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Attitudes of consumers towards ethical buying and fair trade in Slovakia

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Abstract: Nowadays, more and more consumers have an increased interest in the field of ethics and social responsibility, which they present in connection with the companies they buy from. The attitude towards ethical shopping becomes particularly important in the context of sustainable development and environmental protection. Slovakia, as a member of the European Union, is not left out of this trend. In the contribution, we focus on the attitude of consumers in Slovakia towards ethical shopping through an applied questionnaire inquiry. Ethical shopping is the way consumers think when choosing products, considering the conditions under which products are produced, distributed, and disposed. When choosing products, consumers consider not only the impact of these products on the environment but also whether adequate working conditions were observed during their production. We obtained data on the attitudes of consumers in Slovakia through a survey, using the questionnaire method. The survey focused on selected areas of ethical shopping, with a special focus on fair trade and its knowledge among consumers in Slovakia. Based on the results of the survey, we suggest ways to educate as well as motivate consumers in Slovakia to realize ethical buying to a greater extent.

Keywords: correlation analysis; ethics; consumer behaviour; marketing survey; sustainability

1. Introduction

Plenty of related terms are used to define the growing ethical consumer movement, such as green consumerism, eco-consumerism, conscious consumption, sustainable consumption, and socially responsible consumption [1]. Ethical consumerism can be manifested in various types of ethical consumption behaviors (the buying of ethical product options, consumer preferences for more ethical brands, or types of ethically questionable consumption practices [2–5]. Ethical consumerism may be presented in the form of anti-consumption or boycotting behaviors [6] or in charitable giving [7]. Sustainable consumption is considered one of the main prerequisites for sustainable development [8]. It is possible that ethical consumption as part of sustainable consumption represents a response to concerns related to the field of ordinary and mass consumption associated with self-interest and effective utility [9]. The United Nations 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals point to the need to deal with the unprecedented environmental crisis, protect human rights, and promote equality. Therefore, it is important to open a discussion about consumer literacy in relation to the social and environmental aspects of consumption [10]. Conventional consumption practices are often blamed for significant ecological and social negative impacts such as climate change and inequality [11,12]. Concerns about conventional consumption have led many people to rethink the consequences of their everyday behaviors and choices [13]. Inclusive partnerships built upon a shared vision and shared goals for sustainability that place people and the planet at the centre,

are needed at global, regional, national, and local levels [14]. Fair Trade constitutes a social-business initiative that plays a crucial role in the transition towards sustainability and a sustainable market economy, countering the major challenges of the 21st century [15].

Fair Trade is “a trading partnership based on dialogue, transparency, and respect that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions and securing the rights of marginalized producers and workers” [16]. There are strong indications that many consumers are switching towards more socially and environmentally responsible products and services, reflecting a shift in consumer values that is indicated in several countries [17]. The turn towards sustainability is becoming more critical in every sector; the trend of ethical consumerism is undeniable, but consumers’ lifestyles and behaviors have been slow to transform [18]. Even though consumers are ethically concerned, they rarely transform their intentions into a green purchasing behaviour [19].

In connection with ethical shopping and ethical consumption, we often come across the term Fair Trade. Fair trade can be understood as a global movement of association and commercial cooperation based on communication, transparency, and respect that seeks greater equity in international trade, contributing to sustainability in the best conditions of trade and the guarantee of rights of involved groups [20]. Marketing can communicate within the company and with consumers to make better environmental choices and therefore have a positive impact, but marketing communication of sustainability at different levels can very easily turn into greenwashing or misleading messages towards customers about the positive environmental impact of a selected product or activity of a company or organization [21,22].

The aim of Fair Trade is to increase the satisfaction of stakeholders that primarily include producers, employees, consumers, as well as representatives of various environment-focused groups, etc. Ethical consumption fulfills the goals related to consumers, environmental protection, and fair treatment of human resources also through Fair Trade [23]. The Fair Trade is generally considered a tool associated with development. It is also considered a part of “new globalisation”, changing patterns of international trade and the processes of corporate expansion that have historically overcome global ecological and social conditions [24]. Fair Trade presents a strong contrast to the conventional rational economic model of global trade, which focuses on maximum return for institutional buyers of commodities through a power imbalance in favour of purchasers. Some retailers have even developed their own product lines [25,26]. However, for a successful inclusion on the market, sellers need to differentiate the features of Fair Trade goods from the conventional ones [27]. The ethical dimension of such differentiation reduces the pressure on the price competitiveness of even homogeneous products, and the higher retail prices caused by the higher incomes for producers in the developing world are generally classified as having a higher value [26,28,29]. The higher value perceived by consumers is also connected with a feeling of buying a kind of premium product [30]. Such products are also perceived by the consumer as having a higher price. The customer is willing to pay for such products in part. The dependence of consumers on the purchase and price

of Fair Trade products depends on the perceived level of respect for producer rights and trust in social responsibility [31]. A broadened education and distribution channel of Fair Trade has extended beyond the circle of social activists to conscious consumers because it offers ethical consumption and enhances social entrepreneurship to bring about radical institutional change through social activism, marketing, and ethics [32]. Such social responsibility as well as the positive reputation of sellers are important factors in gaining consumer interest [33–36]. Therefore, socially responsible retailers must be transparent with their customers and build positive relationships with society [37–39]. In recent decades, Fair Trade research has developed rapidly as it provides sellers with the opportunity to monetize products. The concept and implementation of Fair Trade represent an innovation in the business model of sellers to help maintain a competitive advantage in a rapidly changing economic situation by improving their ability to create value [34,40–42].

On the other hand, Fair Trade offers a new attitude towards the producer-consumer relationship, which connects production and consumption via an innovative supply chain model. This model distributes its economic benefits more fairly among all stakeholders [24]. Fair trade successfully supports significant changes, which is also possible thanks to the fact that it involves people from all over the world in making decisions about these changes and their implementation in practice. It's a global movement made up of a diverse network of manufacturers, companies, shoppers, advocates, and organizations that put people and the planet first. Thanks to Fair Trade, there is an improvement in the employment opportunities of women and children, especially from developing countries where insufficient working conditions have been recorded. Fair Trade enables people to make the right decisions regardless of gender, status, position in society, or position in the world [20]. Fair trade is one of the most far-reaching and well-known ethical consumerism movements. It aims to put social justice at the heart of global supply chains [43]. Fair Trade is extremely important because it can have a positive impact on the market in terms of sustainable transformation [15,44].

Over the last period, within the framework of the solved issue, attention has been paid to sustainable purchase intentions [44], determinants of consumers' intention to buy Fair Trade products from the perspective of gender [45,46], drivers of consumer's willingness to pay for Fair Trade products [47–49], the promotion of Fair Trade buying behavior [50], ethical identity, social image, and sustainability, and a sociopsychological framework of ethical consumers' attitude-behavior gaps [51].

In Slovakia, only marginal studies are devoted to this issue. They rather focus on research and cross-generational analysis in shaping sustainable food markets [52], corporate social responsibility and application of its principles in chosen transnational corporations based in Slovakia and its impact on their international marketing management [53], case for developing and implementing a Fair Trade regime and participation in EU activities [54], and other studies examining the marginal impact of Fair Trade [55–57]. In view of the above, we can conclude that currently considerable attention is paid to the investigation of the attitudes of consumers towards ethical buying and Fair Trade from the point of view of various determinants and drivers. In Slovakia, attention is paid to this issue only marginally, focusing on the international level. No study examines the issue from the point of view of the general determinants

of gender and education at the level of Slovakia. Therefore, this contribution focuses on the evaluation of attitudes of consumers towards ethical buying and Fair Trade in Slovakia. Since sustainability, the issue of corporate social responsibility, and environmental protection are becoming more and more relevant, we decided to deal with them as a part of our survey, which is aimed at monitoring the attitude of consumers in Slovakia towards ethical shopping and its individual aspects.

2. Materials and methods

Considering the need to solve global ethical issues including rogue states, child labor, migration, climate change, global trade, and many others, we focused on the knowledge of consumers in Slovakia not only in the field of ethical shopping and the concept of Fair Trade, but we were also interested in the extent to which they actively participate in solving selected ethical aspects in shopping.

The survey was applied from 1 February 2024 to 15 May 2024 by means of a questionnaire. The survey was realized by the combined method—many questionnaires were sent online, and part of the survey was carried out by personal inquiries.

The questionnaire consisted of 16 questions, including 4 questions related to demographic data of the respondents (gender, age, education, income) and 12 questions that were aimed at monitoring various aspects of ethical buying, including knowledge about Fair Trade and its importance (the knowledge of consumers in Slovakia related to the concepts of ethical shopping, ethical consumption, interest in ethical products, and obstacles that limit consumers in Slovakia in purchasing ethical products). To increase the validity of the survey, we conducted a pre-survey on a sample of 70 respondents, so we found out whether the wording of the questions was chosen appropriately.

Before conducting the survey itself, we calculated the required sample of respondents.

Sample size calculation:

$$n = \frac{(z^2 \times p \times (1-p)) + e^2}{e^2 + z^2 \times p \times \frac{(1-p)}{N}} = \frac{(95^2 \times 50 \times (1-50)) + 6^2}{6^2 + 95^2 \times 50 \times \frac{(1-50)}{5424687}} = 268$$

where:

population size (N)—5 424 687.

Margin of Error (e)—6%.

Variance (p)—50%.

Confidence level (z)—95%.

Sample size—268 [58].

274 respondents took part in the survey, which fulfilled the minimum size regarding the required number of respondents, with a set confidence level of 95%, a margin of error of 6%, and a variance of 50%.

As part of the research, research objectives and hypotheses were determined, which were tested using the student's test. The mutual relation among independent variables and individual responses was analysed by the correlation coefficient. It is used to measure the strength of a relationship between two variables. We interpret the

values of the correlation coefficient according to Chráska [59]. He describes their dependence as follows: values from 0.9 to 1 (−0.9 to −1) are considered to be very highly dependent, so there is a very strong interdependence among the variables. Values from 0.7 to 0.9 (−0.7 to −0) are highly dependent, and from 0.4 to 0.7 (−0.7 to 0.4) are moderately dependent, from 0.2–0.4 (−0.4 to −0.2) are with low dependence. Values from the interval 0–0.2 (−0.2–0.0) are considered to be weak (without dependence). The entire methodological research process is shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Methodological research procedure.

Methodology procedure		Characteristic
Primary research method		Questionnaire inquiry
Research time		1 February 2024 to 15 May 2024
Method of inquiry		Combined method
Questionnaire	Demographic issues	4
	Research questions	12
Survey validation	pre-survey	a sample of 70 respondents
Survey	Sample size calculation	268
	Sample size real	274
H1	Goal	The goal is to find out whether the gender of the respondents affects their experience (knowledge) with the concept of Fair Trade
	Research question	Does the gender of the respondents influence their experience (knowledge) with the concept of Fair Trade
	Hypothesis	There is a statistical dependence between the gender of the respondents and their experience (knowledge) with the concept of Fair Trade.
H2	Goal	The aim is to find out whether the respondents' education affects their experience (knowledge) with the concept of Fair Trade
	Research question	Does the respondents' education influence their experience (knowledge) with the concept of Fair Trade
	Hypothesis	There is a statistical dependence between respondents' education and their experience (knowledge) with the concept of Fair Trade.
File normality testing		<i>F</i> -test
Hypothesis testing		Student's <i>t</i> -test
Testing the strength of a relationship		Pearson correlation coefficient

3. Results

The knowledge of consumers in Slovakia about the concept of ethical shopping is at the required level, and in most cases, they correctly interpret it as buying products that have been produced regarding environmental and social aspects, but the actual implementation of ethical shopping in practice is already at a much lower level. Up to 64% of respondents carry out ethical shopping only in exceptional cases, and these cases concern the purchase of products such as food, clothes, and cosmetics. 18% of respondents are not interested in the ethical aspects of products at all.

Consumers primarily associate the motives for purchasing ethical products with the expected benefits in the area of health and the higher quality of ethical products compared to other products. Respondents generally perceive the level of ethical shopping as very low. The main reasons for the lack of interest in ethical shopping

include low awareness of what ethical shopping represents, the assumed high price of ethical products, and their weak offer on store counters.

The survey was also aimed at searching for dependence between selected demographic variables (gender and achieved education of respondents) and their experience with selected aspects of ethical buying, including knowing the Fair Trade and its concept.

The first hypothesis assumes the dependence between the gender of respondents and their experience (knowledge) with the Fair Trade concept as the inevitable part of ethical buying (see **Table 2**).

Table 2. Testing the dependence between gender and knowledge of the Fair Trade concept.

H1	Gender	Positive answer	Not sure	Negative answer	Total amount
Absolute frequency	Male	47	58	26	131
Relative frequency		36 %	44 %	20 %	100 %
Absolute frequency	Female	49	64	30	143
Relative frequency		34 %	45 %	21%	100 %
Total amount		96	122	56	274
<i>F</i> -test				0.467764	
<i>F</i> critical value				0.819182	
Assessment of the normality of variables by <i>F</i> -test				The hypothesis of equality of variances is accepted	
Hypothesis testing <i>t</i> -Test for difference of variances				The test for inequality of variances is valid	
Area minus				−1.9647	
Area plus				1.9647	
<i>t</i> Stat				−6.20161	
Hypothesis testing <i>t</i> -test for equality of variances				We reject the hypothesis of equality of variances	
Pearson correlation coefficient				0.0187659	
Strength of relationship—Pearson correlation				weak positive	

Based on the statistical evaluation of the established hypothesis—there is no statistical dependence between gender and knowledge of the Fair Trade concept—this hypothesis is rejected. Even though the normality of the data distribution was confirmed, the *t*-test did not confirm the dependence between the investigated variables since the *t*-Stat value (−6.20161) is not between the evaluation areas, which means that the *t*-Stat test statistic does not lie in the area of acceptance of the null hypothesis, which is the interval −1.9647 to 1.9647. The strength of the relationship between the investigated variables is moderately positive (0.0187659). We can assume that men as well as women have known (or not known) this term, so belonging to a certain gender does not affect the closer knowledge of this issue.

The next hypothesis tested dependence between the achieved education of respondents and their experience (knowledge) with the Fair Trade concept (see **Table 3**).

Table 3. Testing the dependence between education and knowledge of the Fair Trade concept.

H2	Achieved education	Positive answer	Not sure	Negative answer	Total amount
Absolute frequency	Basic education	5	0	0	5
Relative frequency		100 %	0 %	0 %	100 %
Absolute frequency	Secondary education	43	55	13	111
Relative frequency		38.7 %	49.6 %	11.7 %	100 %
Absolute frequency	University education	48	67	43	158
Relative frequency		30.4 %	42.4 %	27.2 %	100 %
Total amount		96	122	56	274
<i>F</i> -test				1.23312	
<i>F</i> critical value				1.22073	
Assessment of the normality of variables by <i>F</i> -test				The hypothesis of equality of variances is no accepted	
Hypothesis testing <i>t</i> -Test for difference of variances				The test for inequality of variances is valid	
Area minus				−1.9647	
Area plus				1.9647	
<i>t</i> Stat				12.87967	
Hypothesis testing <i>t</i> -test for equality of variances				We reject the hypothesis of equality of variances	
Pearson correlation coefficient				0.0209773626	
Strength of relationship—Pearson correlation				weak positive	

Based on the statistical evaluation of the established hypothesis—there is no statistical dependence between gender and knowledge of the Fair Trade concept—this hypothesis is rejected. The normality of the distribution of the data was not confirmed by the *t*-test, and the dependence between the investigated variables was not confirmed either, since the *t*-Stat value (12.87967) is not between the assessment areas, which means that the *t*-Stat test statistic does not lie in the area of acceptance of the null hypothesis, which is interval −1.9647 to 1.9647. The strength of the relationship between the investigated variables is weakly positive (0.0209773626).

There is only a weak dependence between monitored variables, so we can assume that achieved education influences the knowledge of Fair Trade to a low extent. When implementing steps leading to increasing literacy in the field of ethical consumption and various areas related to it (including Fair Trade), all consumers in Slovakia may meet this concept, provided that such activities are applied with regard to a specific target group and its preferences associated with possibilities to increase consumer literacy.

Consumers in Slovakia have some awareness of ethical shopping and issues associated with it, but it is important to provide them with more information so that they can base their purchasing decisions on detailed information, such as whether the products were produced under conditions that take into account adequate working conditions, as well as information on the impact the very production and consumption of these products on the environment.

4. Discussion

Ethical consumerism can be seen as an awareness of how much influence one's own consumption can have in the social and environmental spheres. Many consumers want products that are consistent with their own values, so they look for information about the conditions under which the products they buy are produced, transported, and liquidated. However, understanding and spreading the meaning of ethical shopping habits vary from country to country, and various factors are responsible for different attitudes towards ethical shopping. Knowing these factors becomes the subject of many studies because their knowledge allows the elimination of obstacles that negatively influence consumers when buying ethical products [60].

The results of our survey point to the fact that consumers in Slovakia know the main idea of ethical shopping, but they lack more detailed information about the availability of ethical products and their labelling. To make ethical purchases, it is necessary to raise their awareness, regardless of gender or level of education, as the results of the survey show little or no influence of the mentioned demographic factors on the knowledge and choice of products that can be considered ethical. This category also includes products with the Fair Trade label. In the survey, although most consumers have the correct knowledge of what the given term means, in some cases their awareness is wrong. In addition, even knowledge of terms related to ethical shopping does not mean that consumers will choose ethical products when making their purchases, because they are limited by low awareness of ethical shopping, and another limiting factor is the higher price with which consumers in Slovakia associate ethical products. The primary step leading to the higher motivation of consumers to make ethical purchases is an increase of awareness of ethical consumption, which we propose to address as part of education at elementary levels as well as secondary schools. It is also necessary to provide information to older generations of consumers in ways that we consider more effective in relation to this age category (e.g., by broadcasting educational programs on television). We also suggest the use of social networks because they seem to be effective when targeting the desired group of consumers, which increases the effectiveness of the promotion and its desired result. When raising consumer awareness and literacy about ethical shopping, it is necessary to consider the appropriateness of the communication channels used and the quality of the provided information. As it is reported by authors [61–64], the quality of information and the reliability of information sources affect the degree of their acceptance by consumers. Enterprises are primarily responsible for the sufficiency and quality of information. As reported by Wei et al. [65], consumers associate incomplete information with a higher risk that they place on themselves when making purchasing decisions. It is necessary for businesses to determine whether they provide enough relevant information to consumers. Even if consumers think that it is useless to have much information, businesses should actively provide some official, professional, and authoritative information, because based on it we can infer the level of professionalism and honesty of businesses. Moreover, the more complex information, the higher the avoidance tendency, which may cause individuals process information in an inappropriate way [66]. Information is also a significant source for producers and sellers because information about consumers and their preferences is also beneficial

for managers, as it allows them to better understand consumers and, consequently, can make their marketing activities more efficient [67].

In the approach to ethical shopping, a survey conducted by Deng, who asked more than 1000 respondents in a two-stage study, found that there is a large gap between purchasing intention and purchasing reality. The findings show that the purchase of ethical products is influenced by many factors, including personal characteristics, ethical awareness, economic rationality, purchasing inertia, cynicism, and ethical cognitive efforts, but also situational factors. They all have an impact on the purchasing intention with which we approach selecting the ethical products and how their final selection looks like [68].

Compared to previous quantitative studies, a qualitative study dealing with the attitude of consumers towards ethical shopping was conducted by Rabeson et al. [69]. Based on interviews with French consumers, they found that time, money, and pleasure are the most important factors negatively affecting ethical shopping for couples.

It is highly likely that this ethical shopping trend has growing potential. As it is stated by Šáľková et al. [60], an increasing number of consumers consider ethical, environmental, and social aspects of products. The real interest in ethical products in Slovakia is also at a low level. Both surveys identified the same factors that cause low interest in ethical products. The results of the survey conducted on respondents in the Czech Republic revealed that, especially the poor availability of ethical products in the sales network, lack of interest in ethical products, and higher prices are the most important reasons for not buying ethical products. The survey conducted by Nayak et al. [61] also emphasizes the importance of price when considering the purchase of ethical products. He states that consideration of price sensitivity is therefore also crucial for retail managers, whose pricing strategies can influence consumers' ethical purchasing decisions [70].

Attitudes towards ethical buying are also important for companies. Companies can increase their attractiveness in the eyes of ethically oriented consumers and, at the same time, contribute to a more sustainable society by addressing the discomfort, ambiguity, and negative emotions resulting from their own unethical behavior [71]. From the point of view of promoting ethical consumption, understanding its driving forces and obstacles is crucial for companies and their managers, because taking them into account can improve strategies to promote ethical consumption and influence the target market more effectively [72].

5. Conclusion

It is not possible to generalise the results of our survey. The results presented in this paper consider the conditions and buying preferences of Slovak residents. It is highly probable that specific case studies in other countries can present diverse results because of various cultural conditions that result in specific purchase decisions. Cultural and regional factors can have a significant impact on consumer decision-making processes. Values, traditions, and social norms can also influence how individuals perceive ethical issues and accept ethical products. Therefore, it is necessary for each country, in order to participate in the global effort related to

sustainability, to carry out its own surveys in the field of ethical consumerism and, based on the findings of the surveys and taking into account social, economic, and cultural specificities, determine the most suitable procedures that could effectively motivate consumers to become more ethical in making their purchasing decisions.

Considering the expectations associated with the concept of sustainability, which are associated with the need to ensure adequate living standards not only for current but also future generations, societies primarily focus on activities that monitor impacts in both the environmental and social areas. Many businesses are under scrutiny to see if their activities meet the requirements, taking into account the elimination of negative impacts in the aforementioned areas.

Not only companies but also consumers themselves can contribute to sustainability by considering the ethical aspects of products in their purchasing decisions. To be able to make the right decisions, it is important for consumers to know which products support sustainability and vice versa, which products do not meet the required standards, and not to include such products in their purchases.

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