The attitude-behaviour gap in apparel purchasing – analysis of factors inhibiting fair fashion consumption

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Abstract

Why do only a few consumers buy fair trade clothing despite many opposing to the unsustainable production conditions in the apparel industry? This paper assesses several hindering factors concerning their ability to explain the attitude-behaviour gap in fair fashion purchasing. Using regression analyses, the impact of different knowledge- and personality-based inhibitors on the say-do relationship is studied. Results indicate that consumers have only limited knowledge about the existing supply of fair trade clothing. In addition, traditional purchase criteria as well as the personal need for self-expression through apparel choice take precedence over supporting the fair trade movement.

Keywords: Consumer Social Responsibility, Fair Trade, Attitude-Behaviour Gap

Introduction

How the apparel we wear is produced has changed substantially within the last couple of decades. Whereas formerly, clothing for the Western market was mainly produced by Western companies with rather integrated supply chains, nowadays, apparel on display in stores has travelled across the world and through various firms along the supply chains of big fashion retailers. In addition, an industry-wide development towards ever shorter fashion cycles and decreasing apparel quality has emerged with some retailers now presenting around 20 seasons per year (Ferdows *et al.*, 2015). As a consequence, apparel firms aim to increase the flexibility of their supply chains while at the same time decrease the production costs. A common means to achieve this is by outsourcing the often labour intensive production of garments. Such outsourcing efforts, many times to companies in less observable and regulated markets, often result in a vast deterioration of working conditions for factory personnel (Crane and Matten, 2010). In response to these practices a niche for apparel that withstands the dominant market logics and their consequences has developed. So-called "fair fashion" is produced without "sweatshop" conditions, i.e. without child or forced labour, excessive working hours or inappropriately low wages (Shaw *et al.*, 2006).

However, despite many consumers' opposition towards the working conditions in conventional clothing production, fair fashion still represents only a small fraction of products on the apparel market. The present study aims to identify reasons for this discrepancy by asking which factors moderate the translation of positive attitudes towards buying fair trade fashion into actual purchasing behaviour. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: First, the literature on attitude-behaviour inconsistencies in ethical consumption will be reviewed with a special interest in fair trade and ethical fashion purchasing research. Next, eleven hypotheses concerning

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knowledge- and personality-related factors that are argued to moderate said relationship, are presented. The remaining parts detail the research method used, the results obtained and the implications that can be drawn from these.

The attitude-behaviour relationship
Starting in the 1960s, scholars have challenged the notion of a strong relationship between attitudes and behaviours of individuals. Until today, an extensive body of literature has emerged that attests to a difference between what people say and what they do. One research area, in which this phenomenon is most visible, is ethical consumerism. The discrepancy between consumers' positive attitudes towards ethical product alternatives on the one hand and their ongoing conventional purchasing behaviour has often been termed the "attitude-behaviour gap" (A-B gap) (Bray *et al.*, 2011; Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Sudbury and Böltner, 2011).

Researchers have addressed the A-B gap in many fields of ethical consumerism, e.g. in green (Johnstone and Tan, 2015; Lu et al., 2015) and fair trade consumption (Chatzidakis *et al.*, 2007; Rode *et al.*, 2008), consumption reduction (e.g. Pereira Heath and Chatzidakis, 2012) and, more generally, ethical consumption (Auger and Devinney, 2007; Bray *et al.*, 2011). Further, the impact of CSR (Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001) and the effect of unethical corporate conduct on consumer purchasing (Folkes and Kamins, 1999; Ingram *et al.*, 2005) were analysed in this regard.

Following the growing media attention for the social and environmental issues in apparel mass manufacturing, the A-B gap in ethical clothing consumption has received special attention from scholars. Subfields of research include green fashion purchasing (Niinimäki, 2010), "sweatshop" avoidance (Dickson, 2001; Hassan *et al.*, 2016), fair trade fashion purchasing (Shaw et al., 2006) and the broader field of ethical fashion consumption (Jägel *et al.*, 2012; Joergens, 2006). The common ground of all these studies is that the attitude towards avoiding unethical apparel or toward ethical fashion choices of a person does only partially translate into a corresponding purchasing behaviour. Hence, the following hypothesis is drawn.

H1   The relationship between a person's attitude and his or her purchasing behaviour concerning fair trade fashion is positive but small.

Inhibitors to translating attitudes into behaviour
Resulting from the overwhelming evidence for the A-B gap in ethical consumption, scholars have aimed to provide explanations. One important approach used in this quest is Izek Ajzen's "theory of planned behaviour" (Carrington *et al.*, 2010; Chatzidakis *et al.*, 2016; Shaw *et al.*, 2007). The theory states that in addition to behaviour-specific attitudes individual perceptions of behavioural control as well as prevalent subjective norms influence a person's behaviour. Hence, the A-B gap is explained by stressing the importance of influencing factors that are internal to the individual and/or context dependent. However, while Ajzen's theory is mainly used to understand *how* these determinants affect one's behaviour, the aim of the present research is to study *which* specific factors are influencing the A-B relationship in fair trade apparel purchasing.

To enable a more thorough analysis, the current study focusses on two categories of inhibitors, namely knowledge- and personality-related factors. While the first group pertains to the readily mentioned issue of consumer awareness and information availability (Bray *et al.*, 2011; Carrigan and Attalla, 2001), the second category focusses on factors that are either intrinsic to the consumer or that are dependent on his or her relationship with others.

Knowledge-related inhibitors

Somewhat separate from the other constructs in this category, the first inhibitor researched in this study is consumers' awareness of the social issues in apparel production. Previous studies indicate that consumers seem to have good knowledge (Dickson, 1999; Sudbury and Böltner, 2011). Uncertainties exist, however, concerning the scale of the problems and how to avoid supporting the continuance of these unsustainable practices (Harris *et al.*, 2016; Hassan *et al.*, 2016). As being knowledgeable about the social impacts of conventional consumer goods production has been directly linked to fair trade purchasing (Andorfer and Liebe, 2012), the following hypothesis is proposed.

H2 The less a person is aware of the social issues in conventional clothing production the less will his or her positive attitudes towards fair trade fashion translate into corresponding purchasing behaviour.

Previous research has indicated that consumers are often not very knowledgeable about the existing alternatives to conventional consumption (Bray *et al.*, 2011; Papaoikonomou *et al.*, 2011). While it is easy for consumers to name firms that have been called out for ethical transgressions they are seldom able to recall companies that are known for their ethical conduct (Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000; Carrigan and Attalla, 2001). However, to reach an informed purchasing decision, consumers need to be aware of the seals that signify fairly traded clothing and need to know brands and retailers for such fashion. Otherwise, they might make wrong assumptions about the available range of ethical apparel (Harris *et al.*, 2016; Hassan *et al.*, 2016) and could, in turn, refrain from looking for a fair trade alternative as they believe to be unable to find what they are looking for.

H3 The fewer seals for fair trade fashion a person knows, the less will his or her positive attitudes towards fair trade fashion translate into corresponding purchasing behaviour.

H4 The fewer brands and retailers for fair trade fashion a person knows, the less will his or her positive attitudes towards fair trade fashion translate into corresponding purchasing behaviour.

H5 The less a person knows about the existing range of products in the fair trade fashion segment, the less will his or her positive attitudes towards fair trade fashion translate into corresponding purchasing behaviour.

Personality-related inhibitors

The decision to buy fairly traded clothing is very complex. Not only does it require an active assessment of one's ethical attitudes but also requires additional effort as fair fashion is by far not as easily accessible as conventional clothing. Further, the added value a customer receives from buying fair trade apparel is only implicit as fair trade clothing is not healthier or more durable than comparable mainstream products. Also for most consumers, hardly any gain can be drawn from wearing fair fashion brands in front of others as these niche-market labels are rather unknown to society. As a result, a person's willingness to translate his or her positive attitude towards fair fashion into purchasing behaviour is strongly influenced by person-specific factors that might either support or inhibit ethical purchasing.

Many consumers only start reflecting on their consumption behaviour when they are affected by the consequences of their action either directly or through empathic feelings (Bray *et al.*, 2011; Carrigan and Attalla, 2001). Thus, a person's inclination to buy

socially responsible will depend on how intense he or she perceives the social problems in the apparel industry as a moral issue.

H6   The stronger a person's perception of moral intensity of the social issues in conventional clothing production, the more will his or her positive attitudes towards fair trade fashion translate into corresponding purchasing behaviour.

Further, qualitative studies by Sudbury and Böltner (2011) as well as Pereira Heath and Chatzidakis (2012) have shown that research participants are quick to point to other players in the consumer goods industry when it comes to answering who is responsible for changing how clothing is made. This tendency to deny one's own role in this matter might explain why many consumers do not consider purchasing fair trade clothing despite opposing to current production conditions. Additionally, Pereira Heath and Chatzidakis (2012) identified a low level of perceived self-efficacy as a reason for the A-B gap (see Gallagher, 2012 for a description of the concept). This individual character trait has previously been analysed with respect to consumer boycotting behaviour by Sen and Bhattacharya (2001). Their results hint at a positive relationship between high self-efficacy and proactive ethical consumer behaviour.

H7   The greater a person's inclination to deny his or her responsibility for changing the precarious production conditions in clothing production, the less will his or her positive attitudes towards fair trade fashion translate into corresponding purchasing behaviour.

H8   The greater a person's perception of self-efficacy, the more will his or her positive attitudes towards fair trade fashion translate into corresponding purchasing behaviour.

In some studies, consumers described feelings of hypocrisy when being inconsistent concerning their choice between conventional and ethical products (Johnstone and Tan, 2015; Szmigin *et al.*, 2009). This need to either completely limit oneself to buying ethical products or to consequently refrain from it is problematic for fair fashion purchasing. As such apparel presents only a niche segment it seems unrealistic that consumers will be able to completely refrain from buying conventional clothing. Hence:

H9   The more a person aspires to be consistent in the choice between fair trade and conventional apparel, the less will his or her positive attitudes towards fair trade fashion translate into corresponding purchasing behaviour.

A large amount of research has established around the idea that ethical product claims can be understood as an additional product feature which consumers may or may not factor in when making a purchase. For apparel consumption, this means that aside from the production conditions of clothing, factors like price, design, quality, and brand will influence the purchasing decision. Thus, one reason for the attitude-behaviour gap may rest in that ethical concerns are trumped by more traditional purchasing criteria. This has been indicated for ethical consumerism in general (Papaoikonomou *et al.*, 2011; Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000) and specifically concerning ethical fashion purchasing (Harris *et al.*, 2016; Dickson, 2005), leading to the following hypothesis.

H10 The more importance a person places on traditional purchasing criteria when purchasing fashion, the less will his or her positive attitudes towards fair trade fashion translate into corresponding purchasing behaviour.

Lastly, findings by Shaw and colleagues indicate that individuals' purchasing behaviour is strongly influenced by their social environment. Their focus group-based

studies revealed that some consumers are supported in their ethical apparel consumption by friends, family, and colleagues while others are not (Shaw and Clarke, 1999). For latter, fair fashion purchasing is devalued by significant others and sometimes even openly criticised (Shaw and Tomolillo, 2004). Especially for young consumers, it is of great importance to wear clothing that is in line with social expectations. The inability to fulfil these expectations through buying fair fashion places a significant burden on fashion oriented (young) consumers (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Shaw *et al.*, 2006). In addition, the fast fashion trend impressively shows the need of individuals to constantly change their wardrobe which contradicts ethical apparel consumption (Sudbury and Böltner, 2011). Thus:

H11 The less a person's social environment supports his or her intentions to buy fair trade fashion, the less will his or her positive attitudes towards fair trade fashion translate into corresponding purchasing behaviour.

H12 The more fashion oriented a person is, the less will his or her positive attitudes towards fair trade fashion translate into corresponding purchasing behaviour.

Method
An online-survey of consumers was used to test the study hypotheses. Consumer surveys, though not free from criticism, allow for time- and cost-efficiency as well as complete anonymity of the participants which reduces socially desirability, a bias that is especially problematic in ethical consumption research (Auger and Devinney, 2007). The survey was conducted in German and circulated in June-July 2017 via several social media platforms, thus the data set can be described as a volunteer sample.

In total, 498 complete datasets were obtained of which 447 were usable. The majority of respondents is female (79% of participants), underwent higher education (92%), is 35 years old or younger (87%) and has a monthly disposable income lower than 1.300 € (75%). Thus, the sample can be considered representative of an important consumer group for fashion retail.

The survey constructs were operationalized by making use of items from previous research wherever possible (tab. 1). For most constructs, multiple rating scale items were used (Cronbach's alpha values in tab. 1), the remaining constructs were operationalized by making use of rank order and multiple choice questions. To ensure construct validity, all pre-existing items were adapted so as to pertain specifically to fair trade fashion consumption. Still, not all Cronbach's alpha values obtained for the relevant constructs are satisfying. However, following Wieland *et al.* (2017), critical items were not omitted based on their importance for construct validity.

Figure 1 shows the regression model used in this study. Following the conceptual development of hypotheses 2-12, interaction moderation analysis was conducted to test the proposed relationships.
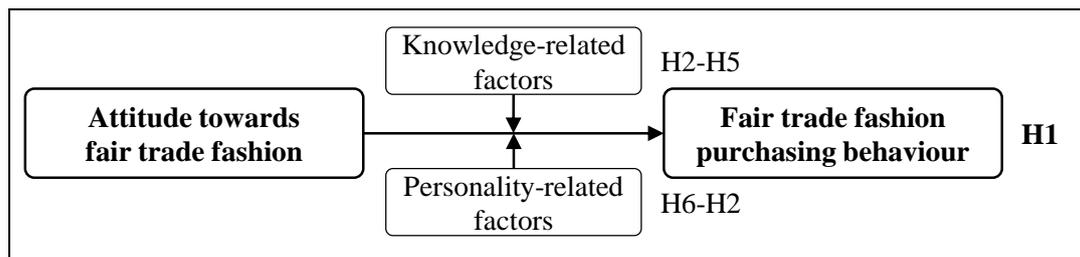

Figure 1: Model for regression analysis

Table 1 – Construct operationalization

Construct	Type	CA	based on
Attitude towards FT fashion	MIM	.829	Chatzidakis *et al.*, 2016; Pelsmacker and Janssens, 2007 & new items
FT fashion purchasing behavior	single item	–	Chatzidakis *et al.*, 2016
Awareness of social issues	MIM	.717	Dickson, 2016; Dickson, 2001
Knowledge about FT seals for fashion	MC	–	9 seals listed by German ministry (BMZ)
Knowledge about FT fashion brands/retailers	MC	–	List of 9 brands and 9 retailers (gathered via Google search)
Knowledge about existing range of FT fashion	MIM	.684	New items
Perceived moral intensity of social issues	MIM	.714	Jones, 1991 as in Singhapakdi *et al.*, 1999 (5 of the 6 items were used)
Denial of responsibility	RQ	–	Newly developed list of industry actors
Perceived self-efficacy	MIM	.776	Beierlein *et al.*, 2013
Importance of consistency	MIM	.490	New items
Non-supportive social environment	MIM	.493	Chatzidakis *et al.*, 2016 & new item
Fashion orientation	MIM	.650	New items
Importance of traditional purchasing criteria	RQ	–	Newly developed list of product attributes

Note: CA = Cronbach's alpha for standardized items; FT = fair trade; MIM = multiple rating items; MC = multiple choice question; RQ = rank order question

Results

This study lends further support to the existence of an A-B gap in fair trade fashion purchasing. On the one hand, participants are very positive towards fair fashion (Ø construct value = 4.23 on 5 pt. scale). One the other hand, only few respondents purchase such fashion on a regular basis (6.5%). Interestingly, a large proportion of participants have at least bought fair fashion once (76.7%), which could restrict sample representativeness. Still, the A-B gap is clearly apparent, allowing for further analysis.

Results from the moderation analyses are shown in table 2. Significant interaction effects could not be found in any of the models tested. Thus, only hypothesis 1 (H1) is supported while all moderation hypotheses need to be rejected (H2-H12). The results question the applicability of moderator models for the analysis of the A-B gap in fair fashion purchasing. However, as a precursor to the interaction models, the direct influence of the constructs on fair fashion buying behaviour was analysed. The results gained thereby offer valuable insights and are thus presented in the following.

Knowledge-related factors

The regression analysis for testing H2 did not yield any significant results. Construct values show, however, that consumers are aware of the social issues in conventional clothing production (Ø construct value = 3.6 on 5 pt. scale). Still, this awareness does not coincide with fair trade fashion purchasing behaviour. Concerning H2, the results obtained show a significant positive correlation between individual knowledge about fair trade seals for fashion and fair trade fashion purchasing behaviour (ΔR^2=.071). The best known seal in this study was one that is also used for other consumer goods like groceries. Thus it seems that fair trade fashion awareness is only part of a broader knowledge about the existence of fair trade alternatives for consumer goods. Hence, further research should take a closer look at whether fair fashion consumption is embedded in a more general inclination of consumers to opt for fair trade alternatives in their purchasing behaviour.

The results of testing H5 support as similar argument. Again, a strong correlation between a person's knowledge about the existing range of fair trade fashion and his or

Table 2- Regression results

Moderating variables (MV): Knowledge-related factors

Variables entered	Awareness of social issues				Knowledge about fair trade seals for fashion				Knowledge about fair trade fashion retailers/brands				Knowledge about existing range of fair trade fashion			
	β	R^2	ΔR^2	n	β	R^2	ΔR^2	n	β	R^2	ΔR^2	n	β	R^2	ΔR^2	n
IV	.274 ***	.075	--	446	.274 ***	.075	--	446	.274 ***	.075	--	446	.274 ***	.075	--	446
IV	.262 ***	.081	.006	446	.277 ***	.146	.071	446	.179 ***	.216	.141	446	.215 ***	.206	.131	446
MV	.077				.270 ***				.388 ***				.366 ***			
IV	.267 ***	.081	.006	446	.230 ***	.146	.071	446	.158 ***	.220	.145	446	.219 ***	.207	.132	446
MV	.078				.269 ***				.423 ***				.366 ***			
IV×MV	.027				.010				-.071				.032			

Moderating variables (MV): Personality-related factors

Variables entered	Perceived moral intensity				Denial of responsibility				Perceived self-efficacy				Importance of consistency			
	β	R^2	ΔR^2	n	β	R^2	ΔR^2	n	β	R^2	ΔR^2	n	β	R^2	ΔR^2	n
IV	.274 ***	.075	--	446	.274 ***	.075	--	446	.274 ***	.075	--	446	.274 ***	.075	--	446
IV	.286 ***	.069	-.006	282	.278 ***	.077	.002	439	.272 ***	.083	.008	446	.286 ***	.137	.062	406
MV	-.066				.011				.092 *				.218 ***			
IV	.281 ***	.070	-.005	282	.278 ***	.077	.002	439	.265 ***	.085	.010	446	.280 ***	.139	.064	406
MV	-.069				.013				.097 *				.222 ***			
IV x MV	-.013				.017				.036				.054			

Variables entered	Importance of traditional purchasing criteria				Non-supportive social environment				Fashion orientation			
	β	R^2	ΔR^2	n	β	R^2	ΔR^2	n	β	R^2	ΔR^2	n
IV	.274 ***	.075	--	446	.274 ***	.075	--	446	.274 ***	.075	--	446
IV	.166 ***	.238	.163	446	.220 ***	.261	.186	271	.269 ***	.088	.013	446
MV	-.418 ***				-.407 ***				-.116 *			
IV	.166 ***	.238	.163	446	.236 ***	.264	.163	271	.273 ***	.089	.014	446
MV	-.418 ***				-.407 ***				-.113 *			
IV x MV	-.001				-.061				.025			

Note: IV = independent variable; MV = moderating variable; β =standardized coefficients; ***p≤0.001 **p≤0.01 *p≤0.05

her purchasing behaviour is found. However, individuals may only make informed purchases if they are provided with all necessary information. In this study, 53.4% of respondents were unable to name any brand or retailer for fair trade fashion. Thus, the majority of consumers are rather uninformed concerning this fashion alternative.

Personality-related factors
The regression models for H6 and H7 did not produce any significant results. Hence, this research proposes that a person's fair trade fashion consumption behaviour is not influenced by how intense he or she perceives the social issues in fashion production as a moral concern or by how much this person sees him- or herself responsible for bringing change to the situation. It is noteworthy, though, that consumers do in fact find themselves quite responsible (Ø rank position = 2.78 on 1-7 ranking), opposing to what other scholars have found (Pereira Heath and Chatzidakis, 2012). However, the second statement by the two scholars concerning the influence of an individuals' perceived self-efficacy is supported. Regression results show a small positive effect (ΔR^2=.008). Thus, the more a person believes that his or her purchasing decisions have an influence on the way apparel is produced the more fair trade clothing does that person buy.

Another (surprisingly) positive relationship was found between a person's need for consistency in his or her choice between conventional and fairly traded clothing and that person's fashion purchasing behaviour (ΔR^2=.062). It seems that the wish to choose consistently is not an impediment but instead a characteristic of fair fashion consumers. This supports what other scholars have proposed: the ethical consumer exists and is willing to sacrifice by giving up old consumption habits to follow their ethical beliefs.

The regression analysis for testing the influence of the importance an individual places on traditional product attributes on his or her buying behaviour yields strong results. A direct effect is visible which more than triples the explanatory power of the overall model (ΔR^2=.163). This supports that for many participants traditional purchasing criteria do in fact outweigh ethical considerations.

For the last two direct effects tested, significant results were again found. While fashion orientation has a small negative impact (ΔR^2=.013), a person's social network plays a very dominant role in the development of fair fashion purchasing behaviour (ΔR^2=.186). These results support the notion that the symbolic function of fashion is indeed a very important purchasing criterion (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Sudbury and Böltner, 2011). As fair trade fashion is not well known and thus does only convey intended information about the wearer to a few ethically interested people it cannot fulfil the same communicative needs as conventional (brand) clothing. A person's apparel consumption behaviour is, therefore, strongly dependent on his or her social environment which can either be supportive or inhibiting to fair fashion purchasing behaviour depending on their own ethical consumption orientation.

Conclusion
The aim of this study was to further our understanding of the A-B gap by analysing eleven factors with regard to their influence on individual fair trade fashion purchasing behaviour. Making use of self-reports, the results of this study are prone to the socially desirability bias. This response distortion is seen as a major problem in studies on ethical consumption (Auger and Devinney, 2007). However, allowing for complete anonymity by conducting the survey online is likely to have minimized this effect.

Young German consumers are highly aware of the social problems in the fashion industry. Despite this, fair trade fashion has not yet made it onto their consumption agenda. General knowledge levels on the fair trade fashion available are very low and

thus inhibit a corresponding purchasing behaviour. Therefore, fair fashion brands and retailers as well as other interested parties like NGOs or consumer activist groups should shift their work from creating awareness about the issue to making the existing alternatives better known. Only if opting for the fair trade alternative is not seen as an unbearable limitation in choice, quality or price will ethical fashion find its way into the shopping bags of the everyday consumer. This is additionally supported by the finding that for fashion consumers traditional product criteria come first.

Secondly, as apparel consumption is strongly influenced by a person's association with a social network, fair trade fashion retailers should consider this in their communication strategy. By creating a brand for their produce they may increase the signalling effect that wearing this fashion will have on a person's social surrounding. In addition, findings indicate that fair fashion consumers aim to stick with their alternative consumption strategy. Such strong commitment of individuals presents a great opportunity for retailers of fair trade fashion. As social influences seem to play a paramount role in apparel choice, committed consumers will be a strong influence on the fair trade fashion buying behaviour of their social environment.

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