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# ICTs and ethical consumption: The political and market futures of fair trade



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## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the relationship between information and communication technologies (ICTs) and ethical consumption as part of a cause for the insurance of a sustainable future. It homes in on fair trade as an ethical market, politically progressive cause and, crucially, form of participation where citizens can engage in the formation of an alternative future and the broader issue of food security. A three-dimensional analysis of agencies and uses of digital structures and content is informed by a case study approach, as well as interviews with fair trade activists, and ethically consuming citizens in the British metropolis. Through this, the argument which primarily rises distinguishes between the dimensions of durability (in terms of time and duration) and sustainability (in terms of time, duration and environmental concerns) of engagement in fair trade as a form of participation. Ethical consumption, then, is part of a durable market which has developed despite general market fluctuation, but is still very much bound in traditional physical economic spaces; in other words, ethical consumption has been integrated in the business as usual paradigm. Additionally, ICTs have not challenged the way in which information about ethical consumption is communicated or the spaces in which it is conducted. ICTs have been employed by fair trade activists, but they have not contributed to the development of fair trade as a political or economic project. Over a period of over five decades since the inception of the cause, their use has not significantly altered the way in which citizens engage with fair trade in the alternative or mainstream marketplace.

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## 1. Durability, sustainability and politically progressive causes

The beginning of the twenty-first century has witnessed the proliferation of politically progressive causes pertaining to the preservation and betterment of our social and environmental futures. These causes have been gradually embraced by public and private agents and successful examples have steadily been mainstreamed into public consciousness. A locus for a variance of engagement with such progressive causes has been generated within the sphere of consumption. Categorically, there has been a proliferation of green or ethical markets pertaining to an idea of sustainable futures (i.e. free-range poultry, sustainable fish, organic dairy, fair trade coffee). These are increasingly connected with the new politics of consumption (cf. [Schor, 2000](#); [Micheletti and Stolle, 2012](#)) where rights to the standard of living, quality of life, equal participation and ecological sustainability form the basis for politically progressive causes such as fair trade. This paper explores the mediation

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of ethical consumption through the cause of fair trade. It interrogates the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the cause by questioning the agencies which employ them and the uses that they are exposed to, resonating with a political economy approach (cf. [McChensey, 2013](#)) concerning the swing of technologies into the direction of already powerful and established agents. By doing so, this paper dissects the potentialities for the ethical political and market futures in urban spaces such as the British metropolis. It ultimately argues that ICTs have played a small part in the growth of fair trade; on the one hand, the market side of fair trade has become normalised through its engulfment in the retail sector, while, on the other, its political side is not being promoted through digital media.

Significant social and political processes within and beyond nations underpin the space left for civic action within and beyond nations. This is by no means a new contention, but one which calls for attention towards the underlying political nature of politically progressive causes. This is part of a larger problematisation of the notions of durability and sustainability of political causes within the contemporary metropolis. The term sustainability is associated with the nexus of time and duration, while the literature on sustainable development also encloses the parameter of the environment. In their extensive study of the relationship between food, globalisation and sustainability, Oosterveer and Sonnenfeld broadly define the latter as “the overarching aim for organising food provision” ([Oosterveer and Sonnenfeld, 2012, p. 250](#)). Thus, one definition of strong sustainable development refers to changes in the types of production and consumption patterns aiming to environmental protection, social justice and economic viability for current and future generations ([Baker et al., 1996](#)). Sustainability is, thus, the highlighting parameter in the socially and environmentally respectful organisation of global systems of provision. Fair trade has been adhering to either of or both of the parameters of social and environmental respect. The term durability is a simpler approach to the time and duration nexus and is here used to describe the ability of a system of provision to endure. This is explicitly found in the marketplace where the growth rates of fair trade have been balanced.

Fair trade has dual nature as both a market and movement ([Jaffee, 2007](#)) and ICTs mediate both these aspects. Fair trade has a long-standing presence in the UK, historically involving a variety of initiatives, structures and strategies which underpin its current operations accordingly ([Lekakis, 2013](#)). This paper argues that technological developments do not have a deep-seated impact on the campaigning or consuming side of this cause. The role and use of ICTs in the mediation of ethical consumption relates to urban sustainable futures and is unravelled from the points of view of both promoters and supporters of the cause. Specifically, the use of ICTs by activists and consumers involved and interested in the cause of fair trade is outlined. The argument which ultimately rises highlights the variable relationship between the notions of sustainability and durability in the case of fair trade. Rather, in politically progressive causes such as fair trade, durability and sustainability are characterised by a mutually dependent relationship where the durability of their presence – be that civic or commercial – influences their sustainability.

## 2. Communicating fair trade: a political economy approach of ICTs

The fair trade movement is directly concerned with ameliorating trade relations between the global South and the global North. This cause is primarily associated with the promotion of the motto and the practice of a ‘fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work’ and is both an organised movement as well as a market. The history of fair trade demonstrates a dense past where various factors have contributed in the growth of the market and movement (cf. [Lekakis, 2013](#)). The historical evolution of the movement denotes its endurance in time; its durability is evident in the fact that it grew from charity-based niche into market-based mainstream. In fair trade, durability is evident in the long standing history which has promoted the growth of the movement, whereas sustainability refers to the targets of the movement to do with safeguarding and ensuring livelihoods for commodity producers in the global South. Accordingly, if there is no durability of the market and movement, then there is no sustainability that the cause can uphold.

There has been an identifiable shift of consumer concerns from the reliability to the sustainability of consumer goods ([Nicholls and Opal, 2005](#)). For instance, consumer activism has targeted the social and environmental repercussions of manufacturing more than the durability of commodities themselves. The growth of consumer concerns about future sustainability has been met by the professionalisation of charity and campaign work in the United Kingdom. The degree to which politically progressive causes become the business of commercial actors can be described as their marketisation (cf. [Nash, 2008](#); [Richey and Ponte, 2011](#)). Ethical consumption has been regarded as ‘commodity activism’ ([Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012](#)) which is incessantly flirtatious towards markets and solidified corporate players to survive and sustain its campaigning work. In envisioning urban futures, the histories, trajectories and transformations of causes remain crucial in outlining common modes of life; these are the outcome of particular processes with fluctuating preferences to political but also promotional cultures. The sustainability of fair trade campaigning and ethical consumption needs to be teased out as part of the historical transformation of the cause and the examination of the structures and processes which mediate the cause.

The internet is contextually and physically disposed to social, cultural and economic frameworks, and as such ICTs are understood from a social constructivist stance, while reflecting upon a political economy framework in order to understand the embeddedness of the medium in neoliberal capitalism. A political economy approach of ICTs is vested in the exploration of the organisation and regeneration of power. The exploration of the agencies and processes of employment of digital technologies has illuminated the deep commercial nature of the internet where business is as usual (cf. [Schiller, 1999](#); [Mansell, 2004](#); [McChensey, 2013](#)). The types of agents engaged in fair trade activism and their communication strategies can, therefore, unveil the role of ICTs in enhancing or hindering the market or political side of this cause. Alternative trade organisations (ATOs) initially promoted the visibility of fair trade, in the 1980s. The campaigning function of these charities

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