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## “Our fair trade coffee tastes better”: It might, but under what conditions?

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## **Abstract**

The sustainability of Fair Trade ultimately relies on consumers choosing fair-traded products. To date, research has tended to study consumer and producer engagement, and reactions to Fair Trade separately. These areas do, however, interconnect systematically through supply chains. In this paper we introduce a self-catalysing model of Fair Trade which acknowledges those interconnections, traces them along supply chains from producer to consumer and addresses different international development priorities articulated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Its conceptual elements span a) product quality, in this case taste experience influenced by organoleptic properties and moral satisfaction; b) organizational morality via corporate social responsibility and living wages; and c) strategic management of slack farming resources – each catalysed by, and catalysing, positive emotions. Contingencies at each point in the model alter the likelihood that produce will be and feel fair and taste better to consumers.

## **KEYWORDS**

living wages, supply chains, sustainable consumption

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The sustainability of Fair Trade ultimately relies on consumers choosing fair-traded products. To date, research has tended to study consumer and producer engagement, and reactions to Fair Trade separately. These areas do, however, interconnect systematically through supply chains. In this paper we introduce a self-catalysing model of Fair Trade which acknowledges those interconnections, traces them along supply chains from producer to consumer and addresses different international development priorities articulated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Its conceptual elements span a) product quality, in this case taste experience influenced by organoleptic properties and moral satisfaction; b) organizational morality via corporate social responsibility and living wages; and c) strategic management of slack farming resources – each catalysed by, and catalysing, positive emotions. Contingencies at each point in the model alter the likelihood that produce will be and feel fair and taste better to consumers.

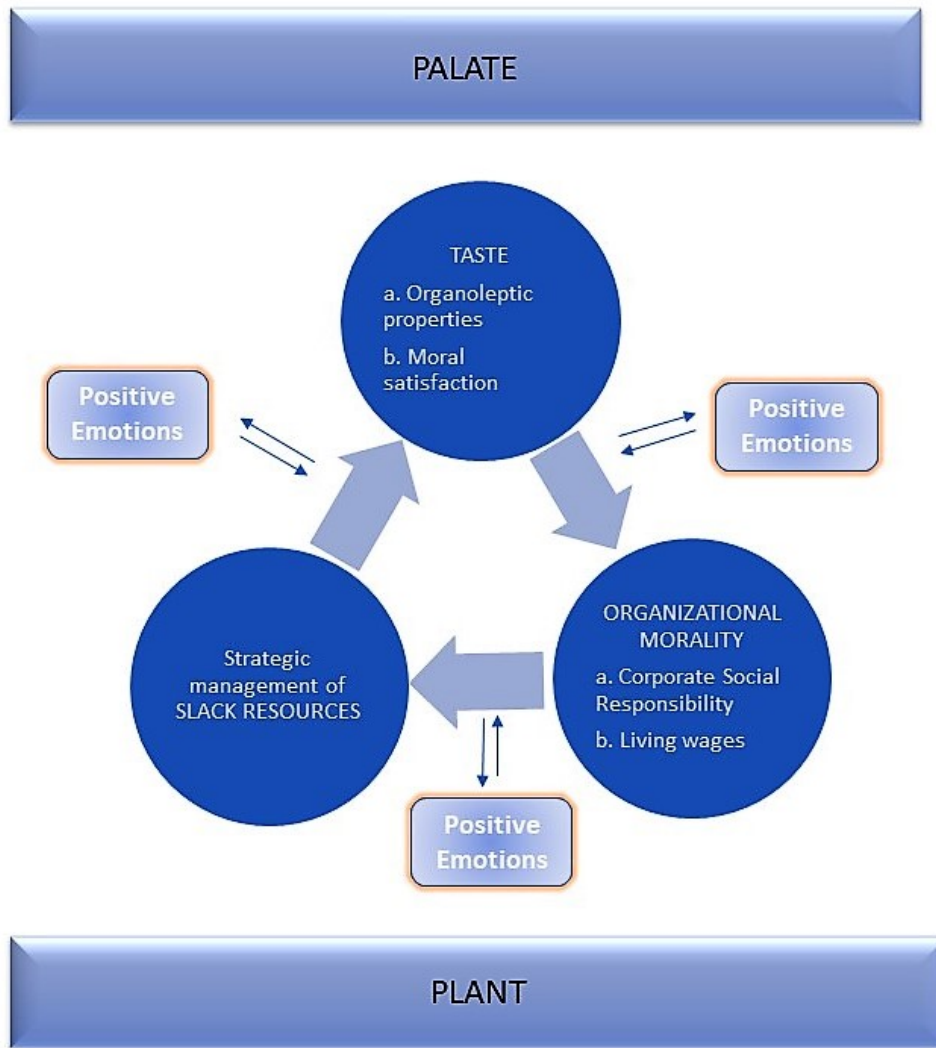
Fair Trade connects a range of stakeholders by linking small-scale primary producers, international trade, business practices and standards to end-user consumers. Lotz, Christandl and Fetchenhauer (2013) were able to show that to those consumers fair-traded produce can and does sometimes taste better. The evidence additionally shows that consumers can be both (i) willing to buy Fair Trade products; and (ii) financially able to pay the higher price that Fair Trade commands against competing conventional, non Fair Trade products (De Pelsmacker, Driesen, and Rayp, 2005; De Pelsmacker and Janssens, 2007; Konuk, 2019), suggesting a potential virtuous circle back from consumers to primary producers. For businesses, this implies that Fair Trade principles and product quality can be valuable marketing tools (Obermiller, Burke, Talbot, and Green, 2009). At least one major multinational company has used this principle by deploying the marketing slogan ‘Our Fair Trade coffee tastes better.’

Fundamentally, the ethos of fair trade<sup>1</sup> is not just about business and consumer affairs or benefits (Abad-Vergara, 2012). It also instantiates a) decent, i.e. fair and socially protected work conditions and b) nurturing work-engagements for small-scale primary producers and all others in the supply chain from plant to palate (International Labour Organization, 2019). Fair trade thus implies roles for multiple stakeholders and economic, social as well as sensory good (Andorfer and Liebe, 2012) and aligns with the ethos of the world's most ambitious plan for human development, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; United Nations, 2020a). Within the SDGs, one goal in particular stands out on consumer affairs – SDG-12: Ensuring Sustainable Consumption and Production patterns (United Nations, 2020b). The SDGs are inter-related, and inter-dependent, however. For example, the concept of a global and/or local supply chain suggests that SDG-12, an outcome goal, may be linked to SDG-17 (Partnership for Development), a process goal required to achieve sustainable consumption and production patterns, and other related, and inter-related, outcomes. These may range from a Fair Trade system potentially helping to improve work conditions (SDG-8) and reduce societal inequality (SDG-10) to peace in society (SDG-16). Global price shocks, for example, can push potential and actual small-scale farmers and producers away from growing fair traded coffee towards illicit cocaine and thus increase societal conflicts (Dube and Vargas, 2008).

Here, we propose the socially conscious fair-trade model outlined in Figure 1 which provides the mechanisms through which Fair Trade may result in greater quality produce, thus benefitting the consumer, while also providing greater sustainability along the supply chain via a self-catalysing feedback loop that rests on the psychology of human emotions.

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<sup>1</sup> We use Fair Trade, capital F and T, to denote fair trade that is accredited, but fair trade to denote the wider concept of fairness in trade which does not in itself guarantee the fairness referred to by Fair Trade accreditation.



**FIGURE 1**

Conceptual Framework for the Virtuous Circle of the Broaden and Build Model of Fair Trade Connecting The Producer (PLANT) to the Consumer (Palate)

*Note.* The following can moderate or mediate strength of any relationship denoted by any arrow: economic crisis, pandemic, natural disaster, war, political crisis, oppression, greenwashing, human insecurity from any of the above

We take the example of coffee to unpack each of the model elements and mechanisms included in Figure 1. We start by clarifying that consumers' subjective taste experience may be influenced not only by organoleptic properties of the produce, that is the sensory experience on

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the consumer's palate, but also by feelings of moral satisfaction emerging from buying a perceptibly fair-traded product. Next, we employ a multi-stakeholder and inter-disciplinary perspective to examine how aspects of corporate social responsibility (CSR), living wages, and strategic management of slack resources may indirectly impact organoleptic properties of the produce and/or moral satisfaction at each point in the supply chain. Contrary to traditional supply chain models, we propose positive emotions (not financial resources) as the decisive currency that drives this self-catalysing process. Finally, we suggest the metaphor of a virtuous supply chain circle as the connection between producer and consumer, and a positive vision of rekindling human virtues of fairness and justice through transmission of positive emotions throughout the supply circle.

## **2. DISCERNING PALATES IN THE CONTEXT OF FAIR TRADE: POSITIVE TASTE PERCEPTION OF FAIR-TRADE PRODUCE**

Surprisingly perhaps, research on how Fair Trade produce actually tastes organoleptically is relatively rare. This may have to do with the fact that individuals never perceive the organoleptic properties of food (vision, touch, taste, olfaction; Petracco, 2000) perceived exactly as they are registered by the senses; as they are modulated by subjective perceptions (e.g., preferences, moods, motivations), even among trained experts (Smyth and Cozzolino, 2013). Lotz et al. (2013) provide one example of research which considered consumers' palate. They took an ethical consumerist perspective in three studies.

In their first study, German consumers were asked to ostensibly participate in a coffee product test. It examined the influence of the organoleptic properties of two types of coffee (non-Fair Trade vs. Fair Trade) and the psychological influence of two types of labels (Fair Trade vs. conventional label) on taste experience. Participants were allocated to one of four possible

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experimental conditions by seeing the label on the coffee packet from which they were asked to prepare a cup of coffee. Coffee labelled as Fair Trade received more positive taste ratings than coffee not labelled as Fair Trade, but the actual product (Fair Trade vs. not) did not. Equally so, Sörqvist et al. (2013) found that an eco-friendly labelled, but organically identical coffee yielded better taste ratings than when it was not labelled as such. These findings suggest that psychological influences of the coffee *label* may have more of an impact on taste evaluation than the coffee's actual taste (i.e., the organoleptic experience).

Of course, one fair-traded type never represents all nor most Fair Trade coffees, nor other Fair Trade products. In their second experiment, Lotz et al. (2013) thus used two different products: Fair Trade and conventional chocolate. Here, too, the chocolate labelled as Fair Trade was ascribed better taste. Moreover, participants who had assumed Fair Trade products did *not* taste different to non-Fair Trade certified products were *more* impressed by the taste than those who had already been Fair Trade supporters. This ruled out a purely cognitive expectation effect, akin to a placebo effect as an explanation for the superior rating of the Fair Trade chocolate based on the assumption that fair trade would taste better. It pointed instead to at least some purely organoleptic, Just Noticeable Difference, in actual taste (Peck and Childers, 2008).

In Lotz et al.'s (2013) third experiment, participants tasted only Fair Trade chocolate, either with or without a Fair Trade label, and minimal information about Fair Trade itself (in the previous experiments participants had received such information. Again, a Fair Trade label in itself, despite many participants being sceptical about whether Fair Trade would actually taste better, moved the reported taste needle upwards. Such findings are suggestive of some non-organoleptic processes as the product had been identical in both conditions, but again not purely

cognitive ones as participants were mostly sceptical beforehand and received no information about Fair Trade which might have primed their taste evaluations.

Crucially, a measure of positive *emotion* had been included in this third experiment (Russell, 2003). Emotion was found to partly mediate between label and taste evaluation. Similar results had been found by Grankvist, Lekedal and Marmendal (2007) who had conducted research on the role of emotional processing in assessments of taste. They examined whether taste preference for orange juices differed among Swedish students who were made to believe that the product was conventional, eco- or Fair Trade. In addition, Grankvist et al. (2007) investigated the role of values on the preference for eco- and Fair Trade labelled food products. Although no significant taste differences emerged based on how the juices had been labelled, when students attached greater importance to the value “warm relationships with others” they also tended to rate the taste of both, eco- and Fair Trade labelled juices, more favourably. Seeing the value “security” as important was positively associated with taste preference for Fair Trade-, but not eco-labelled juices. Thus, both, the value of “warm relationships with others” and of “security”, boosted positive ratings for Fair Trade products.

As a set, these studies remain ground-breaking because they probed the psychological aspects related to the quality of Fair Trade produce, by considering the role of perception and emotion as partial mediators between label and reported taste experience. However, they have penetrated less into our question of whether products generated through Fair Trade-products *taste* better organoleptically, all else being equal. Putting aside any philosophical debate about whether a cognition, or more likely perhaps an emotion about a consumer experience is a taste or something more psychological instead, and whether that would be enough in itself to prompt purchase behaviour, some Fair Trade coffee may still just taste better, organoleptically.



On what basis is such an organoleptic pathway to the palate conceivable? Crucially in the studies and literature just outlined, products generated in a Fair Trade system were nowhere nearly widely-enough sampled, either by type or by origins to determine whether Fair Trade systems generate commodities that taste better, on average, *ceteris paribus*, than non-Fair Trade system counterparts. From a wider systems' perspective, and absencing any massive global taste experiment of all Fair Trade versus other trade produce (which can still be fair; Andorfer and Liebe, 2012), a more immediate question might be: Under what upstream *contingencies* in the supply chain does Fair Trade produce taste better? We argue that these contingencies include moral satisfaction of consumers, organizational morality and slack resources for producers, at each level due to the emotional states which they elicit.

### **3. MORAL SATISFACTION AS A MODULATOR OF TASTE**

From a strictly economic perspective, Fair Trade products are typically more expensive than their non-Fair Trade counterparts and thus may be out-of-reach. Nonetheless, consumer behaviour research in economically wealthier societies with greater purchasing power, disposable income and wider product options increasingly show that consumers may not be mainly economically motivated. Instead, they are prepared to pay a premium for the satisfaction of not buying goods and commodities that rely on environmental or labour exploitation. For example, consumers with enough disposable income report being willing to pay extra for commodities like eco-labelled seafood (Vitale et al., 2020), organic wine (Schäufele, Pashkove, and Hamm, 2018), or Fair Trade coffee (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005). In New Zealand, for instance, Murphy and Jenner-Leuthart (2011) surveyed Auckland City Café customers on their perceptions of coffee attributes, including price and taste. Overall, customers expected to pay more for Fair Trade coffee, although, on average, not as much as the margins required at the time

of the study. When exposed to a reportedly moving documentary which provided information about fair trade in the coffee sector, stated price premium support increased, offsetting a drop in expectations about coffee taste. This reported drop may have partly reflected increasing discrimination in purchasing behaviour (Carrigan and Attalla, 2011) and/or reactions to the emotional contents of the documentary (Murphy and Jenner-Leuthart, 2011). Probing these possibilities further, Bratanova et al. (2015) examined experimentally the effect of being informed about a certain aspect of a product (environmentally friendly vs. harmful production of a biscuit, conventional vs. Fair Trade chocolate, local vs. imported apple juice) on the taste experience and willingness to pay for the ethically appealing product. Being informed about a specific ethical product compared to a specific conventional or a non-ethical product increased consumer moral satisfaction derived from contributing to ethical production and, subsequently, their taste expectation. This led to an actual higher taste experience and, ultimately, a higher intention to buy the ethical product in future.

Such findings indicate the importance of positive emotions triggered by doing what is morally right and organoleptic satisfaction for sustaining consumer behaviour (Mohr, Webb, and Harris, 2001). They suggest further that the partially mediating role of positive affect in Lotz et al.'s (2013) third organoleptic taste experiment, as well as Grankvist et al.'s (2007) findings of the moderating role of values, may have been partly grounded in feelings of moral satisfaction. More precisely, a halo effect could explain the "morality-enhanced tastiness of ethical food" (Bratanova et al., 2015, 147), indicating that feelings of moral satisfaction may bring about a more positive expectation and, subsequently, a better taste experience of a product. According to Bratanova et al. (2015), such psychological processes share a common neurological basis, as both primary rewards (e.g. expectation and tasting of food) and abstract rewards (e.g. moral

satisfaction) may activate a common reward-related neural system. Indeed, such reward-related neural pathways were found to be activated by Fair Trade labelling (Enax et al., 2015).

A sensibility to morality may thus be a significant emotional force motivating consumers to (a) support environmentally and socially responsible organizations, (b) derive moral satisfaction from buying their ethical products (Mohr et al. 2001), and (c) find Fair Trade tastier. Consequentially, consumers may practice critical consumption, i.e., boycotting companies, brands, producers and products for ideological, political, ethical, or environmental reasons, in order to express their social identity as individuals with high moral standards (Yates, 2011). For example, cost signalling theory and the theory of competitive altruism suggest that paying more for prosocial products may be seen by others to signal higher levels of status (Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh, 2010).

Of course, affordability will matter for many consumers as well as producers in the Fair Trade system - especially during periods of economic recession, joblessness, and other forms of disaster, when economic factors become more salient. Under such economically dire conditions, even if someone wishes to purchase a Fair Trade version of their coffee, they may not be able to afford the price differential (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005). In that case, the idea of a living wage may matter all along the Fair Trade system supply chain and becomes crucial for deciding whether or not the product generated in a fair-traded system gets into the consumer's shopping basket. This consideration concerns those holding the economic power to make such decisions - organizations.

#### **4. DISCERNING THE PLANT IN THE CONTEXT OF FAIR TRADE ORGANIZATIONAL MORALITY**

Often, organizations demonstrate to the public that they are doing “good” through investing in CSR programs. Originally, CSR was associated with responsible actions toward society and the environment (Arora, Kourala, and Phillips, 2020; Bauer and Aiman-Smith, 1996). Even though the exact meaning and definition of CSR remains contested, today its focus is on a “triple bottom line”, which adds financial returns from CSR as well as impact on the working lives of employees and on the environment (Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, and Ganapathi, 2007). However, meta-analyses have shown that it contributes mainly toward the economic bottom line (Carr, 2013).

When CSR is perceived as sincere, though, it includes the corporation treating its own employees well (Erdogan, Bauer, and Taylor, 2015). From there, it can boost organizational reputation (Carr, 2013). It can attract committed employees (Turban and Greening, 1997) and further motivate them, once employed, to be work engaged (De Roeck et al., 2014). For example, CSR has been linked to increases in Organizational Citizenship Behaviours (OCBs) (Oo, Jung, and Park, 2018). OCBs are behaviours shown by employees which benefit the organization, but which are not part of an employee's formal job description. In turn, OCBs have been linked to customer satisfaction (Podsakoff et al., 2009).

The customer in CSR can be broadly defined to include not only the consumer but also other types of organizations further up the supply chain (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012). A pertinent example of this Organizational Social Responsibility (or, O-SR) would be a corporation that provides agricultural management training to small-scale, own-account coffee farmers in organized cooperatives (Starbucks, 2019). Such training is inherently likely to boost produce quality, for instance by boosting skills in farmers' financial and other management of available

resources, in either financial (in the case of financial literacy training) and/or other strategic ways (Gielnick et al., 2016).

Within larger for-profit organizations there is an additional contingency, stemming from the Principal-Agent distinction and moral hazard (Easterly, 2006). Principals with a direct stake in produce quality like coffee growers and third-party agents further along in the supply chain, from growers' representatives to supermarket retailers, do not share the same interests and priorities (Schrage and Huber, 2018). Available resources in smaller and larger organizations might be put into shareholder pockets and profits, rather than being invested back into fostering skills among farming communities and cooperatives (Reed, 2009; Valkila, Haaparanta, and Niemi, 2010). This also applies to Fair-Trade agencies, which have been criticized for charging producers high certification costs (de Janvry, McIntosh, and Sadoulet, 2015). Furthermore, organizations may adopt methods of "greenwashing", i.e., techniques of deception and disinformation about the true level of fairness and ethicality in the deals done with growers, in shaping their public image (Bowen and Arragon-Correa, 2014).

The point in this section is that Fair Trade produce will only taste better if each of the organizations along the supply chain does their part for fairness. CSR matters not only for the fairness of Fair Trade, but also for whether a Fair Trade labelled product will actually taste better to the consumer than a product from its ostensibly less fair, 'not' Fair Trade counterparts. CSR may influence taste experience, either by impacting produce quality and taste relatively directly, or indirectly, by transmitting sincere CSR efforts and thereby engaging a consumer's emotions. Greenwashing, i.e. CSR as a means to contribute to organizations' financial returns, may endanger such positive effects. However, just as Fair Trade retailers can greenwash,

organizations can still choose to trade fairly even without the official sanction of a 'Fair Trade' label, or accreditation stamp.

## **5. LIVING WAGES AS AN INDICATOR OF ORGANIZATIONAL MORALITY**

One of the choices organizations face is how much they pay workers and suppliers. Such choices are considered in Humanitarian Work Psychology (Carr, MacLachlan, and Furnham, 2012). It is a relatively new and specialized field in work psychology, focused on understanding and promoting work conditions that foster decent work (SDG-8, above). It includes, for example, well-established models of human-centred work design (e.g., Humphrey, Nahrgang, and Morgeson, 2007) that relate work characteristics, such as feedback, to personal and work outcomes, such as motivation, well-being and work performance. Abad-Vergara (2012), for instance, demonstrated the relevance of feedback: When coffee roasters visited small-holding producers and cooperatives in Colombia, and during the visit relayed feedback that their coffee was appreciated in New Zealand, and of high quality, the growers reacted with emotional pride and job satisfaction.

Positive feedback at work – in this case along the supply chain – can be psychologically, including emotionally, motivating (Carr and MacLachlan, 2014). Motivation in turn has been linked to production levels and quality of outputs (e.g., Cerasoli, Nicklin, and Ford, 2014) through a 'high-performance work cycle' in which positive feedback boosts self-confidence, which improves performance, generates more positive feedback, and so on (Meyer, Becker, and Vandenberghe, 2004). Such virtuous cycles have been found to be applicable in organizations at the base of the economic pyramid, where much of the world's Fair-Trade products originate (United Nations Development Programme, 2014). Whilst visits to farming cooperatives by fair trading coffee roasters are more the exception than a rule, as Abad-Vergara (2012) has shown,

they illustrate the role of informative and motivating positive feedback for primary producers in Fair Trade.

This evidence prompted us to consider how motivating positive feedback cycles might be generated through other channels, more likely in everyday Fair Trade system practices, and by organizations other than own-account workers (such as coffee growers and roasters in small businesses). Larger private sector organizations are a prime type of organization able to affect decent work conditions for many suppliers and employees (United Nations Development Programme, 2014). Such organizations are also widely invested in Fair Trade systems, for example through food processing plants and even in smaller and more localised roasting organizations or retail outlets (Hira and Ferrie, 2006).

One of the most obvious means of feedback are wage and income levels. These should, at a minimum, cross a “living wage” threshold (Carr et al., 2016). The concept of a living wage is arguably behind the Fair Trade idea itself. Derived from the poverty trap perspective, according to which incomes lift quality of life and work life *only* once they reach a certain pivotal *threshold*, the concept of a living wage suggests payment systems that: (i) *cross* this threshold can make a transformational difference to levels of job satisfaction, work engagement and product quality; and in turn may eventually (ii) *spill-over into Fair Trade taste* (Carr et al., 2018).

Carr et al. (2018) tested the first of these propositions in two diverse economies (New Zealand and South Africa). They found that there was a living wage threshold, which, when crossed, was associated with a step-change in quality of work life, including work motivation and job attitudes like work engagement, from negative to positive. Fairris (2005) found that living wage employers witnessed reductions in turnover and absenteeism, through which living

wages may positively impact productivity. However, these studies did not examine occupations directly linked to Fair Trade systems. The research therefore remains merely suggestive of a link between a Fair Trade system (that by definition supplied a living wage) and work motivation (in the form of job satisfaction, work engagement, and sense of fairness) among farmers and other workers along the entire length of supply chains involved in the product of Fair Trade.

One way in which living wages via Fair Trade can begin to impact product quality and eventually taste is by enabling some disposable income that the primary producer is able (and motivated) to reinvest in crop quality. In the field of Strategic Management, such disposable income is termed slack resources.

## **6. SLACK RESOURCES**

Strategic Management includes allocating slack resources in any constraining environment (Waddock and Graves, 1997). This definition means that, by default, many small-scale “own account” and small “family business” farmers, whose informal livelihoods are economically and socially “vulnerable”, are engaging in strategic management (World Bank, 2012). Even prior to COVID-19, vulnerable workers made up approximately two-thirds of the world’s 3.3b workforce (International Labour Organization, 2019a). Ipso facto, their vulnerability is the condition that created the original demand for a Fair Trade system (Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, 2020). To the extent that a fairly-traded price might hold the economic necessities of subsistence at bay, Fair Trade prices might, as a result, free up some money to invest back into product quality (International Labour Organization, 2019b).

Strategic Management of slack resources has been linked to improved firm performance, for example in small to medium enterprises (SMEs) and enterprise development (Daniel et al.,



2004; George, 2005). For SMEs operating in challenging environments, slack resources may partly enable adaptive innovations (Voss, Sirdeshmukh and Voss, 2008). This might extend to strategic investments by Fair Trade farmers (Abad-Vergara, 2012). For example, according to Abad-Vergara's analysis of trade in coffee (between Colombia and New Zealand), for every cup of coffee sold at a retail cost of NZ\$3.50 without Fair Trade cover in New Zealand, the farmer received 2 to 3 cents per cup sold. The same cup under Fair Trade fetched, at the time, 6 to 7 cents. This extra price return created just enough 'slack' resources for Colombian hill-farmers to purchase schoolbooks for their children, and to invest in plastic covers for drying beans during rains. These in turn helped to boost coffee quality and, its potential taste.

There is a contingency, however. All of this assumes that small-scale farmers who manage to reap a fair price for their produce in comparison to farmers who do not are additionally motivated and able to invest in the coffee rather than in other priorities (Sarasvathy, 2001). For example, through an individual lens, it would be economically rational for a farmer, or a small-scale farming cooperative, to sell their *lower*-grade beans for a guaranteed price to a Fair Trade certifier, whilst keeping their *better* (tasting) produce for private customers, or retailers, such as small business roasters, who might pay a better price. In that case, somewhat perversely, the better quality (and tasting) coffee would not reach Fair Trade packets at all (for an example from dairy see Palmer, 2020). Organoleptically, Fair Trade produce would then not taste any better than non-Fair Trade produce. The final taste would be contingent on the farmer's business nous, and the extent of their connective relationship(s) with private buyer(s). Thus, slack resources may be necessary, but are not sufficient for Fair Trade tasting better.

Supply-and-demand crises such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, affect all farmers, not just those engaged in Fair Trade. For the latter, however, slack resources may initially be

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diverted to protect against climatic, health and economic crises, just to keep production afloat. The available financial cushion may give a modicum of social protection to the smallholder, keeping the production cycle going. Their coffee may not taste any better but at least it would still be available to the consumer. Economic necessity can therefore be a moderator of whether fair trade will generate *any* resources, slack or otherwise.

Similarly, the nature of the supply chain itself may add further contingencies, including chain *tension*. Longer supply chains may be more exploitative, simply because more people are taking a 'cut' of the profit, increasing tension and reducing slack resources at the producer end of the chain; and thereby decreasing the consumer's taste experience. The advantage of shorter supply chains is illustrated by a Fair Trade system supply chain program that transported clay cups from rural artisans to coffee shops in cities and urban areas, thus enabling living wages for their primary producers by reducing the number of middle-personnel and resulting in a better coffee experience, organoleptically and morally, for coffee consumers in Chicago (Saxena, 2017; 2019).

Digital technology can also be used to directly connect one end of the Fair Trade system supply chain (the consumer) to the primary producer. Consumers already see this when primary produce is labelled with its origins, for example the name of a particular farm, or country location. The tag connects the consumer back to the primary producer, which may make both parties feel better about their work and consumption, respectively. This kind of direct and potentially emotional connection could be facilitated not by flying to Colombia and meeting farmers directly, but more readily and frequently through digital transformations. For example, an application connecting the consumer to the farmer could enable the former to tip the farmer electronically, if the product quality warrants it (Burt, 2014). This kind of linkage conceivably

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makes the transaction fairer, not only by boosting slack resources at the farm end motivating the farmer, but also by creating over time a virtuous fair-trade, finer-tasting *circle*.

## 7. THE VIRTUOUS CIRCLE OF THE BROADEN AND BUILD MODEL OF FAIR TRADE

Slack resources in and of themselves may not fully motivate farmers to reinvest such resources into their organizations. The motivational force behind small-scale farmers investing slack resources into their coffee rather than in other priorities can be coherently explained by Fredrickson's (2001) Broaden-and-Build theory: Positive emotions broaden people's available thought-action repertoires, which in turn contribute to building enduring personal resources, comprising physical, intellectual, social, and psychological resources. These processes can further transcend individuals, with higher quality of connections to others helping to broaden and build resources between as well as within individuals.

This seminal positive psychology perspective is helpful for synthesising the literature reviewed so far, and for our opening question. Emotions in general, and fostering positive emotions in particular, run like a leitmotiv through taste perception (determined both organoleptically and morally), organizational morality via CSR, living wage-enhanced quality of life and decent work, and the strategic management of slack resources. Adding the need for a farmer to feel passionate and engaged with their product in order for it to taste better at the consumer end of the supply chain, we arrive at one unifying possibility. Each of the processes we have considered so far is linked to broadening-and-building positive human emotions. Fair Trade will taste better *to the extent that Fair Trade practices along the supply chain have mutually fostered positive emotions*.

The metaphor of a chain is perhaps rather negative and overly linear for the positive and reciprocal image of broadening and building. Our analysis of Fair Trade systems suggests that instead of a linear supply chain from producer to consumer, the Fair Trade system might be more appropriately described as a circular system. Such a virtuous cycle presents a more positive image, one of rekindling the human virtues of fairness and justice, and positive emotions attached to these (United Nations Development Programme, 2014).

In an integrated, connected circular structure, driven fundamentally by broadening and building positive emotional connections, it is possible for one construct, such as fairer employment and a fairer, living wage to benefit other stakeholders, including consumers with a stake in taste, in a demand-supply-consumption loop. Thus, a living wage, from a fair-trading system perspective, has the potential to be enabled by the consumer, benefit the farmer, by and for the processing intermediary organization(s) and their employees, the roaster, and ultimately back full circle to a better taste for the consumer (Carr, et al., 2018).

The model also suggests that the primary bond that will elevate the taste of Fair Trade system-generated products is the link between consumer and primary producer. Conventional linear supply chain metaphors, in which integration is at best vertical, imply no such link. Indeed, the consumer is metaphorically the most removed from the primary producer, who is at the farthest, opposite end of the supply line. In our model, by contrast, the concept of better TASTE in the Fair Trade system, being experienced by the consumer, can derive from and broaden through other stakeholders clockwise in the model; better taste can ultimately help to sustain broader resilience by the primary producer through strategic management of SLACK RESOURCES.

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As outlined in Figure 1, contributions to taste can also be made by secondary producers which are intermediaries between taste and primary production. Intermediary organizations that process the product can also add value, for example by investing in decent work conditions for their employees – including the provision of living wages. Decent Work (ORGANIZATIONAL MORALITY) has been shown to fuel a "positive work cycle" (Bhawuk et al., 2014). There is more intensive job satisfaction and work engagement in the production process, and potentially a better taste in the product itself (Latham, Locke, and Fassina, 2002). This additional value can combine with quality-add at the primary producer stage (SLACK RESOURCES) to create a better taste, as well as feeling, for the consumer of Fair Trade system goods, products and services. An inter-organizational *positive work-consumption cycle* may result, which would increase momentum to Fair Trade movements, create another round of positive emotions, and so on.

At any stage of the cycle, barriers to a better consumer experience can arise. These include subversion of the idea of Fair Trade itself, in which farmers may cannily sell the best product to the private bidder, outside of the Fair Trade system. Similarly, employing organizations can choose to divert profits away from the shop floor and towards private shareholders, or elsewhere. Consumers, too, can be hit in the pocket by events like COVID-19. For instance, people may stop going out to buy coffee, anywhere. Hence there are a number of contingencies implied by Figure 1, moderators and mediators, each of which combines to help co-determine both 'when' and 'how' Fair Trade system-generated produce will taste better.

## 8. CONCLUSION

We identified at the outset that whether Fair Trade actually tastes better is the wrong question as it is clear that it can. Whether it does or not likely depends on a number of

contingencies that occur before any potentially fairer-traded product even reaches the consumer's palate. Some of these are relatively proximal to the consumer, such as in the supermarket or the marketplace; others occur much earlier in the supply chain, such as in the crofter's field. Fair Trade is an inter-organizational, multi-level system, and so too is its taste. Taste at least partially depends on the quality of work, and workplace engagement along the length of the supply chain. CSR is implicated, as is Strategic Management.

Through breaching the interdisciplinary gap in our discourses on Fair Trade, we have identified various contingencies that co-determine the likelihood that fair trade tastes better. This is not a Yes or No answer, nor an aspiration, but a systemic contingency. The answer to our initial question – whether Fair Trade products taste better - is, it depends. In particular, the more levers that can be applied along the supply chain to support positive emotions and thereby broaden-and-build emotional resilience, the more likely the answer will be Yes. Whether and how these emotions may stem from actual perceived or felt fairness, as far as we can see, remains unanswered. Rather astoundingly perhaps, research has tended to omit measures of perceived or felt fairness. This is surely a burning question for future research.

In the present, we are left with some practical applications and advice. First, to the discerning consumer, be mindful that Fair-*er* Trade is likely to taste better, because a Fair Trade label is an indicator but not a guarantee of better taste. The more indicators of fair trading exist along the supply chain, the better the chance of consumers experiencing better taste. For example, a café or a company that pays living wages, preferably to all its suppliers and employees, is a safer bet. Better still, a brand that is Living Wage accredited will likely have better tasting product (there are major examples recently of major multinationals committing to this, like Unilever and Accor).

Second, better taste as well as positive affect-laden, morally satisfactory experiences, in turn, are likely to lead consumers to word-of-mouth marketing (Ferguson, 2008), when they discuss tastier Fair Trade coffee with others in their social and familial circle, as well as on social media. This word of mouth marketing could increase customer acquisition, especially in the small business context (Obermiller et al., 2009; Stokes and Lomax, 2002). Beyond word-of-mouth marketing marketers can capitalise on the reputational benefits from Fair Trade certification, Living Wage accreditation, and CSR initiatives, when marketing Fair Trade as a morally and gustatory better deal, with utility and literally a 'Just' Noticeable Difference.

Third, socially responsible organisations should buy Fair Trade but also practice fair trade along their entire supply chain. It is no use paying living wages to in-store employees if produce is produced in slave-like work conditions, just as Fair Trade prices paid to growers and pickers are undermined by paying poor wages to workers further along the supply chain (e.g., coffee roasters or quality control workers).

To responsible governments and international agencies like the UN, we would say integrate policies, such as economic or regulatory subsidies for fair trade and penalties for poor trade, across entire sectors and value chains, benefits in aid from international multilateral organizations, or tax-cuts and financial incentives that are weaved in national policy programs for stimulating Fair Trade CSR initiatives from organizations. By providing subsidies to those who engage in genuine CSR practices and adhere to living wage standards, governments and policy-makers may further promote Fair Trade across multiple consumer commodities. In the end, the social benefits of the proposed system and the economic viability of the virtuous circle may start to come together in a holistic model of development over time.

In these respects, the final arbiter of when and how Fair Trade system-generated produce tastes better remains the consumer, however, even in a circular, inter-dependent economy like the one presaged in the Fair Trade model outlined here. Answering the question we posed in the title of this paper, we conclude, begins and ends as a Consumer Affair.

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