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# The moral branding of Fairtrade: Opportunities and pitfalls of visual representations in the Fairtrade system – empirical insights on the perspectives of German consumers

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## Abstract

*The Fairtrade system can be considered as one of the most successful real-world experiments of alternative economies. However, Fairtrade more than other alternative economic approaches relies on mass market mechanisms and the sale of its products via conventional distribution channels and retail outlets. To gradually transform the ‘unfair’ mechanisms of world trade and to achieve its social and environmental goals, Fairtrade requires a constant growth in sales. This also means that the marketing of Fairtrade goods in the consumer countries is subject to established capitalist mechanisms of advertising and demand creation. Although Fairtrade’s brand building aims at differentiation through alternative values of cooperation, trust, and fairness, it also works within the constraints of simplified and abridged advertising messages. More often than not, contrasts and stereotypes are over-emphasized – a phenomenon that critics call the ‘exploitation of difference’. In this way, new forms of ‘distancing’ and ‘othering’ are constantly built up and reinforced. Individuals, livelihoods, production practices, and entire landscapes in the Global South become commodified and are used for brand development and sales promotion. This paper examines these issues based on interviews and a questionnaire survey among German consumers. Our empirical insights indicate that the visual language used for Fairtrade marketing has to be targeted to critical consumers, who are increasingly skeptical of overly moralizing and simplified images with exaggerated contrasts between the ‘different worlds’ of producers in the South and consumers in the North. However, it should also be noted that Fairtrade Germany is increasingly aware of challenges in its visual communication and is intensively reflecting on its visual language.*

## Zusammenfassung

Das Fairtrade-System kann als eines der erfolgreichsten Realexperimente alternativer Wirtschaftsweisen angesehen werden. Allerdings setzt Fairtrade mehr als andere alternative Ansätze auf Mechanismen des Massenmarktes und den Verkauf seiner Produkte über konventionelle Vertriebswege. Um die ‚unfairen‘ Strukturen des Welthandels zu verändern und seine sozialen und ökologischen Ziele zu erreichen, benötigt Fairtrade ein konstantes Absatzwachstum. Das bedeutet aber auch, dass die Vermarktung von Fairtrade-Produkten in den Konsumländern den etablierten kapitalistischen Mechanismen der Werbung und der Generierung von Nachfrage unterworfen ist. Die Markenbildung von Fairtrade zielt zwar auf eine Differenzierung durch Werte wie

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Kooperation, Vertrauen und Fairness ab, arbeitet aber auch entlang von Zwängen vereinfachter und verkürzter Werbebotschaften. Häufig werden dabei Kontraste und stereotype Darstellungen überbetont – ein Phänomen, das Kritiker\*innen als ‚Ausbeutung der Differenz‘ bezeichnen. Auf diese Weise werden ständig neue Formen der Distanzierung und des ‚Othering‘ aufgebaut und verstärkt. Menschen, Produktionspraktiken und ganze Landschaften im Globalen Süden werden kommodifiziert und für die Markenbildung und Verkaufsförderung genutzt. Dieser Beitrag untersucht diese Aspekte auf der Basis von Interviews und einer Fragebogenerhebung unter deutschen Konsument\*innen. Unsere empirischen Erkenntnisse zeigen, dass die Bildsprache des Fairtrade-Marketings auf zunehmend kritische Abnehmer\*innen abzielen muss, die allzu moralisierenden und vereinfachten Bildern mit übertriebenen Gegensätzen zwischen den ‚unterschiedlichen Welten‘ der Produzent\*innen im Süden und der Konsument\*innen im Norden immer skeptischer gegenüberstehen. Ebenso ist aber auch festzustellen, dass Fairtrade Deutschland sich dieser Probleme und Herausforderungen bewusst ist und seine Bildsprache mittlerweile intensiv reflektiert.

**Keywords** fairtrade, visual communication, consumer perception, othering, North-South stereotypes

### 1. Introduction

The market share of Fairtrade-certified products has grown substantially since the first products labeled as ‘socially’ and ‘fair’ were sold in German supermarkets in the early 1990s (FFH 2019). Its trade volumes make the Fairtrade label one of the most successful brands within the alternative economies approach as well as within the broader Fair Trade movement itself (Braun et al. 2020; Healy 2009). Fairtrade is not necessarily critical of economic growth as such, but follows the logic of environmental and social sustainability and aims to strengthen income generation in the Global South, i.e. South America, Africa, and Asia. Fairtrade today is a complex trading system and a protagonist in consumption-based development cooperations. Rooted in ‘Third World’ actions of church organizations in the 1940s and the 1950s, much of the Fair Trade movement’s aims are now mostly channeled through conventional marketing and distribution channels, often via the Fairtrade label (Dragusanu et al. 2014; Kister 2019, 2020a).

As a rule, producers in the Global South are almost always guaranteed minimum prices and additional premiums are paid (Dragusanu et al. 2014), therefore, Fairtrade labeled goods usually cost more at the shop counter than conventional products. Higher wages and premiums require not only the consumer’s willingness to pay higher prices (Andorfer and Liebe 2012) but also a constant growth in sales in order to achieve the social and environmental goals pursued to gradually transform the ‘unfair’ mechanisms of world trade. To ensure a constant growth in sales, Fairtrade positioned itself as the world’s most renowned ethi-

cal brand (Dolan 2011). This implies that the tasks of the labeling initiative grew considerably in complexity, and its public outreach increased significantly. Besides labeling, however, Fairtrade’s brand building involves all activities in the areas of marketing and public relations with the aim of increasing awareness and sales of Fairtrade products.

Historically driven by altruistic and humanitarian motives, Fairtrade today tries to establish global social justice by embracing corporate participation and corporate models of accountability (Quaas 2015; Raschke 2009). Thus, it is deeply embedded in global free trade including its underlying assumptions and as such supports the basics of world capitalism (Carrington et al. 2016; Dolan 2011; Fridell 2003; Henrici 2010). However, its vision of world capitalism takes a philanthropic stance, trying to re-moralize, de-anonymize, and reconfigure global trade by the “politics of reconnection” (Dolan 2011: 37). As such, Fairtrade aims to re-embed social and moral relations into market exchange and to de-fetishize its commodities by re-connecting the consumers to the labor value producers have invested in the production process.

However, competition in the global capitalist arena also means that the marketing of goods and (moral) ideas in consumer countries is subject to the established capitalist mechanisms of advertising and demand creation. Although Fairtrade’s brand building aims at differentiation through the alternative values of cooperation, trust, and fairness, it also works within the constraints of simplified and abridged advertising messages that have to compete for recognition in saturated markets. The contradiction between

(price) competition in the capitalist global market and the goal to provide for a decent standard of living on the site of producers through trade is met with what *Levi and Linton* (2003) called the symbolic use value for the consumer. In other words, the attempt to de-fetishize the commodity by reconnecting the product with the labor of its producer is counteracted by such forms of marketing and advertisement which drive new processes of fetishization: the commodification of subjects and entire landscapes in the Global South.

This applies above all to the visual language and representations used by Fairtrade, which on the one hand have to respond to established consumer expectations, but on the other hand must also establish a moral link between producers in the Global South and consumers in the Global North. More often than not, contrasts and stereotypes are emphasized – in a phenomenon that the critic *Catherine Dolan* (2011: 45) calls the “exploitation of difference”. In this way, new forms of ‘distancing’ and ‘othering’ are consciously built up and reinforced. Individual livelihoods, production practices, and entire (rural) landscapes in the Global South become commodified and used for brand development and sales promotion. It is *Foucault’s* (1984 [1967]) heterotopia that is mirrored in the consumers’ projection of what is deemed a – somewhat exotic, but no less – livable and desirable production utopia.

This paper discusses this topic based on a data set gained through qualitative and quantitative interviews with German consumers. The activities in the realm of marketing, campaigning, and visual communication that build the fundament of our study can be roughly grouped into three subcategories: first, Fairtrade’s engagement in the production of visual material and language in favor of its own self-promotion and image building via campaigning; second, marketing by means of recruiting so-called brand ambassadors; and, third, images and visual communications on product packaging from Fairtrade-licensed companies. Our study focuses on how the visual language and advertising of Fairtrade products are perceived and interpreted by consumers, what associations and worldviews are triggered, and whether North-South stereotypes are perpetuated and deepened as a result. Ultimately, the question is how consumers perceive mechanisms of ‘othering’ and in how far consumers deem the depiction of workers in the Global South necessary to push ethically-oriented consumption in the North and to reduce rural poverty in the South.

## 2. The imperial eye: expectations and aesthetics in visual communication

In development cooperation, the visual representation of its recipients is strongly linked to its changing aims. With dependence theory as the dominant doctrine, the period from the 1950s to the late 1960s predominantly worked with supplicant postures and hunger motifs (*Quaas* 2015; *Winterberg* 2020). During this period, the emerging Fair Trade movement was dominated by church organizations such as Brot-für-die-Welt or MISEREOR who engaged in acts of Christian ‘Third World’ charity. The visual representation of the relations between producers and consumers of early Fair Trade products was consistent with the developmental notion of center and periphery: Producers were depicted as weak, helpless, and asking for money, food, or aid. While the people in the Global South were primarily ascribed a passive role, the power to change global economic conditions was attributed to the Global North (*Quaas* 2015).

With the conventionalization and mainstreaming of Fair Trade products, which today mostly carry the Fairtrade label, social relations in Fair Trade’s development cooperation between the Global North and the Global South were readjusted in the 1990s and redefined by forms of economic exchange that were raised over other forms of social connection. The charitableness of an unbalanced gift exchange which “always affirms the inferiority of the recipient” (*Zick Varul* 2008: 662) was substituted by paying adequate or at least above-average prices for the physical and manual labor of the producers of artisanal and agricultural produce. As most of the market share of Fair Trade products is now concentrated in mass markets and industrial coordination (*Braun et al.* 2020; *Kister* 2020b), *Henrici* (2010) points to the fact that especially Fairtrade is deeply embedded in the global free trade agenda and advocates the underlying assumptions of market liberalism. The option of ‘not buying’ is no longer included in the idea of Fair Trade (*Johnston* 2001). Yet, by putting labor and monetized transfer at the center of the social connection between North and South, this relationship seems to be left with a moral vacuum (*Zick Varul* 2008: 655). Thus, ethical consumption was placed at the center of Fair Trade’s developmental task: By disclosing the conditions of production, Fair Trade’s world shops, labels, and import organizations aim to de-fetishize the commodity and to draw Northern consumers into moral connections with producers in the South (*Dolan* 2011; *Lyon* 2006).

Since the launch of its label in the conventional German supermarket chain LIDL in 2006, Fairtrade Germany works along vertically integrated supply chain structures (Kister 2020b) but aims to de-anonymize the act of consumption in supermarkets via certification. Thereby, the label politicizes consumption choices and bridges citizenship with mass consumption. In this new form of governing its value chains, Fairtrade pushes ethical consumerism in which shopping is conveyed into an “arena of civic and political participation as citizens” (Dolan 2011: 39). Thus, consumption decisions play a decisive role in the expression of an individual’s political voice in capitalism. Ultimately, by displaying morality in consumption choices, consumer-citizens enact the production of an ethical self by their very choices (Zick Varul 2008). Within this setting, brands such as the Fairtrade label act as vignettes for processes of “ethical selving” (Zick Varul 2009: title) in what Fridell and Konings (2013: title) call “philanthrocapitalism”.

Today more than ever, brands play an increasingly important role concerning public relations and communication in the contemporary attention economy (Doyle and Roda 2019; Goldhaber 1997; Simon 1971), in which huge amounts of information cause the competition for and the commodification of human attention and engagement (Festré and Garrouste 2015; Knowles 2011). The visual and symbolic processing of ethical product features functions as its distinctive extra. Fairtrade increasingly reconnects consumers with producers through new aesthetic and discursive forms and contributes to the aestheticization of alternative trade through specific “regimes of representation” (Dolan 2011: 44). The branding of morality thus functions as a consumer-friendly way of bridging the divide and re-connecting consumers with producers. While we focus only on the marketing of Fairtrade in this study, this applies to the symbolic and visual re-production of the entire Fair Trade movement’s imagery. However, Azoulay (2018a,b) argues that aesthetics in moral branding are often prone to perpetuate neo-colonial, imperial, or at least hegemonic ideologies.

The camera’s unifocality is emblematic of its imperialist imprint. In the visual communication of development cooperation and Fairtrade, the unifocal camera “is designed to separate and differentiate while naturalizing that separation” (Azoulay 2018b: para. 2). The camera and the right to take pictures for marketing is, just as the act of labeling itself, necessarily one of

agency and power imbalances (Henrici 2010). The individuals whose photographs are taken are referred to in little meaningful or only in very specific ways that allow for consumption enhancing imaginaries of a distant but accessible and acceptable heterotopia (Foucault 1984 [1967]). The visiotype and often stereotype fixations of the ‘other’ more often than not have an escapist function: Fairtrade’s photographs, texts, and other marketing or campaigning materials are trying to build an emotional bridge and transform the social distance between North and South, rich and poor, modern and traditional, center and periphery, and consumers and producers into a relationship of affective proximity, intimacy and, indeed, a somewhat paternalistic global kinship. Thereby, Fairtrade establishes a “regime of representation” (Dolan 2011: 44) in which the livelihoods and landscapes of small farmers depict “the power of Fairtrade to transform lives” (*ibid.*: 44). This regime of representation aestheticizes trade and “the socioeconomic conditions of producer communities” are sanitized “by typically presenting portraits framed by an idyllic rural backdrop” (Wilson 2010: 177). This reinforces the notion that Fairtrade addresses its producers’ core problems. As Kister (2019: 12f) points out, the visual representation of Fairtrade campaigning and packaging are never neutral, but socially constructed and embedded in a lineage of complex relations of dependency and power asymmetries between the North and the South which structurally date back to colonialism and symbolically reproduce these structures.

A central part of Fairtrade’s marketing is the provision of producer vignettes, little stories, or statements that intend to add a sense of authenticity and a sense of personal connection with the producer. Especially true in the case of artisanal products and in the promotion of “ethnodevelopment” (Eversole 2006, cited in Wilson 2010: 176), these vignettes also establish the authenticity of the products – and therefore of the organizations that promote it – “by linking them to images of particular producers and by extension to the cultural traditions those producers are thought to represent” (Wilson 2010: 177). The double images of Fairtrade’s current campaigning – “Weil es mir wichtig ist” (transl.: because it matters to me) –, which are discussed in the next chapter, are especially designed to promote the sense of personal connection with the producer.

A further dimension of contemporary Fairtrade public relations builds on brand ambassadors. These tend to

represent the caring, yet paternalistic embodiment of white charity that corresponds to the traditional dependency model in development cooperation. For labels like Fairtrade aid celebrities provide a “proxy for brand integrity” (Dolan 2011: 46). They link names with issues, and their voices are often perceived as critical of the inequalities and injustices of capitalist globalization (Fridell and Konings 2013). Yet, the critical culture that so-called ‘aid celebrities’ and brand ambassadors aim to occupy paradoxically tends to legitimize neoliberal practices, as they themselves are products of the global capitalist market. For the consumer and for ethical consumerism as a whole, trendsetting celebrities play an important role as “contemporary arbiters of morality” (Dolan 2011: 47) and public opinion is influenced, sitting within “a wider neoliberal framework in which ‘expert’ knowledge is circulated by certain political/cultural intermediaries who propagate and legitimize particular visions of consumption” (*ibid.*: 47).

In the visual representation on the product packaging by Fairtrade’s licensees, the producers are traditionally and mostly cooperatively organized small farmers who are well-relatable and not too alien to Northern visions of sustainable production methods, sometimes supplemented by representations of factory or plantation workers (Winterberg 2017). While intellectuality is predominantly absent from product packaging or finds no place in the inevitably very abbreviated statements, intellectual reflection is ultimately left to consumers in the Global North. Post-colonial citizens in the Global South who are partners in Fair Trade are presented and portrayed as modest, poor to some extent, but happy, hardworking, determined, clean and tidy, simple, benevolent and, last but not least, grateful (Winterberg 2017; Zick Varul 2008).

This brief overview of the major criticisms that apply to the entire movement’s imagery left us with the task to tackle complexity and to target our data collection on the specificities of the Fairtrade label’s imagery in the German context. In doing so, we grouped Fairtrade Germany’s visual communication into three major categories: first, Fairtrade’s self-representation utilizing professional marketing; second, Fairtrade’s appointment of brand ambassadors as a means of promoting its brand integrity; and, third, we focused on the product packaging of Fairtrade’s licensees in the market segments of coffee, cocoa, and fruit juice. In particular, we are interested in how (potential) consumers in Germany evaluate the imagery of Fairtrade and what associations this branding via images evokes.

### 3. Methodology and data

Our empirical study on how Fairtrade’s visual language and advertising is perceived and interpreted by consumers is based on three steps. In a preparatory step, a comprehensive interview was conducted with the person responsible for visual communications at Fairtrade Germany on Fairtrade’s campaign work and, in particular, the visual representations used. As one outcome of this interview, Fairtrade Germany provided us with image documents from campaigns and typical product packaging, which were then presented to our interviewees (step 2) and the respondents of the quantitative survey (step 3) for evaluation and interpretation. Our interviews had to be adapted to the Covid-19 restrictions that applied in Germany in spring 2021. This meant that almost no face-to-face interviews were possible.

The respondents for the qualitative semi-structured interviews were selected according to certain predetermined characteristics. The selection characteristics were intended to ensure that the respondents came from different age groups and spatial contexts (urban/rural). Moreover, people from different social classes and both women and men were interviewed. Care was also taken to include people with migration backgrounds. A total of nine individuals were interviewed in one-hour interviews using the Zoom communication software. Images from Fairtrade campaigns as well as product packaging were presented for evaluation. In addition to questions about the consumption of Fairtrade products, the focus was on questions about the effect of the visual documents and the corresponding associations that they triggered in the respondents.

Very similar questions were also asked in the questionnaire survey. Here, however, the answers were recorded mainly in bipolar semantic differentials and Likert scales (cf. Snider and Osgood 1969; Verhagen et al. 2015). The ratings in semantic differentials were intended to represent the connotative (associative) meaning of the presented images and product packaging from the respondents’ point of view. In total, we surveyed 333 people over 15 years of age using a questionnaire implemented in the online survey tool LimeSurvey. Students guided the respondents through the questionnaire and the presented visual material in Zoom or (very rarely) face-to-face conversations. The visual inputs included a short introductory video about the Fairtrade system and, more importantly:

(1) *Images of a campaign in which producers in the Global South and consumers in the Global North are shown next to each other with the same basic product or its processed end product.* For our interviews, we chose a double image of two women, one with a cocoa fruit (representation of a producer), the other one with a chocolate bar in her hands (representation of a consumer). Other images of this 2020 campaign called 'Weil es mir wichtig ist' show men and women with bananas, flowers, oranges, coffee beans/coffee, cotton/textiles, etc.

(2) *Images of an ongoing campaign with two well-known German actors, Hannes Jaenicke (male, born 1960) and Cosma Shiva Hagen (female, born 1987).* Hannes Jaenicke acts as a Fairtrade ambassador for cocoa in West Africa and Cosma Shiva Hagen as an ambassador for cotton also in West Africa. For both actors, two images were presented, one each from the official advertising campaign for Fairtrade coffee which only shows the actors' facial portraits in neutral grey-shades and one showing the two actors in field shots together with 'producers' from Africa.

(3) *Images of three product packages each of Fairtrade chocolate, Fairtrade orange juice, and Fairtrade coffee, with different designs:* A packaging design that prominently featured producers in the Global South and which appeals openly to the ethics and morals of consumers, a more conventional, rather neutral packaging design with no obvious moral message, and a packaging design that was located in between the two poles. Respondents were asked to rank these packages in terms of their attractiveness to them.

Although the respondents were not selected strictly randomly because the group of 16 students who conducted the interviews preferably selected people they already knew or were easier accessible during the time of severe Covid-19 restrictions in early 2021, they nevertheless correspond rather well to a cross-section of the population in Germany. Statistical tests for bias show that people with higher educational qualifications are slightly overrepresented compared with the total population of Germany. The same applies to women, people aged under 40, and residents of urban areas, as well as people living in households with fewer than four people. We have no reason to believe that these slight biases significantly affect the results, but they should still be considered when interpreting the results. A total of 177 women and 151 men were interviewed. Five persons indicated their gender as diverse.

From our point of view, the fact that almost all interviews had to take place online did not lead to negative effects on data quality or the course of the interviews. On the contrary, conducting the interviews via Zoom even had the advantage that the photos and illustrations shown were available to all interviewees in a good and consistent quality via the computer screen under well-controlled conditions. An obvious disadvantage with all online surveys is that it is often difficult to reach people of higher age and/or low computer affinity. However, we were able to compensate for this at least in part by interviewing older people face-to-face through close relatives and/or interviewers living in the same household.

#### 4. Delving into the marketing of Fairtrade Germany

Our key points of discussion with the responsible person for Fairtrade Germany's visual communication revolved around *white* knowledge and image production and *white* supremacy over representation versus the depiction of Blacks, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPoC) as an iconographic motif. In a post-colonial arena in which whiteness functions as an unmarked norm vis-à-vis undifferentiated representations of BIPoC in accordingly overtly picturesque rural landscapes, representations of BIPoC tend to fulfill clichés of the 'exotic foreigner' or the distant 'other'. This set, we asked our interviewee to contemplate possible blind spots in Fairtrade's contemporary image production. Furthermore, we asked him to discuss the concrete workflow and requirements of Fairtrade's image production with us.

This interview put some of the above-mentioned criticisms into perspective. It became clear that Fairtrade Germany is dealing with the issue of representation rather sensitively. For instance, anti-racism training that is specifically designed for visuals in development cooperation forms an important element of the usual proceedings. These training programs are part of Fairtrade Germany's self-conception as a 'learning organization'. Another important point that factors in is the inter-subjective exchange within Fairtrade's international network. Since all of Fairtrade International's major decision-making bodies are equally composed of members of the Global North and the Global South, i.e. in form of representatives of local and regional production networks, cooperation and exchange with partners and cooperatives in the Glob-

## The moral branding of Fairtrade: Opportunities and pitfalls of visual representations in the Fairtrade system

al South are strong, also with regards to the production of images and vignettes. This system of mutual support and control is further enhanced through the expanding possibilities that digitalization brings with it: the contemporary ethics of visual representation are sharpened by the increasing availability of visual resources, images, and photographs that the system of Fairtrade International's various bodies such as National Fairtrade Organizations, local cooperatives, plantations, producer networks, political advocates, etc. produce and share.

Still, there is a growing awareness that the representations of producers in the Global South are always "on the threshold of simplification" (interview with Fairtrade Germany) due to the abridged possibilities of representation in marketing. The simpler the advertising, the more abridged the representation. However, Fairtrade Germany is trying to set its in-house campaigning productions against this trend. It aims to produce campaigns that are loud and attention demanding as a first concern, only to introduce backgrounds and further information a few clicks or pages further.

### 5. Fairtrade's campaign of contrasting images

In general, the vast majority of our respondents trust the Fairtrade system. Around two-thirds of those 333 individuals surveyed said they trusted the Fairtrade label, for a good 20% this was only partially true, and under 10% had no trust in the seal. This is very much in line with other studies that also show that the Fairtrade label is regularly rated as rather trustworthy in comparison with other quality seals (e.g. Loos et al. 2013). Trust in the Fairtrade label tends to increase with higher income, but younger people are more critical than older people, and men are slightly more critical than women according to our data.

To find out the extent to which contrasting portrayals of people from the Global South (producers) and the Global North (consumers) in Fairtrade campaigns are perceived by people as authentic and equal or inadequate and even discriminating, we asked our respondents to rate provided images by contrasting descriptive adjectives on a five-point scale. The results show that the double image taken from the 2020 'Weil es mir wichtig ist' campaign was mostly considered respectful and appropriate but not authentic (Fig. 1). Moreover, the two women presented were seen as

more unequal than equal. Evaluated individually, the woman on the left is attributed mainly as likable, relaxed, self-confident, and happy, but relatively poor, while the consumer on the right was mostly seen as familiar, posed, leisure-oriented, responsible, self-confident, and relatively rich (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1 Semantic differential – adjectives attributed to the double image of two women. Source: own questionnaire survey 2/2021 (N=333)

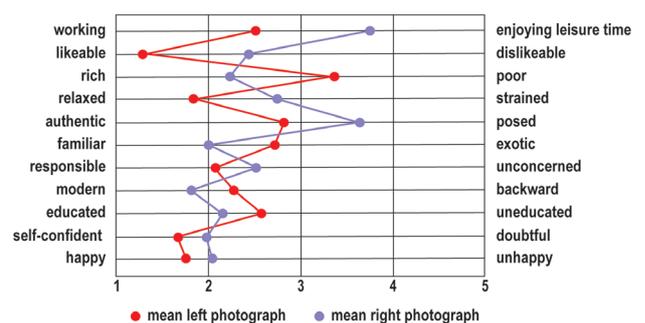


Fig. 2 Semantic differential – adjectives attributed to the women on the left and right. Source: own questionnaire survey 2/2021 (N=333)

The essential advertising purpose of the depiction has obviously been achieved – both women were predominantly associated with positive qualities. The campaign also avoids, at least for the majority of potential consumers, inappropriate or discriminatory portrayals. Nevertheless, several post-colonial stereotypes of the Global South and the Global North are reproduced and perceived accordingly by most viewers. People in the Global South are seen as (hard) working and poor, but (thanks to the Fairtrade system) as relatively relaxed; people in the Global North on the other hand are seen as rich, educated, and responsible. The roles as producers and consumers are clearly divided, and this has not been fundamentally questioned by our respondents. The depiction appeals to consumers' morals by portraying the two women depicted as modern, happy, and self-confident individuals, who nonetheless live in very different worlds. This is similarly true for the other dual images used for the 'Weil es mir wichtig ist' campaign.

Our qualitative interviews tend to confirm the results of the questionnaire survey. However, interviewees pointed out that these photos were "very posed pictures" which do not adequately depict the true working and living conditions in the production countries. One interviewee also suggested that people with a migration background should be portrayed more frequently on the consumer side, as this would better reflect the contemporary social reality in Germany and introduce more people with a migration background to the Fairtrade system. This can be interpreted as an indication that Fairtrade campaigns, despite their undoubtedly increasing sensitivity towards 'othering' and stereotypical juxtapositions of the Global North and the Global South, still may take too little account of the plural social realities in both the North and the South.

### 6. Fairtrade's brand ambassadors

Like many other NGOs, Fairtrade often shows celebrities or brand ambassadors in its campaigns. The use of public figures for advertising purposes has been a common marketing practice for several decades (Kilian 2013). So-called 'aid celebrities' show that the use of hopefully trustworthy celebrities is now very common in the NGO scene and that NGOs have largely adapted to the usual marketing mechanisms of private-sector companies (Dolan 2011; Richey and Ponte 2008). As with conventional products, the aim is to attract attention and positively transfer the image from the advertising figure to the brand.

As a typical example of the depiction of celebrities for marketing purposes, we took a closer look at Fairtrade Germany's *Coffee Fairday* (#MACHKAFFEEFAIR) campaign (Transfair e.V. 2021a). Here, Fairtrade Germany's focus was deliberately on scenes in which the celebrities were not shown in the context of producing countries, so as not to exaggerate the North-South contrast. They are only shown in rather professional looking grey-shaded photos combined with a short verbal message on the ethics of Fairtrade coffee. For our survey, we have chosen two grey-shaded photos of the actors *Cosma Shiva Hagen* (CSH) and *Hannes Jaenicke* (HJ). Both personalities are known to the German public for their social and environmental commitment. Two other pictures we used in our survey were taken from the presentation of 'celebrity supporters' on the website of Fairtrade Germany (Transfair e.V. 2021b). Among other celebrities from entertainment, HJ and CSH are presented here 'in the field' together with Fairtrade producers. In order to test how these different representations (field scenes/official *Coffee Fairday* campaign photos) affect each other, the images were shown to two equally sized subsamples of the survey in a different order.

Regardless of the sequence in which the images were shown, over 50% of our respondents found the *Coffee Fairday* campaign images "appealing" and about two-thirds "trustworthy". HJ's images were rated significantly higher than CSH's in both cases (HJ: 61% appealing and 77 % trustworthy; CSH: 51% and 61%). HJ was particularly well received by older people, while CSH did not score higher than HJ in her own age group. HJ also tended to be rated better in the pictures together with the producers. The shot of him was perceived as less posed and more appropriate, likewise, he was perceived as more engaged, more familiar, less vain, friendlier, and more trustworthy. However, CSH pose was perceived as less dominant towards the producers.

One possible explanation for HJ's overall more positive rating is his public perception as a long-time environmental activist, while CSH's social involvement is less known among the broader public. Another explanation would be that CSH does not seem to be able to compensate for the overall more critical attitude of younger people towards the Fairtrade system by her popularity among these age groups. Both HJ and CSH are viewed more positively by respondents over 40 and even more so over 60 years of age, with the 16 to 24 age group being even more critical than the 25 to 39 age group.

The order in which the images were shown to the respondents influenced their ratings. In response to the questions of (1) whether the advertising message of the official campaign images appeals to them personally and (2) whether they consider the message of the official campaign images trustworthy, the approval ratings fell by 7 to 9 percentage points in almost all cases when the interviewees had previously seen the images of the celebrities together with producers in the Global South.

Our findings point to two typical problems when it comes to marketing with brand ambassadors. First, from an instrumental marketing perspective, it is highly relevant for the campaign which brand ambassadors are selected. The focus should be on people who appeal to all age groups and who are already known for their social and/or environmental commitment. Recipients of advertising messages are very sensitive when it comes to the credibility of the celebrities presented in marketing campaigns, in particular when moral branding is involved. Second, depictions of brand ambassadors together with producers in the Global South can be more problematic than neutral, more stylized depictions without the visual context of the Global South. Field scenes can have an exclusionary effect and might be understood by viewers as paternalistic and even uninviting. There is obviously a fine line between the desire to show brand ambassadors' engagement and empathy with the livelihood situation of producers in the Global South and the danger of reproducing and reinforcing traditional (post-)colonial North-South stereotypes. Furthermore, there seems to be a danger that the depiction of (aid) recipients who are helped by brand ambassadors transports and reproduces paternalism and a modern version of the colonial idea of the 'white man's burden'. One interviewee from the qualitative interviews critically questioned the willingness of the producers to be depicted as 'the needy'.

### 7. Product packaging of Fairtrade licensees

While Fairtrade has full control over the imagery used in its own campaigns, this is much less true when it comes to the design of its licensees' product packaging. Packaging designs can significantly influence buyer decisions and perceptions of social and ecological product attributes (Berki-Kiss and Menrad 2019; Steenis et al. 2017). Not all, but quite a few Fairtrade products feature people from the Global South and the countries of production on the packaging – very often smiling happily in an idyllic rural setting with 'their' products in their hands. Modern and more mass-market compatible packaging designs deal with such simplifying depictions more sensitively, but highly cliché-laden depictions of poor but happy producers can still be seen on much Fairtrade product packaging.

In order to be able to analyze the effect of packaging designs, we presented our interviewees the packaging designs of three chocolate bars, orange juices, and coffees each – one packaging with a striking pose of a producer looking happily into the camera (moral design) and one with a more restrained design without a corresponding pictorial producer representation (mainstream design). A third presented packaging design lay respectively between these two poles (neutral design). Respondents were asked to rank the three packaging designs from one to three depending on how appealing they are to them (rank 1 most appealing, rank 3 less appealing).

Our results indicate that packaging designs with visual representations of (happy) Fairtrade producers are considered rather unappealing by the majority of consumers whereas more mainstream designs are usually rated higher (Table 1). The most drastic design, a chocolate bar with a very dominant depiction of a smiling young black worker emptying a large, braided basket of coffee beans complemented by a large

Table 1 Ranking of packaging designs – means and standard deviations of ranks of perceived attractiveness: rank 1 most attractive, rank 3 least attractive. Source: own questionnaire survey 2/2021 (N=333)

	Moral design		Neutral design		Mainstream design	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Chocolate bar	2.42	0.76	1.69	0.76	1.90	0.76
Orange juice	2.15	0.84	2.03	0.81	1.82	0.77
Coffee	2.04	0.86	1.93	0.72	2.03	0.86

representation of the Fairtrade label was rated as the least attractive packaging design by our respondents. One interviewee from the qualitative part critically observed that (black) labor was more often than not represented by young, able-bodied persons, showing bodily features that were (are) fundamental for the hard and bodily challenging agricultural work on (post-)colonial plantations. The interviewee saw a link to the ‘qualities’ and bodily features that colonial subjects and slaves had to possess to work on the plantations.

The moralizing, somewhat stereotypical designs of the juice and coffee packaging were also rated more negatively than the alternative neutral and mainstream designs. The differences between the more neutral Fairtrade designs (clearly visible Fairtrade labels, but no identifiable depiction of individuals) and the more mainstream-oriented designs (smaller Fairtrade labels, usually avoidance of additional design elements that refer to Fairtrade) were much less noticeable. Moreover, the ratings for coffee packaging were less differentiated than that of chocolate bars and orange juice. In particular, a Café Intención packaging, which we classified as moralizing-stereotypical, hardly stood out from the other packaging designs (Fig. 3). This indicates that even dominant representations of people do not necessarily lead to reduced attractiveness for potential customers. We therefore had the Café Intención packaging additionally evaluated in a semantic differential. The results show that although the image depiction on the packaging is perceived as highly posed (3.76) and glossed over (4.00), rather neutral to slightly positive ratings are achieved for the pairs of terms ‘obtrusive – unobtrusive’ (3.04), ‘trustworthy – not trustworthy’ (2.84), ‘respectful – discriminatory’ (2.67), ‘unprejudiced – racist’ (2.72) and ‘appropriate – inappropriate’ (2.79; all values measured on a scale from 1 to 5).

The respondents’ age has a significant influence on their assessments of product packaging designs. Younger respondents under the age of 40 reacted much more sensitively and negatively to overly moralizing and stereotypical depictions of people in the Global South than older respondents. This influence of age proved to be highly significant in chi-square tests for chocolate and coffee ( $p = 0.001$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), but less so for orange juice. The same was true for the evaluation of the (moralizing) Café Intención packaging design. Again, those under 40 were significantly more critical than those over 40 ( $p = 0.000$ , t-test,

comparison of means), with those in the age group 16 to 24 being the most critical group and those over 60 the least critical. For example, around 46% of the 16 to 24 years old respondents even perceived the depiction of the coffee farmer on the Café Intención as “racist” or “rather racist”. 38% of this age group found the depiction “discriminatory” or “rather discriminatory” and 45% “inappropriate” or “rather inappropriate”. In all other age groups, these percentages of negative assessments were significantly lower.



Fig.3 Coffee packaging: Café Intención\* (“moral design”), Gran Verde\*\* (“neutral design”), Caffè Crema\*\*\* (“mainstream design”). Source: \* kindly provided by Fairtrade Germany, \*\* [www.dallmayr.de](http://www.dallmayr.de), \*\*\* [www.fairtradeoriginal.de](http://www.fairtradeoriginal.de)

Overall, the empirical results show that overly moralizing and rather stereotypical portrayals of people from the Global South are no longer popular with the majority of (potential) consumers in the Global North and especially with younger people, as the modes and implications of structural racism are increasingly unveiled and understood. Thus, it seems advisable for Fairtrade itself, but also for the licensees who put Fairtrade products on the market, to refrain from overly simplifying representations of producers on the packaging and to opt for more neutral and mainstream-oriented designs instead.

## 8. Conclusions

Although Fairtrade’s brand building aims at differentiation through alternative values of cooperation, trust, and fairness, it also works within the constraints of simplified and abridged advertising messages. To catch the consumer’s attention in saturated markets and to convey morality as a distinctive product feature in the attention economy, Fairtrade’s marketing more often than not still carries the vision of

an idyllic production heterotopia, thereby producing a mediated, somewhat voyeuristic (cultural) encounter. In addition to establishing a moral connection between producers in the Global South and consumers in the Global North, the projection of a rural idyll to distant others aims to cover the link between Fairtrade's (more and more industrialized) production sites and its orientation to mass markets in marketing and product packaging, that would carry somewhat different social and ecological implications.

Fairtrade, which follows a 'learning organization's approach', is trying to establish new forms of image co-production with its producer networks, thereby drawing on the opinions and expertise of its partners in the Global South. However, our analyses show that the verbal messages, symbolic codes, bodily features, and image backdrops used tend to confirm and reinforce stereotypes, thereby always running the risk of overemphasizing contrasts between North and South, thus promoting processes of distancing and othering. The depiction of grateful producers in idyllic and seemingly ecologically intact rural landscapes that are aimed to correspond to consumer's escapist imaginations of production heterotopias seem to have an ambiguous effect: On the one hand, the respondents in our sample seem to be attracted by such escapism. This shows, for instance, the somewhat uncritical view of the very simplifying Café Intención packaging. On the other hand, respondents describe the very same depictions as "posed", "glossed over" and "unrealistic". If this does not hint at complex cultural and psychological processes of guilt and shame that the (post)colonial subject in the North has to deal with and which are object of contemporary critical whiteness and (post-)colonial studies, it at least shows that overly simplified visual representations may harm Fairtrade's credibility.

Moreover, the rapid modernization and urbanization of many regions and the pluralization of lifestyles of individuals and social groups in the Global South are still virtually absent from Fairtrade's marketing. Fairtrade still primarily promotes rural products from the South to urban consumers in the North, thereby running the risk of deepening the perceived North-South divide, the ideas of socio-economic and socio-spatial rifts between the center and the periphery as well as the idea of non-synchronism (*Bloch and Ritter 1977*) between the North and the South. However, it is also apparent that those responsible for visual communications and marketing in Fairtrade's organizations

are increasingly sensitive to these issues. For example, issues such as migration from rural to urban areas and the modernization of agricultural production now certainly have their place in Fairtrade's communication. A current example of an inclusive campaign that reflects the modern realities of life in the Global South is the documentary series "Farmers – Fighting the Global Crisis" (<https://farmers-documentary.fairtrade.net/>; German: <https://farmers-documentary.fairtrade.net/de>). The visual language used for marketing has to be targeted to increasingly and appropriately critical consumers who are often rather skeptical of overly moralizing images with exaggerated contrasts between the 'different worlds' of producers in the South and consumers in the North. This is especially true when marketing messages are intended to target younger people.

Yet, the limitations of our empirical analysis must also be considered. As already explained above, our sample is not a strictly representative cross-section of the population of German consumers. Above all, the somewhat disproportionate representation of younger cohorts leads to a certain bias in the direction of a more critical overall evaluation, because younger people evaluate the imagery of Fairtrade more skeptically than older people. Even more significant, however, is a second limitation resulting from the very fact that the survey was aimed at a cross-section of the population. BIPoC and other individuals affected by exclusion and (structural) discrimination could come to significantly more negative assessments. Although our qualitative interviews provide initial indications of this, these limitations need to be addressed in further research.

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