based on these findings, German consumers that favour sustainable practices and social responsibility will be more likely to favour the tenets of fair trade as a flower attribute and prefer fair trade cut flowers.

2. The Breadth of Information Sources Used to Obtain Information about Fair Trade Cut Flowers

Whether and how German consumers search for information about fair trade cut flowers has yet to be explored. However, Ambrožová and Částek (2013) investigated information practices and purchase behaviour for fair trade food products in the Czech Republic. Their results show that consumers use a variety of sources to inform themselves. They obtain information from resources provided by the certification body itself, from friends, from shop assistants or from the internet. Some consumers do not use any information sources [4].

Further evidence of the information practices of consumers interested in ethical consumption can be deduced from Gross and Roosen (2020). Their study investigated how German consumers perceive the trustworthiness and informativeness of different information sources reporting on agricultural production practices [5]. The results of the panel regression analysis showed that information from the government, in particular from the Ministry of Agriculture was perceived as more trustworthy and informative than information shared by the Federation of German Consumer Associations. German consumers perceive information without an indication of source as the least trustworthy [5]. Their findings contrast with earlier US studies reporting that consumer organizations ranked higher in their trustworthiness than governmental organizations [6].

McKendree et al. (2014) studied the agriculture and information practices of US consumers. The study found that most consumers do not seek out information about societal issues related to food production because it leads to unpleasant feelings and discomfort [7]. However, the consumers who were seeking information relied on non-profit or activist

organizations, government agencies, research institutions and universities, agricultural industry groups, and social media [7].

In conclusion, fair trade and other ethical consumer studies show that information practices, including consumer use and perceived trustworthiness of sources, are diverse when it comes to ethical issues in food production. In the absence of a clear direction for identifying single sources of trustworthy information, consumers who draw from a variety of different sources are likely to find compelling fair trade information.

3. Familiarity with Fair Trade Cut Flower Production

Consumer familiarity with the concept of fair trade is widely studied. De Pelsmacker et al. (2006) studied fair trade coffee in Belgium in two consumer groups, namely "Oxfam store visitors" and "regular consumers" [8]. Their results showed that both groups of consumers had at least a basic understanding of the fair trade concept. While regular consumers were aware of the social impact of the scheme, they still associate it more with the environment. Oxfam store visitors were aware of the impact and contribution of the scheme, but, surprisingly, this knowledge was not necessarily translated into positive attitudes toward fair trade products [8]. These findings confirm those of an early study emphasizing the problem of translating fair trade principles into consumer purchasing behaviour [9].

More recent studies emphasize good consumer knowledge or familiarity with fair trade and ethical products [10][11][12][13]. However, there is concept confusion amongst consumers due to an overwhelming presence of labels [14][15][16]. The co-existence of credible labels from certification bodies verifying credence product attributes such as fair trade, and other pretentious or meaningless labels, leads to consumer bias, confusion, irritation and resignation [17].

Ethically conscious German flower consumers are likely to face this problem, as there are various flower labels indicating fairness in flower trading on the German market. One is the traditional fair trade label, dedicated to improving the livelihood of farmers in countries with poor environmental and labour reputations and campaigning against child labour. This label is somewhat recognized by flower consumers [18][19]. Other flower labels include the MPS certification label and the green certificate. Both labels are dedicated to certifying environmentally produced ornamental plants and cut flowers and include a social component which addresses human labour [20][21][22].

While the green certificate is dedicated to the development and training of labour in the German horticultural industry [22], the MPS scheme follows the same goals as fair trade. Various flower farms in Kenya, Tanzania, Sri Lanka, and India, have been awarded with the certification [23]. Consumer familiarity with these labels remains so far unknown. Furthermore, it is yet to be explored in more detail how familiar German consumers are with the concept of fair trade in a non-food context such as cut flowers.

4. The Relative Importance of Fair Trade as Cut Flower Attribute

Prior research on food and cut flower attributes emphasized several intrinsic and extrinsic product attributes that are important to consumers [20][21][24][25]. Intrinsic attributes are inherent to a product, for instance, appearance, texture, scent and freshness [25]. Extrinsic product attributes relate to the commercial and production aspects of the product and include price, packaging, and Fair trade certification [26]. Intrinsic and extrinsic attributes both provide cues to consumers which are used to evaluate food or flowers and decide which product to purchase. Many horticultural product studies focused exclusively on one attribute [27][25]. However, when consumers make purchasing decisions, they choose from different product alternatives, each with different bundles of attributes. This enforces decision making and trade-offs [24].

Auger et al. (2007) used a best–worst approach to study the relative importance given by consumers to ethical issues across Germany, Spain, Turkey, USA, India and Korea [28]. The study found that regardless of an individual's nationality, labour and human rights were consistently chosen as "more important" than other ethical issues. This is an indicator of the importance of fair trade-certified products in the European, US and Asian consumer markets [28].

Specifically, in a cut flower context, Rombach et al. (2018) investigated German consumer preferences for cut flower attributes in a bundle format using a best–worst approach and a latent class analysis [18]. Their results showed that that intrinsic flower attributes, particularly appearance, freshness and scent, were more important to German consumers than the extrinsic attributes studied, namely, price, country of origin and fair trade certification. The latent class analysis determined four consumer segments that desired either budget, luxury, or ethical flowers or more information about flowers [18].

Berki-Kiss and Menrad (2019) explored the preferences of German consumers for certified cut flowers using a choice-based conjoint experiment with roses and included sustainability certification, country of origin, packaging, smell, and flower head size [20]. Their latent class analysis revealed consumer heterogeneity with around two-thirds of the over 1000 respondents strongly in favour of sustainability-certified flowers. Further, fair trade-certified roses received an overall positive assessment in contrast to organically certified ones. In addition, paper or no packaging, pleasant scent and uniform appearance of the flower heads received positive consumer evaluations [20]. In summary, it can be deduced that the intrinsic attributes of cut flowers are the most important for flower consumers, but certain consumer segments find fair trade-certified flowers appealing.

5. Socio-Demographic Information

Numerous studies dedicated to the socio-demographic backgrounds of ethical consumers included consumers having an interest and buying fair trade products. The body of literature is, however, not conclusive [29][30][31][32]. While older studies have identified people with higher education, higher income, and being female as relevant socio-demographic factors impacting ethical food purchasing behaviour [11], more recent studies have found that socio-demographic factors are not good predictors of ethical food purchasing behaviour [33][21][18][19]. In a cut flower context, these diverse findings are confirmed by Michaud et al. (2013), Rombach et al. (2018) and Berki-Kiss and Menrad (2019) [20][18][34]. For food and flowers, experiential and attitudinal factors appear to be more relevant influencers of ethical consumption behaviour, but socio-demographic variables have been included in this research as a form of statistical control.

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