

# PREDICTING THE INTENTIONS TO BUY FAIR-TRADE PRODUCTS: THE ROLE OF ATTITUDE, SOCIAL NORM, PERCEIVED BEHAVIORAL CONTROL, AND MORAL NORM

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**Abstract:** The current study examined to what extent attitude, social norm, and perceived behavioral control explain students' intentions to buy fair-trade products. Moreover, it was explored whether the addition of moral norm to these three factors permitted the better prediction of the intentions in question. Questionnaire data was collected from 192 students of the University of Luxembourg. The results of structural equation analyses revealed that attitude and perceived behavioral control explained 61% of the variance in intention. The addition of the moral norm construct increased the explained variance of intention from 61% to 73%. These results suggest that to encourage students to buy fair-trade products, applied social psychologists or educational institutions should create programs that develop their perceived control over the behavior, for instance, by offering the products in their canteens as well as in their food and drink dispensers. In addition, they should insist on the advantages of fair-trade consumerism to favor the development of a positive attitude. Finally, they should emphasize the moral correctness of the behavior.

**Keywords:** fair-trade products, moral norm, sustainable social development, theory of planned behavior

## I. INTRODUCTION

From a human and ethical perspective, the inequity and poverty due to unsustainable and unfair power relationships implies the modification of a range of human behaviors that are conducted by the whole spectrum of societal actors ranging from the governments, corporations, institutions, down to the individual citizens. The

United Nations General Assembly recognized that education is crucial to increase the understanding of the global community about sustainability, and declared the time period 2005 to 2014 as the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development [1]. In this regard, Sterling [2] states that "Educational policies can help to create a better world, by contributing to sustainable human development, mutual understanding among people, and a renewal of democracy" (p. 86). In the educational system, the universities have a specific responsibility in the sense that the future leaders, decision makers, and intellectuals from the social, political, economic, and academic sector are created, formed, and shaped mainly within the world's institutions of higher education [3]. One aspect of sustainable development that universities have been asked to promote in the frame of the decade 2005-2014 is the "Respect for the dignity and human rights of all people throughout the world and a commitment to social and economic justice for all" (p. 14) [4]. Universities across the world are recognizing and asserting their pivotal role in affecting the necessary changes in human behavior, through research, teaching, and community engagement. Offering a variety of fair-trade products such as coffee, tea, chocolate, fruits, and rice, is a small but important step in sensitizing students about the imbalance of power in many trading relationships and unstable markets. For producers, fair-trade means prices that aim to cover the costs of sustainable, ecological production. Considering the effort undertaken by some institutions such as the University of Luxembourg to encourage students to consume fair-trade products rather than conventionally imported products, it would be interesting to investigate the psychosocial factors

contributing to their intention to buy these kinds of products.

**The theory of planned behavior.** The research reported in our article applied the theory of planned behavior (TPB), which has proven to be successful in explaining various types of behavior related to sustainability, including travel mode choice [5-7], household recycling [8], waste composting [9], the purchasing of energy-saving light bulbs, use of unbleached paper, water use, and meat consumption [10], and general pro-environmental behavior [11-13]. However, to our knowledge, the theory of planned behavior has not been used to predict the behavior of “buying fair-trade products”.

According to the theory of planned behavior, the most immediate determinant of behavior is the individual’s intention to perform the behavior, which reflects the cognitive representation of an individual’s readiness to perform a given behavior. The intention, in turn, is postulated to be determined by three major predictors: a favorable or unfavorable evaluation of the behavior (attitude towards the behavior), perceived social pressure to perform or not perform the behavior (subjective norm), and perceived capability to perform the behavior (perceived behavioral control). As a general rule, the more favorable the attitude and subjective norm, and the greater the perceived control, the stronger should be the person’s intention to perform the behavior in question [14]. The relative importance of each precursor as determinants of intentions is expected to vary across behaviors and populations. Thus, in some applications researchers may find, for instance, that only attitude has a significant relation with intentions, while in others they will determine that all three predictors make independent, significant contributions [15].

Despite the considerable support from different studies, several researchers have suggested that the TPB can be extended to increase its predictive utility [9]. In this regard, the results of a recent meta-analysis conducted by Ravis, Sheeran, and Armitage [16] suggest that moral norm captures “a significant and substantial increase in the variance explained in intention after TPB variables have been taken into account” and that “moral norms are most likely to enhance the predictive validity of the TPB when the behavior of interest has important consequences for the welfare of others” (p. 3011). Moral norm can be defined as the individual’s perception of the moral correctness or incorrectness of performing a given behavior [14] or “feelings of moral obligation to perform or restrain from specific actions” [17](p. 191).

The aim of this study is to examine the sufficiency of the TPB to predict students’ intentions to buy fair-

trade products and to explore, in this context, the influence of moral norm. In accordance with these considerations related to the theory of planned behavior and its need for extension, the following hypotheses were formulated: (1) Attitude, social norm, and perceived behavioral control predict intentions to buy fair-trade products (Model 1); and (2) a revised TPB model, adding moral norm, predicts intentions better than the standard TPB model (Model 2). Thus, the inclusion of this additional variable should increase the amount of explained variance.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Participants and Procedure

The participants in the study were 192 undergraduate students, graduate students, and post-doctorates from the University of Luxembourg (97 females, 94 males, 1 missing data), aged between 18 and 46 years ( $M = 25.78$ ,  $SD = 4.55$ ). All participants were volunteers. During the period from May to June 2011, the data from the Bachelor and Master students were collected at the campuses of the three faculties and in the university residences of the University of Luxembourg. Students were recruited at their residences, before or after their courses, and at the cafeterias. The Ph.D. and post-doctorate participants received the questionnaire via email. They were asked to participate in a survey of their opinions regarding sustainable development.

### Questionnaire

The questionnaire administered to the participants was designed to assess the intention to buy fair-trade products, attitude towards buying these products, social norm regarding buying the products, perceived control concerning that behavior, and moral norm or the feeling of a strong moral obligation to buy fair-trade products.

*The behavioral intention* was evaluated using four items. Sample items are “you intend to buy fair-trade products on a regular basis in the next 12 months” or “you will make an effort to buy fair-trade products on a regular basis during the next 12 months.” The response alternatives ranged from definitely not to definitely yes on a 7-point scale.

*Attitude* was measured directly by asking respondents about their overall attitude using a semantic differential scale and indirectly by asking them about specific behavioral beliefs and outcome evaluations. Direct attitude was measured using six 7-point semantic differential scales. Following the question, “For you, buying fair-trade products on a regular basis during the next 12 months would be...”, the opposite adjectives on the scale were, for example, unimportant-important or worthless-worthy. An indirect measure of attitude focusing on cognitive and instrumental behavioral beliefs was carried out by

means of an expectancy-value scale. Belief strength about consequences related to the behavior of interest was measured using a 7-point bipolar scale, ranging from extremely unlikely (-3) to extremely likely (+3). Following the question, "If you would buy fair-trade products regularly in the next 12 months, how likely or unlikely do you believe that this would...", 10 items were presented including, for example, the advantage "increase the quality of working conditions in third world countries" or the disadvantage "be time consuming because the products are hard to find". Respondents were asked to assess the importance they attached to each of the consequences (i.e., advantages and disadvantages). A 7-point bipolar scale, ranging from extremely bad (-3) to extremely good (+3), was used to measure the value attributed to each of the 10 consequences. For each behavioral belief, the belief score on the unlikely-likely scale was multiplied by the relevant evaluation score on the extremely bad-extremely good scale. The resulting products across all the beliefs were then summed up to create the indirect attitude score.

*Subjective norm* was measured using an injunctive norm measure and a motivation to comply measure. To assess the injunctive norm, following the question "how likely do you believe that the following people think you should buy fair-trade products regularly in the next 12 months", the participants were asked to answer the question considering each reference person or group (e.g., your family), on a 7-point scale ranging from extremely unlikely (-3) to extremely likely (+3). The motivation to comply was measured by the means of the following question "Generally speaking, how much do you care about what the following people think you should do?". The participants were asked to indicate their response for each reference person or group on a 7-point scale ranging from do not care at all (+1) to care very strongly (+7). For each normative belief, the belief score was multiplied by the score on the motivation to comply scale. As in the indirect attitude measure, the resulting products were then summed up across all the beliefs to create an overall subjective norm score.

To measure *perceived behavioral control*, two items were used. For example, the participants were asked to rate the following item on a 7-point scale ranging from very difficult (1) to very easy (7): "For you, buying fair-trade products on a regular basis in the next twelve months is...".

*Moral norm* was measured by the means of five moral obligation items. Following the introduction, "Considering the behavior of buying fair-trade products on a regular basis in the next 12 months..." the participants were asked to rate five items on a 7-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). A sample item is: "you feel a strong moral obligation to do so."

The reliability of each scale was adequate, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .70 to .90.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Two structural regression models were tested using the structural equation modeling (SEM) approach. SEM was performed using the Mplus 5.2 software [18]. In order to conduct SEM with latent variables, it is recommended to use multiple indicators for each variable, because scores from multiple indicators tend to be more reliable and valid than those from a single indicator [19]. In the current study, each latent variable was defined by the means of two parcels [20-21], where each parcel represented a subset of the scale items. To determine suitability of each model, the following fit indices were examined: the chi-square statistic and its associated p-value, the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), the root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA), and the standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR). According to rules of thumb [19], good model fit can be stated when a ratio of less than 3 for the chi-square/degrees of freedom ( $\chi^2/df$ ) statistic is obtained, CFI and TLI are greater than roughly .90, the RMSEA is smaller than .05, and when SRMR is less than .10. The fit indices for the two models tested in the current study are presented in Table 1. As can be seen, the values indicate a good fit to the data for both proposed models.

**Table 1:** Fit Indices for Models 1 and 2

Model	$\chi^2/df$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA			SRMR
				Estimate	90% CI	p	
1	1.06	.999	.997	.018	.000-.073	.773	.022
2	1.37	.991	.984	.044	.000-.077	.582	.024

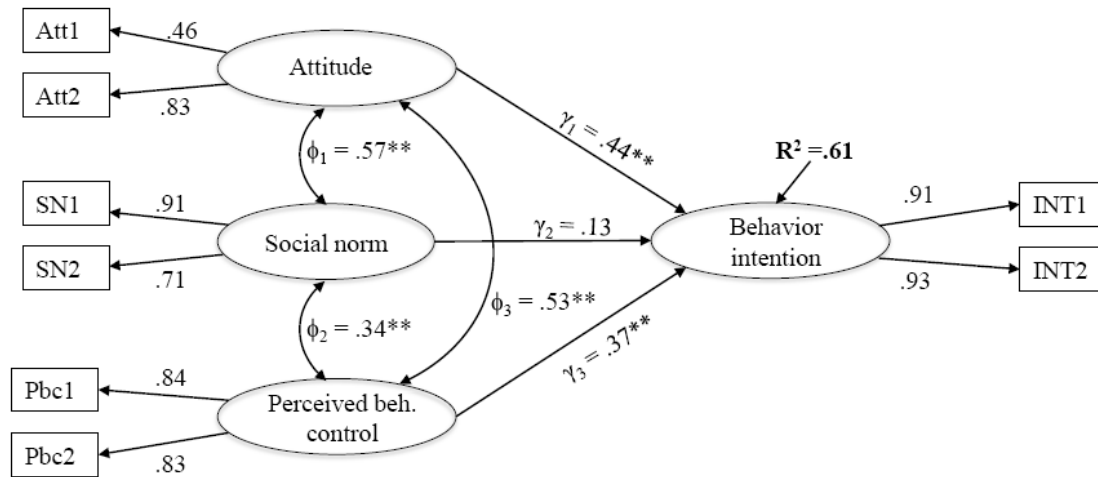


Figure 1: The TPB Determinant Variables Predicting Student's Intention to Buy Fair-Trade Products

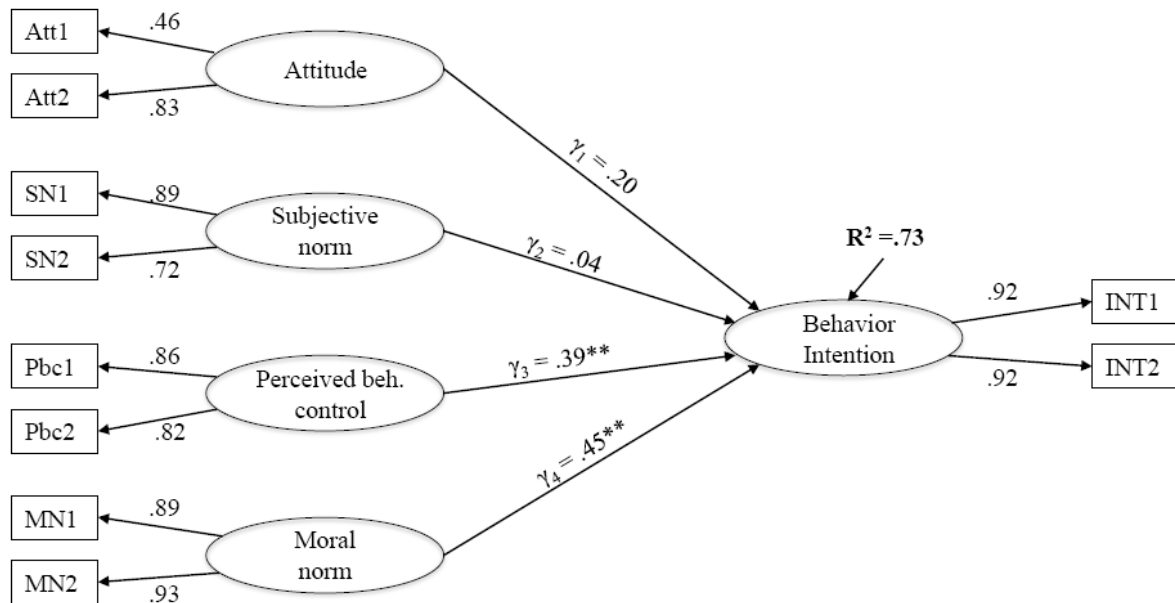


Figure 2: The Revised TPB Model, Incorporating Moral Norm

Results of the first structural equation analysis (see Figure 1) suggest that students' intention to buy the products is a positive function of their attitude towards fair-trade products ( $\gamma = .435$ ,  $SE = .127$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and their perceived behavioral control (PBC) ( $\gamma = .371$ ,  $SE = .088$ ,  $p = .001$ ). Social norm does not contribute significantly to the prediction of the behavioral intention ( $\gamma = .128$ ,  $SE = .096$ ,  $p = .181$ ). According to Cohen's benchmarks [22], the effect of PBC and attitude is medium.

The second hypothesis proposed that adding moral norm to the constructs of the TPB will improve the prediction of intentions. Thus, the inclusion of this additional variable should increase the amount of explained variance. The results showed that the addition of moral norm added 12% to the variance of the initial model. Together, attitude, social norm, perceived behavioral control, and moral norm explain 73% of the variance in behavioral intention to buy fair-trade products (see Figure 2). According to Cohen's benchmark [22], the effects of PBC ( $\gamma = .389$ ,  $SE = .069$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and moral norm ( $\gamma = .448$ ,  $SE = .076$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were medium, while that of attitude was small ( $\gamma = .197$ ,  $SE = .116$ ,  $p = .089$ ). Social norm does not contribute significantly to the prediction of the students' intention to buy fair-trade products ( $\gamma = .039$ ,  $SE = .074$ ,  $p = .601$ ). In sum, the comparison of Models 1 and 2 indicates that adding moral norm increases the amount of explained variance by 12%.

In the context of the students' intentions to buy fair-trade products, the results of the current study confirm that perceived behavioral control and attitude are important predictors. However, the results suggest that social norm does not have a direct impact on the intention to buy fair-trade products. The TPB or rational choice models in general, have repeatedly been criticized in the past for neglecting moral considerations [10, 22, 24]. The current study provides evidence that moral norm is an important additional predictor, increasing the explained variance of intention from 61% to 73%. Fair-trade can be referred to as "moral economies". Through ethical labeling systems, consumers are supposed to take moral responsibility for their economic actions: "as such, fair-trade becomes the guarantor for turning the consumers' purchasing power into a tangible contribution to socio-economic development" [25]. The current study underlines the necessity of moral concepts as independent determinants of intention in the context of fair-trade products purchasing behavior. In accordance with other findings [26], our results suggest that moral norm is likely to enhance the predictive validity of the theory of planned behavior when the behavior of interest has important

consequences for the welfare of others. In general, sustainability-related behaviors are regularly referred to as social dilemma situations, which often require people to restrain egoistic tendencies to benefit collective interest and where moral considerations are thus crucial [23, 27].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In sum, the results of the current study suggest that the theory of planned behavior should be extended by moral norm in order to better predict intentions related to fair-trade products purchasing behavior. Consequently, to encourage students to buy fair-trade products, applied social psychologists or educational institutions should create programs that develop their perceived control over the behavior, for instance, by offering the products at their canteens as well as in their food and drink dispensers. In addition, they should insist on the advantages of fair-trade consumerism to favor the development of a positive attitude, as well as on the moral correctness of the behavior (e.g., moral economy), for instance, through information campaigns to initiate or support reasoned action.

The current research is entirely based on self-reports and the results could consequently be criticized as (a) being affected by participants' readiness to adapt to researchers "expectations" and (b) being unrelated to overt behavior [12]. Considering the latter point, it is also important to note that no direct behavior measure was included in the current study, thus making it impossible to estimate the relationship between intention and behavior as well as the other predictors as, for example, the direct relationship between PBC and behavior. In a future study this variable could be included as a measure. In addition, a longitudinal study including a behavioral measure could be conducted in order to determine which psychosocial variables best predict long-term fair-trade consumerism. Other variables could also be included in future studies with the aim to verify their predictive value as, for example, "altruistic values" and critical awareness of consequences [28]. Considering this latter point, in his opening remarks at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, September 2002, the Director General of UNESCO insisted that "sustainable development requires knowledgeable, active citizens and caring informed decision makers" (p. 21) [29]. In this vision, universities should prepare their students to become critically aware, responsible, ethical, and cooperative citizens, fostering the common good [2, 30]. It could be interesting to conduct future research to measure students' level of critical awareness of consequences of buying fair-trade products, and in how far this variable contributes to a positive or

negative attitude, perceived behavioral control, opinion regarding the moral correctness or incorrectness of buying fair-trade products, intention, and behavior. Finally, future studies should consider replicating this study to a variety of behaviors and different populations.

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