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How different types of communication affect ethical consumption: The role of psychological consumer empowerment

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Track: Sustainable marketing

How different types of communication affect ethical consumption: The role of psychological consumer empowerment

Abstract

This exploratory study aims to test the effectiveness of different types of communication in promoting ethical consumption, which is contextualized as the purchasing intention of Fairtrade products. The proposed model takes into consideration also the moderating role of psychological consumer empowerment (PCE).

Abstract (ITA)

Questo studio mira a esplorare l'efficacia di diversi tipi di comunicazione nella promozione del consumo etico, contestualizzato come intenzione di acquistare prodotti Fairtrade. Il modello proposto prende in considerazione anche il ruolo moderatore dell'empowerment psicologico del consumatore (PCE).

Keywords: sustainable consumption; communication; fairtrade; psychological consumer empowerment

1. Introduction

Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of their choices' social, economic, and environmental consequences and are changing their preferences and behaviors accordingly (Gillani et al., 2019). Communication can be an important tool to encourage the consumer to move towards more sustainable behaviors (Kolandai-Matchet, 2009). This study aims to investigate how different types of communication can favor consumers' sustainable choices and the role played by psychological consumer empowerment (PCE; Wathieu et al., 2002). The present research contextualizes sustainable communication within the fairtrade system, as it has been considered a potential opportunity to contribute to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (Golding and Peattie, 2005).

Several researchers have focused on sustainable consumption communication (e.g., Guillen Mandujano et al., 2021; Vergragt et al., 2016), however, it has not yet developed into a consolidated framework. In a recent review, Fischer et al. (2021) advanced a systematization of sustainable consumption communication research, by identifying distinct types of communication: Type I focuses on behavior modification techniques that do not require consumers to engage deeply with sustainable issues (e.g., nudging); Type II focuses on individual contributions and leverages active engagement that goes beyond private consumption to include civic action (e.g., boosting); Type III focuses on the collective level and aspires to transform systems of consumption and production rather than individual behavior (e.g., labeling schemes)

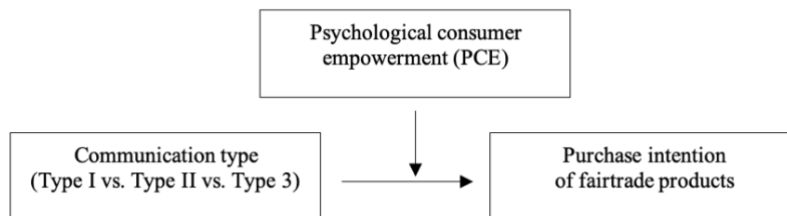
(Fischer et al., 2021)¹. Our exploratory research contributes to the debate aimed at defining which types of communication are most effective in promoting sustainable consumption, examining the differential effects of the three types of communication on consumers' purchase intention of fairtrade products.

2. Theoretical background

Based on previous studies on the effectiveness of sustainable consumption communication (e.g., Lee and Oh, 2013), this study uses a dual theoretical framework: the regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) and the relevance theory (Meijers and Stapel, 2011), which are used together as lenses to analyze this topic. Regulatory focus theory asserts that a message can be either promotion-focused or prevention-focused to appeal to different customer preferences (Zhao and Pechmann, 2007). Relevance theory states that in a message, components can be anchored as either self-oriented (i.e., self-fulfillment) or other-oriented (i.e., community-oriented; Fraj and Martinez 2006). Thus, the three types of communication can be classified as: Type I - prevention-focused and self-oriented; Type II - promotion-focused and self-oriented; Type III - promotion-focused and other-oriented.

PCE is examined as a moderator in our proposed model. PCE is pertinent and significant within proactive behavior, as it has been shown that empowered individuals feel they can influence behavioral outcomes (e.g., Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Ergeneli et al., 2007; Siegall and Gardner, 2000). A recent study on climate protection (Hartmann and Apaolaza, 2018) showed that PCE is a motivational factor in sustainable consumption behavior. We hypothesize that PCE moderates the influence of the different types of communication on intentions to act ethically, leading to different effectiveness of the three types of communication. (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Conceptual model



3. Method

As a first step exploring the topic, a between-subject experimental design was conducted on a sample of 76 Italian consumers (23.7% men; average age 27.2 years, SD = 9.40) to test the hypothesized relationships between communication type, PCE, and consumer responses. The manipulated stimuli used were three types of fairtrade

¹ Fischer et al. (2021) identified four types of communication. Type IV was excluded from this study as it aims at understanding and discursivity, while the first three types share the common goal of change, which they achieve through different paths.

communication campaign, adapted from Stoefs and Mathijs (2009) (Type I), Kolandai-Matchett (2009) (Type II), Hartlieb and Jones (2009) (Type III) (see Appendix A). We measured the intention to purchase fairtrade products (four items adapted from Wang and Chen, 2019), PCE (five items adapted from Hartmann and Apaolaza, 2018), along with control variables (i.e., age, gender, education level, occupation).

4. Results

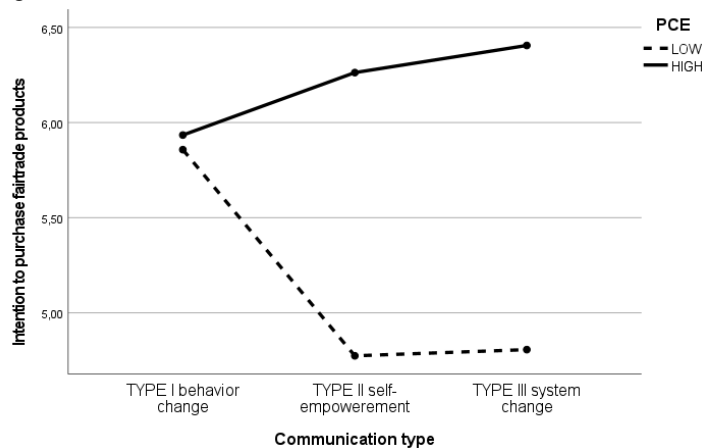
We ran a two-way ANCOVA considering the effects of communication type on the purchase intention moderated by PCE (high vs. low). Findings (Table 1) showed that communication type and PCE interacted significantly to influence purchase intention ($F(2, 66) = 4.64, p < .05$). When PCE was high, respondents were more inclined to purchase fairtrade products when exposed to Type II and Type III communications; the more empowered the consumer feels, the stronger the motivational influence of the two types of communication on purchase intention (see Figure 2).

Table 1. Results

DV: Intention to purchase fairtrade products	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Model corrected	38.69	9	4.29	4.69	<.01
Intercept	32.04	1	32.04	34.96	<.01
Control - gender	1.99	1	1.99	2.17	.15
Control - age	.45	1	.45	.49	.49
Control - educational level	.06	1	.06	.07	.79
Control - occupation	.65	1	.65	.71	.40
Communication type	1.98	2	.99	1.08	.35
PCE (low vs. high)	18.77	1	18.77	20.48	<.01
Communication type * PCE	8.49	2	4.25	4.64	.02
Error	60.49	66	.92		
Total	2492.63	76			
Total corrected	99.17	75			

R-square = .39

Figure 2. Interaction effects



The effects of Type II and Type III communications on purchase intention are significantly moderated by PCE. Interpreting these findings using the regulatory focus theory, as PCE reflects an active rather than passive perception of one's role (Hartmann and Apaolaza, 2018), promotion-focused communications (i.e., Type II and Type III) are more effective than prevention-focused communications (i.e., Type I) when the PCE is high. As empowered individuals experience a sense of control over the environment, they are more prone to actually shape the environment (Zimmerman and Warschausky, 1998).

Using the relevance theory framework, the role of PCE does not depend on the relevance of the message (self-oriented or other-oriented). This may be explained by the fact that individuals who feel self-empowered also feel empowered toward others and the community. They perceive that they are competent and can influence their environment (Hartmann and Apaolaza, 2018).

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, this work contributes to the literature by exploring the role of PCE in identifying which types of communication are more effective in promoting sustainable consumption behavior. The findings contribute to the research on how to promote sustainable consumption and offer practical implications for policymakers and, mostly, insights for further research. When individuals experience high levels of PCE, promotion-focused communications (i.e., Type II and Type III) seems to be more effective in supporting ethical consumption behavior, regardless of the relevance focus of the message (self vs. other). However, this is a preliminary study that has several limitations (e.g., limited sample), therefore it should be considered as a first step in the research topic that assumes future studies to further investigate the findings by testing the roles of other possible moderators/mediators (e.g., perceived effectiveness).

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Appendix A: Stimuli

A) Type I communication

Scientists are increasingly worried about the fact that not everyone can enjoy the benefits of globalization. The inequality in international trade relations is a threat to the foundations of our food system. Experts therefore wonder whether this is the inheritance we want to leave to future generations. They contend that Fairtrade products can contribute to solving this problem. As a result of the purchasing policy of retailers and the government policies, farming families have limited access to international markets. They hence cannot improve their situation, while poverty and inequality is a continuous source of tensions throughout the world. In addition, the socio-economic base of whole regions and countries is brought off balance by the influence large multinationals exert on the food supply chain.

Fairtrade products could ensure that everyone enjoys the benefits of globalization. In this sense, Fairtrade products can be a solution in order not to endanger the foundations of our food system. The purchase of these products represents a gesture that takes into account the long-term consequences of current behavior on a global level.

B) Type II communication

Scientists are increasingly worried about the fact that not everyone can enjoy the benefits of globalization. The inequality in international trade relations is a threat to the foundations of our food system. Experts therefore wonder whether this is the inheritance we want to leave to future generations. They contend that Fairtrade products can contribute to solving this problem. As a result of the purchasing policy of retailers and the government policies, farming families have limited access to international markets. They hence cannot improve their situation, while poverty and inequality is a continuous source of tensions throughout the world. In addition, the socio-economic base of whole regions and countries is brought off balance by the influence large multinationals exert on the food supply chain.

By choosing to buy Fairtrade products, every consumer can make a difference, meaning that they have the right and power to let institutions and companies know their thoughts on the distribution of wealth in the world. Everyone can communicate their concern by making ethical consumption choices, buying Fairtrade products. Sustainable consumption can only become a reality if the consumer makes purchasing choices based on what he believes.

C) Type III communication

Scientists are increasingly worried about the fact that not everyone can enjoy the benefits of globalization. The inequality in international trade relations is a threat to the foundations of our food system. Experts therefore wonder whether this is the inheritance we want to leave to future generations. They contend that Fairtrade products can contribute to solving this problem. As a result of the purchasing policy of retailers and the government policies, farming families have limited access to international markets. They hence cannot improve their situation, while poverty and

inequality is a continuous source of tensions throughout the world. In addition, the socio-economic base of whole regions and countries is brought off balance by the influence large multinationals exert on the food supply chain.

The Fairtrade circuit distributes products that are manufactured and marketed fairly at all stages of the process. Each of these products is recognizable through a label bearing the wording and the Fairtrade logo and which is printed on the packaging of the individual products. This label indicates that the product is fully traceable (and distinguishable from non-certified products) at all times, from farm to shelf.