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**Title: Representation, voice, and producer-consumer communication in fair trade movements: toward new empirical directions**

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**Abstract**

Representation is integral in the remit of the fair trade movement for social justice, but fair trade’s communication is built on stereotypical portrayals that objectify Southern producers. Although such portrayals have received ample scholarly critique for upholding neo-colonial relations by reinforcing western consumers’ colonial fantasies, there is still a dearth of research into if and how a more truthful and dynamic representation can be built. The article moves the debate forward with a novel experiment that explores new possibilities for producer-consumer connections by ‘connecting’ an Indian farming community with a group of consumers in the UK through short videos and stories created by the farmers. The findings highlight the need to re-think the role of representation in fair trade since when farmers construct their representations on their own terms, they engage in reflexive and dialogic processes that prove empowering. Moreover, including the farmers’ voices in these representations has the capacity to challenge consumers’ colonial perceptions about the distant other. The experiment also sheds light on the challenges that are inherent in reframing fair trade’s discourses and creating more inclusive and interactive communication strategies.

**Keywords:** Fair trade, communication, self- representation, voice

**Introduction**

Representation and communication are an integral component of fair trade movements whose social justice remit is constructed around narratives that are intended to build connections between consumers in the North and food growers in the South. However, fair trade’s communication strategy is built on discursive embodiments that reproduce stereotypical images of Southern producers, silencing their voices and commodifying their livelihoods. Previous studies have paid considerable attention to these discursive constructions, critiquing the commoditised images of farmers and the imperialistic, neo-colonial relations they promote (Goodman et al, 2014; Hassan, 2013; Naylor, 2014; Wilson, 2011). Nevertheless, and despite numerous calls for more transparency in producer-consumer relations, there remains a dearth of experiential evidence of whether and how a more truthful fair trade communication can be possible and how it would affect producer-consumer relations.[[1]](#footnote-1) One of the reasons for this deficit, which is the focus of this article, is the failure to include the farmers’ voices and perspectives in both fair trade’s communication strategies and relevant debates about the significance of these representations. Hence, the aim of this article is to move the field forward by offering new empirical knowledge based on producers’ experience of constructing their own representations and sharing them with consumers. This is done first by creating a space for the farmers’ perspectives to be included in the discussion; and second by exploring the practicality of a virtual producer-consumer communication framework that is based on farmers’ self-representation and the use of participatory video.

The article begins with a discussion of fair trade’s representation through the notions of self-representation and voice/ listening. These concepts are associated with participation in the public sphere and offer clarity and theoretical grounding to the significance and the perniciousness of the commodified narratives through which producers are typically represented. To put the theory into practice, the article introduces an innovative experiment that involved a group of South Indian farmers and UK-based consumers, and aimed to facilitate a producer- consumer communication based on farmers’ own videos and text-based stories. The data presented in this article was collected through focus groups with 76 farmers in India, a collaborative video- making project led by the farmers, and focus groups with 50 consumers in the UK. The findings highlight the need to re-think the role of representation in fair trade’s communication strategies since when farmers construct their representations on their own terms, they engage in reflexive and dialogic processes that prove empowering. Moreover, the experiment offered useful insights into the possibilities for fair trade marketing and communication strategies to challenge stereotypical representations among consumers. At the same time, the findings shed light on the challenges that are inherent in reframing fair trade’s discourses and creating more inclusive, genuine and interactive fair trade communication strategies.

**Representation and the discursive constructions of fair trade movements**

A growing body of work on global food networks has focused on fair trade as the most archetypal model for improving the lives of producers and their communities in the South. Fair trade promotes economic development as a project that is more progressive than earlier post-colonial aid projects (Naylor, 2014). It represents an economic platform with the capacity to promote greater connections between consumers and producers through relations of care, closer proximity, and mutual understanding (Kneafsey et al., 2008; Wright, 2010). One of the main underlying aims is the ‘rescue’ of the Global South not through foreign aid but through trade (Dolan, 2008; Lekakis, 2013).

Representation is at the heart of fair trade’s mission to reconnect Southern producers and Northern consumers. An integral strategy of the movement is to support economic connectivities with cultural connectivities that are built on a consistent flow of visual and textual imaginaries and discursive constructions (Goodman et al, 2014; Wilson, 2008). The defining characteristics of these constructions are captured in the fair trade embodiments presented by Goodman et al (2014), which comprise the political imaginary, the emphasis on quality, the celebritization phase, the connected labour and finally the virtualisation of livelihoods. These embodiments reflect different waves of representation, from close-up smiling photographic portraits of humble farmers narrating the positive changes that fair trade brought to their lives, to the ‘premium looking’ images of spectacular landscapes (Adams and Raisborough, 2011; Lekakis, 2013). These were followed by the entrance of celebrities, and finally the return to the material improvements brought by the fair trade premium, this time through thick web-based descriptions. In a recent article, Polynczuk-Alenius (2018) made a significant step forward, by showing how two fair trade organisations in Finland and Poland sought to incorporate the farmers’ views into their Facebook communications; but their focus remained on the utility of these views for bringing the image of the producer into consumers’ minds and reassuring them about the product quality (p. 168).

Fair trade’s communication strategy has been widely criticised for encouraging the objectification of farmers and undermining their humanity, while reinforcing the superiority of the ‘generous’ Northern consumers as benevolent donors. There is a now a considerable number of studies offering a critical analysis of how smiling faces and personal testimonies turn producers’ lives and landscapes into a ‘spectacle’ for consumers, encouraging an individualization and personalisation that results in the simplification of the producer-consumer relationship (Bryant and Goodman, 2004; Dolan, 2008; Lyon, 2006; Varul, 2008; Cameron and Haanstra 2008; Chouliaraki, 2013). A further implication of these representations lies in perpetuating neo-colonial stereotypes of the Global South as a homogenised mass to be uplifted by the intervention of the powerful Northern consumer (Hassan, 2013; Wright, 2004). In this case, producers’ images reinforce a sense of cultural difference that triggers the desire for ethical action among Northern consumers (McEwan, 2008: 135). The role of representation in the creation of colonialist discourses of difference has been supported by development scholars who argue that colonial relations rely on knowledge and discourse produced though the exchange and utilization of stereotypes, that disregard the voices of subaltern groups (Escobar, 2001; Manyozo, 2017). In the case of fair trade, producers’ lack of control over how they are seen and perceived by consumers is a manifestation of this disregard, reflecting Northern/Western definitions of ‘fair’ and ‘ethical’ rather than ‘local’ understandings of social organization (see McEwan, 2008: 135; Wright, 2010).

Nevertheless, our understanding of these representations remains partial as the current scholarship has so far neglected to explore if and how fair trade’s communication strategies can move beyond neo-colonialist frameworks. This article argues that exploring new possibilities for producer-consumer connections requires that producers’ voices and views be included in discussions concerning representation in fair trade communication strategies, but also in the construction of narratives that lie at the heart of these strategies. This argument is informed theoretically by the notions of self-representation and voice.

**Understanding fair trade’s narratives through voice**

The concepts of self-representation and voice enable a more nuanced understanding of the significance of fair trade's discursive embodiments**.** Self-representation has been theorised as a form of political participation in civil society and the public sphere through the act of self-expression and voice by ordinary people, and through the mediation of technology, social structures and cultural expectations (Mackay and Heck, 2013; Thumin, 2012). As an act of participation, self-representation can lead to empowerment through strengthening the symbolic dimension of everyday life, breaking individuals’ isolation and contributing to identity performance through expressions of individuality, self-worth, and personal strength (Rodriquez, 2011; Dobson, 2011). Its empowering nature lies also in its correlation with social capital and the therapeutic function that is implied by the privileging and valuable recognition of people’s ordinary experience and point of view (Bourdieu, 1991; Thumin, 2008; 2012). This empowering dimension can be exemplified further through the concept of voice.

Voice is an integral part of self-representation and encapsulates the ability to be recognised and participate in social and political life through our freedom and capacity to define our own representation (Plush, 2015). The significance of voice and the ability to provide a narrative for the self has received considerable scholarly attention in connection to issues of power, inclusivity and social justice, and to the agency it affords for marginalised communities (Butler 2005; Couldry, 2010; Husband, 2009). For Couldry (2010) voice is about the agency to represent oneself and provide a narrative, which is a basic feature of human action. He puts forward the principle of voice as process and as value. While the former focuses on the act of giving an account of oneself, the latter recognises that what makes us human is the ability to promote our own interpretations of ourselves and the world, and the social acceptance of these interpretations (Couldry, 2010; Honneth, 1996). In contrast, ‘voicelessness’ can lead to exclusion from social groups and generate feelings of anger and shame (Smith and Hyde, 1991). The process of voice articulation *per se* can also prove to be a powerful one, as it can foster a sense of confidence and competence in one’s identity and their connectedness to others (Podkalicka and Campbell, 2010). At the same time, voice production requires resources and skills, which are allocated unevenly depending on gender, class, or race (Downing, 2016; Madianou et al, 2015: 3022). Madianou et al (2015) remind us that ‘voices can be nuanced, taking forms that might not immediately register as voice’ (p.3024), which also raises questions about what can be defined as voice/voicelessness. Such definitions are once again subjected to issues of race, class and gender and local socio-cultural contexts.

The different streams of literature also agree that voice is redundant without the required listening mechanisms that will make people’s voices sustained and validated (Couldry, 2010). In the dialogic literature, voice is reciprocal and constitutes a process of learning that cannot be possible outside of engaging with one another (Deetz & Simpson, 2004; Heath et al, 2006). It is through both internal and external dialogues that individuals can engage in a reflexive process that can lead to action (Braden, 1998; Shaw, 2012 in Plush, 2015:3). In this dialogic interaction, ‘hearing’ voice is an insufficient indicator of valuing voice. Instead, the essence of the matter is active listening and ‘the right to be understood’ (Downing, 2016; Husband, 1996; Plush, 2015). Active listening means that a transformation of conditions that are complicit in voice denial may also be needed; and it is through such transformations that voices from the margins can be recognised and valued by the powerful, and that institutionalised hierarchies of attention can be shifted (Dobson, 2014; Dreher, 2009; Plush 2015). But as Downing (2016) points out, it is important that interactivity and listening happen not just between marginalised communities and the powerful (e.g. the state), but also among peers (i.e. the marginalised) so that their voice does not remain dismissed by the powerful (p.10).

The notions of voice and listening offer a valuable tool for a more nuanced understanding of the exclusion of farmers’ voices from fair trade’s communication strategies. In fact, the significance of voice and listening exposes the level of injustice that characterises fair trade communication, which renders the voices of food growers non-recognised. When they are not ‘invisible’ or replaced by images of landscape, farmers get to be listened to only through established audible positions of ‘beneficiaries’ whose lives were improved thanks to the generosity of the foreign consumers. The different waves of fair trade’s discursive embodiments encourage a ‘selective audibility’, a term used by Bassel (2017) to describe the act of ‘listening’ to those who speak only from the positions identiﬁed that reinforce the binary of ‘Us and Them’ (p.19). To a certain extent, this is a product of fair trade’s institutionalisation that, according to Hussey and Curnow (2013) and Lyon (2006), has led to the low level of farmer participation in marketing materials and in decision-making more broadly. In essence, fair trade is characterised by an unequal distribution of the narrative resources from which people can build their self-representation and connect to others, what Couldry (2010) describes as ‘voice-denying rationalities’ that constitute a form of oppression (p.10). The connection between voicelessness and oppression goes back to Paulo Freire’s pedagogy and argument for people's need to ‘individually and collectively speak their world’ in order to transform oppressive structures (Freire, 1998).

A question that emerges in this case is if and to what extent fair trade organisations could create spaces where producers can construct their own narratives, and can also capture the attention of thoseactors that are better placed to ‘listen’ and offer recognition and response. Until now, the construction of fair trade representations has been targeted at the foreign consumers as actors whose purchasing decisions would lead to a redistribution of wealth to the fair trade farmers (White, 2003). However, the multidimensionality of voice and listening implies there could be other actors that fair trade communication can and should be targeted at. Moreover, given the sense of oppression associated with voicelessness, how producers experience lack of voice in the context of fair trade communication merits more attention. For instance, in a study conducted in Mexico, farmers admitted that the stereotypical representations promoted through fair trade’s marketing undermined their confidence and capacity of self-management since they were led to believe it was ‘poverty’ and ‘victimhood’ that kept them in the fair trade market (Taylor, 2002).

Given the complexity and heterogeneity that characterises the structures of food networks, identifying answers to these questions is no easy task. Yet, by bringing the voice of the producer into these discussions, we can begin to unravel new possibilities for voice and listening through fair trade communication**.** This article moves the field forward in two ways. First, it creates space for the farmers’ voices through focus groups with a community of South Indian farmers, and it sheds light on the meanings of fair trade’s representations as seen through the farmers’ viewpoint. Second, through an experiment that involves the creation of short videos and text-based stories by the farmers that were then shared with consumers in the UK, the article explores the practicality of a more dynamic producer-consumer communication. This is based on the farmers’ experience of expressing their voice and being listened to, and on consumers’ impressions of ‘meeting’ the distant producer through the farmers’ own narratives.

**Researching Representation through participatory video: a case study of the ‘Organic Wayanad’ farmers’ cooperative**

The research presented in this article is part of an ongoing qualitative exploratory case study that focuses on a small community of South Indian farmers in the Wayanad District of Kerala. Kerala has been known for its efforts to put in practice what has been described as a successful sustainable development model through land reforms, education and healthcare policies, and mobilization of social movements and civil society (Parayil and Sreekumar, 2003). Wayanad has a long history of trade relations with products such as pepper cardamom, ginger, sandal-wood, ivory and wild honey, but it has also become known as one of the most distressed agrarian districts in India and as one of the suicide-prone districts during the agrarian crisis in the beginning of the century (Münster, 2012; Thottathill, 2014; Vakkayil, 2010). Since 2010, an action plan has been put in place to support the promotion of organic zones (Münster, 2012). This study focuses on a cooperative called ‘Organic Wayanad’ that works for the promotion of biodiversity protection and sustainable agriculture. One of the main objectives of Organic Wayanad was to develop an internal control system and provide consultancy and training especially during the process of conversion from conventional to organic farming (Vakkayil, 2010). The cooperative has over 400 members who are both organic and fair trade certified and whose products are exported to Europe and North America.

**Research design and data collection**

The project was designed to explore and capture different aspects of the producers’ and consumers’ experience from the video production process. Although the focus of this article is on the inclusion of producers’ voice in fair trade communication, the consumers’ participation and experience is also vital given their role as potential ‘listeners’. Hence, a combination of different methods was used including the participatory video production, focus groups with the farmers before and after the video production, and focus groups with UK consumers. Using a case study design inevitably results in restrictions in terms of scale. However, this restricted focus facilitates a more detailed and in depth understanding of the farmers’ experience of participating in the construction of their own representations and of the new possibilities that emerge from the virtual producer-consumer communication. Moreover, the aim of the study is not to generalise the findings but to generate new data and provisional insights about representation that can inform and/or be contradicted by future studies. The data presented in this article has been collected over a one-year period, between September 2016 and September 2017. The data was coded through an inductive process. The process aimed at identifying themes that captured the farmers’ and consumers’ views and experiences of representation through the entire research cycle, including the initial discussions, the video production, and the consumers’ reactions to the videos. In this process, the concept of voice offered a tool that helped codify the farmers’ views and experiences in terms of oppression and sense of community and identity. Member checking was also used to ensure the accuracy of the farmers’ experiences. All participants have been anonymised and pseudonyms were used to protect their identity. The research process and key themes from the focus groups are summarised in the following tables.

[Table 1 goes here]

[Table 2 goes here]

[Table 3 goes here]

**Findings and analysis**

**Voice for social acceptability: fighting social oppression**

Despite numerous critiques of fair trade farmers’ representations in academic scholarship, farmers’ perceptions are absent from relevant debates. It was therefore critical to bring these into the discussion with the farmers in Wayanad. A common theme that emerged from all focus groups was farmers’ sense that they were misrepresented, especially by the local and regional middlemen. Several farmers explained they understood how fair trade’s stereotypical images reflected a marketing strategy, not just of corporations in the North, but also of the middlemen – the traders that buy the farmers’ products and also dictate the prices before they sell them to consumers - who capitalised on narratives of poverty to boost their sales. As one of the participants explained,

This is a shrewd strategy of the middlemen to paint us as living in poverty, for their own interests, so that they can sell more; also they can use us as a dumping ground for things they do not need, such as obsolete technology, fertilizers etc. (Participant 1, Focus group 3).

In the words of another farmer, ‘It is in their [middlemen] interest to portray us poor and struggling; and they do not really make any effort to understand the work we do’ (Participant 1, Focus group 5). When asked how they felt about these portrayals, their initial reactions were mixed. While few farmers admitted they did not mind being misrepresented as ‘poor and struggling’ if it boosted their sales, the majority felt strongly about the need to ‘correct’ this image. As the discussions continued, the farmers began to reflect on how the image portrayed [through fair trade’s communication] to the rest of the world was also shared by the local society, and this had to change. They unanimously stated that society in Kerala had a skewed image of farmers, and organic farmers in particular,[[2]](#footnote-2) which is manifested in the lack of social acceptability from official institutions such as banks. As another farmer explained, ‘Farmers play such an important role in society; everything we eat comes from the soil, you cannot make this with a PC, and still we do not receive the recognition we deserve’ (Participant 6, Focus Group 8). For many farmers, this lack of respect and recognition threatens their sustainability as a farming community, as it drives young people away from farming and from Wayanad. This was a crucial point in the discussion as the farmers reflected on the importance of having their voice heard, and making their presence felt and respected. As one farmer put it, ‘Unless we get organised and become a force, we will be treated like second-class citizens’ (Participant 2, Focus Group 2). For most producers, establishing a strong identity as a group – e.g. through a representative body and a website - was crucial in promoting their work and receiving the recognition they deserved.

For the farmers in Wayanad, misrecognition is not a price worth paying for a higher income due to the long-term implications it can have for their sustainability. More importantly, by exemplifying the connection between recognition and the community’s sustainability, their responses demonstrated the material dimension of self-representation and voice, and why it matters. Although there is no clear evidence linking fair trade’s narratives directly to the local society’s perceptions, the farmers’ testimonies point to the possibility that fair trade’s stereotypical representations are part of a vicious circle of communication that involves local intermediaries and feeds into local society’s misrecognition. In this case, the farmers’ desire to establish an identity that could help them safeguard their interests in their trading relations is proof of the damaging implications of this misrecognition. The video production project presented an opportunity for them to document aspects of their work with a view to sharing it with the community at home and abroad.

**Building connections through education and a renewed farmers’ image**

One theme that emerged from the video production was the pedagogical nature of the videos and text-based stories that contrasts farmers’ heartfelt testimonies commonly promoted through fair trade campaigns. This was enacted through an emphasis on farming processes and methods, constructing a very different image of the farmers, compared to the typical fair trade representations. While some farmers walked the viewer through their fields, others focused on specific plants or the process of making organic fertilisers. In one of the videos the farmer showed the recipe and process for making ‘Jeevamrutham’, a natural fertiliser made from local ingredients. In the video the farmer explained:

Before I started farming organically, I used chemical fertilizers and initially I got a very good crop; but later the crop started reducing. When I started using Jeevamrutham, I got an equally good production. Chemical pesticides would make the farm very dry, but Jeevamrutham keeps the soil and the plants moist.

In another story, a farmer explained how she observed the practices of a neighbouring tribal community, the Kurichiya community, who were already practicing traditional organic methods and were enjoying a ‘life free of diseases’. The video and story production process presented an opportunity for the farmers to see themselves as educators who can share their specialized knowledge about traditional farming methods and offer a civic function. As one of the farmers explained ‘We do not use the modern machinery that people often think is used in farming, simply because it is not suitable for the landscape and the size of the farms. But we use many different techniques and we want to share these with the consumers’ (Participant 3, Focus Group 11). Others talked about educating consumers regarding the importance of the climatic conditions of places like Wayanad for the quality and taste of products such as the pepper, and the harmful effect of pesticides.

People think that chemical farming increases the output. But, this is not true. If you want people to understand this, you need to show them the actual process of organic farming, the results, the quality and size of the vegetables etc. It is only then they will understand this (Participant 2, Focus Group 9).

According to Wright and Annes (2016), meaningful connections with others can be achieved when the narratives rooted in idealized imagery can be overcome through the dissemination of realism-based portrayal of agriculture. The videos and stories of the Wayanadan farmers offer such a portrayal, showing that connections with the audience can be pursued through more diverse and nuanced images of farming than the common romanticised narratives. This is reinforced by the fact that none of the farmers’ videos and stories referred to the social premium they receive through fair trade or the difference that this has made to their lives. It is noteworthy that as the farmers were given no brief, they were able to exercise a choice about which aspects of self to represent (Corner, 1995). Choice is an essential aspect of self-representation, and farmers’ choice to focus on farming techniques, recipes and medicinal properties of crops is an indication of the information that they wish to communicate to the consumer and how they want to be ‘heard’. At the same time, their choice of video and story content offers proof of the diversity of narratives that are possible and the different aspects of the food production process that can be made visible when the farmers are given control over the narrative resources. In this case, legitimacy is cast in terms of technical knowledge and farmers’ expertise and agency - rather than life improvements through fair trade’s social premium and consumers’ compassion. Without negating the need to uncover the unjust relations of free trade, what these videos draw attention to is the diversity of representations that are possible – beyond colonial portrayals - and the farmers’ wealth of knowledge that can be shared with consumers.

**Challenging colonial narratives in producer-consumer relations**

Consumers’ perceptions are also critical for exploring the possibilities for more truthful and dynamic representation. In this experiment, the consumers’ reactions to the farmers’ stories were insightful in terms of the capacity of farmers’ knowledge and expertise to challenge existing stereotypical representations of the distant other. A crucial aspect of farmers’ self-representation was its pedagogical nature as all consumersadmitted that they learnt about aspects of farming they had not imagined were possible. Several of them were motivated to do their own research on methods such as ‘zero budget farming’. Through this experience, the farmers’ stories shifted their attention away from the image of the ‘traditional’ and ‘charitable’ producer, to a more realistic image of farmers as professional experts in their field. One consumer stated,

I had not realised just how many organic alternatives there were, so I’ve been *educated* and, as I say, if this was a half hour TV programme, everybody who would have watched it in Britain would been educated in some small way, definitely, I’m sure of it (Participant 2, Focus Group 1).

Others expressed surprise at the fact that organic farming could give a bigger yield than they had thought. As this participant stated: ‘A lot of them were saying that the yields have gone up, so that’s something that I found quite surprising…they’re actually growing more crops than you think’ (Participant 3, Focus Group 9). Another consumer also said,

It amazed me, not only is it better for everybody in terms of their health, but the land that they were planting in actually was better and therefore their crop was better and there wasn’t a bad thing to it, so [I am wondering] ‘Why don’t more people do it? And why don’t we support that more? It made me think that if they can change their farming, I can change the way I eat (Participant 5, Focus Group 5).

Most of the consumers admitted they had not realised organic farming required so much work, and the videos and stories threw light on the reasons for the higher cost of organic produce. They also commented on the videos offering ‘a great geography lesson’. More importantly, all groups invariably admitted that watching the videos increased their appetite to know more about the production of certain food products and the cycle of the farming process as it moves through the different seasons.

The power of the farmers’ stories to challenge mainstream perceptions of the distant other lies in encouraging consumers to engage in a different thought process. In this experiment, consumers constructed a different image of the farmers, but also a different identity for themselves: not as benevolent saviours, but as recipients of some form of education. This was encapsulated in their surprise at the fact that, ‘these farmers and their families, they look like us’ (Participant 3, Focus Group 1) and ‘these farmers were not poor, but reasonably comfortably off in doing what they were doing’ (Participant 1, Focus Group 7). Another participant also said: ‘I was quite shocked at how wealthy they *appeared*’ (Participant 4, Focus Group 9). Consumers’ sense of surprise and shock is a clear indication of their pre-conceptions about the distant producer. Most of them admitted they were expecting to see a different story and image of the farmers as the following quotes from the participants indicate,

‘I was quite shocked with it [the videos] really because in the images and documentaries I’ve seen in the past, it seemed like they [farmers] were living in poverty and then in these videos they seemed quite different’ (Participant 4, focus group 7).

‘These videos were different, I was not expecting to see that…I was expecting them to talk about how fairly or unfairly they are treated’ (Participant 2, focus group 4)

…yeah, fair trade messages tend to be more hard-hitting…’ (Participant 3, focus group 4).

This was another crucial point in the discussion since it demonstrates the capacity of farmers’ representations to disrupt the racialized relationships encouraged by fair trade’s communication that rely on the commodification of difference and the ‘distant other’. In this way, consumers’ perceptions of their own role vis-à-vis the farmers began to shift. At the beginning of the discussion, participants were asked why they bought fair trade products. The majority expressed their desire to help reduce poverty and reward hard-working farmers, which reinstated their perceived role as ‘benevolent saviours’. It was therefore notable that these perceptions changed across the board after watching the videos and reading the stories. Most respondents admitted they felt these farmers looked proud and self-sufficient. As one respondent insisted, they were not ‘charitable case’ and ‘did not need our help’. This experience raises the possibility of a consumer role that moves beyond neo-colonialist frameworks of the benevolent and moral consumer and includes making more informed food choices to support the work of farmers and help the environment. This role was ultimately linked to information and education. As one of the participants said, ‘In many ways eating, choosing and buying food is an education, and if you’re not informed then you’re not going to change anything’ (Participant 5, focus group 2).

Although the experiment demonstrated there is consumer appetite for more authentic content that can disrupt dominant narratives, making this content accessible to consumers remains a challenge. This was reflected in the following group discussion (Focus Group 2):

Interviewer: …so what would be the best way to get this material to consumers?

Answer: I wouldn’t just go out and seek for this information, but I would pay attention if it was shown to me as I was doing online shopping (Participant 1).

…yes, the shops and brands need to promote these stories (Participant 3).

….true, I’m also not going to lie to you, I wouldn’t actually go out of my way to look for this information, but I’d love to watch it or have a leaflet while shopping, so that I can make a connection (Participant 4).

Others mentioned the fair trade events organised by the fair trade foundation as occasions where they would expect to find and pay attention to such material. Consumers’ expectation that this type of content would be embedded in their shopping context and experience implies that fair trade brands and organizations can play a key role in providing the platform for this closer producer-consumer connections by incorporating the farmers’ voices in their marketing and communication strategies. Fair trade organizations, such as UK’s Traidcraft [[3]](#footnote-3) and Germany’s Forum Fairer Handel, [[4]](#footnote-4) have begun to recognize the need to challenge stereotypical representations, and move beyond empathy-driven advertising and towards more educational, factual and knowledge-based communication strategies. Hence, this may be the way forward for fair trade’s marketing strategy, especially as competition is growing from independent fair trade consumerlabels, with companies and cooperatives gradually abandoning external certifications and developing in-house labels (Pilling, 2019).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Nonetheless, a closer reading of consumers’ reactions also shows the complexity of challenging mainstream perceptions about the distant farmers. Their surprise and ‘shock’ at the farmers apparent wealth and expertise demonstrates the pervasiveness of colonial images of the Southern producer as someone that needs to be ‘rescued’, and of the neoliberal social and economic discourse that such images underpin in the North (see also Joffe and Staerklé, 2007). This reinforces the position that the capacity of marginalised voices to radically challenge established stereotypical narratives and discourses is conditioned on more radical changes in the circumstances that are responsible for the mis-representation of these communities, and the silencing of their voices (see Plush, 2015). As Couldry (2010) argues, for voice to be influential, what needs to be considered and change are those circumstances that keep it from being valued. Such circumstances concern not just political and socio-cultural contexts, but also knowledge construction institutions that cultivate colonial narratives and discourses. Fair trade’s contribution to the establishment of new narratives can be critical but would also have to be accompanied by more drastic changes in these knowledge construction processes and institutions.

**The power of self-representation through the process of story production and listening**

I argued earlier that the value of self-representation and voice requires attention to the act of listening. For the farmers in Wayanad the process of making and watching their videos proved to be the most empowering aspect of self-representation. Yet, this sense of empowerment is inextricably linked to the process of being listened to, even by an unknown audience.As one of the farmers explained, creating the videos and talking to an imagined audience ‘made me feel that I have a voice and I love talking about what I do [and] my farming methods’ (Participant 1, Focus Group 10). Another one added, ‘I’m very proud to have taken part in this [project] and I feel important’ (Participant 2, Focus Group 10). Although the effectiveness of voice and listening should be evaluated based on ‘acceptance’ of what is being heard (see Lawy, 2017), in this instance farmers’ sense of value derives from being able to speak and assuming that someone is listening.Their renewed sense of pride and self-appreciation was also strengthened through the indirect communication with the UK consumers. As one participant put it, ‘It feels good and it is important to hear good comments from them. We have an honest and transparent operation and we can speak in front of large groups with confidence and pride’ (Participant 1, Focus group 16). The significance of consumers’ listening and their openness to learn and be educated should be evaluated against the farmers’ societal backdrop described earlier. In this socio-cultural context, the farmers’ virtual interaction with the UK consumers became another source of social connectedness, motivation, and renewed confidence.

 Yet, more than the recognition by the foreign consumers, the experiment demonstrated the significance of horizontal listening for farmers’ sense of empowerment. This became obvious first through the playback process.Following the video production, the officials from Organic Wayanad organised a screening where the videos were played back to the farmers who participated and to an audience of up to 50 farmers who had not taken part in the project. The effect of the playback process and of seeing one’s life on film lies in promoting feelings of confidence and self-worth. This is by helping people develop an image of themselves and see a collective representation of the community (White, 2003). For the farmers in Wayanad, the video-making experience and the playback process provided an opportunity to ‘hear each other and talk to each other’ (Participant 1, Focus Group 13). It becamea communicative act and a conversational pathway that offered them a means for identification of shared values - such as their need to have their voice heard and valued by the local community. Most farmers agreed that it was the local misperceptions about the work and social status of organic farmers that had to change, reinforcing the importance of society’s recognition and respect, as explained earlier. One farmer also said, ‘There is not enough awareness and information [locally] about the amount of care and effort that needs to go into organic farming’ (Participant 4, Focus group 19). Moreover, watching their own videos gave them inspiration to turn them into educational tools for other farmers and for members of the public. They expressed the hope that people would eventually understand the value of their methods, even if, as one of them said, ‘they may laugh [at us] in the beginning’ (Participant 4, Focus Group 12). Although Thumin (2008) warns against equating self-representation and voice with social change, in this case, the process of self-representation through the video creation resulted in some form of change and action, as a group of farmers went on to organise screenings in neighbouring farming communities in Kerala to raise awareness about organic and fair trade farming among consumers and conventional farmers.

The sense of value, pride and self-appreciation that farmers experienced through the video creation process and their virtual interaction with the consumers shows that fair trade organizations can strengthen fair trade’s social justice principles first by providing the narrative and material resources needed for farmers to create their own accounts of themselves; and second by embracing farmers’ voice and self- representation as part of their marketing strategy. Farmers’ participation in their self-representation requires dialogue between fair trade organisations and the farming communities. Existing evidence suggests that buyers and coffee roasters can play a crucial role in supporting farmers to become skilled and empowered in various non-monetary ways (Lyon, 2006). The same actors could also support them in constructing their own images through engagement and dialogue. At the same time, the farmers’ experience of making and watching their own videos, and their need to be valued and understood by the local society brings to the forefront the need to approach self-representation and voice as a nuanced and culturally embedded notion. For the farmers in Wayanad, what counts as voice is their ability to be ‘heard’ by the local community, which is in line with theories of voice that highlight the need for spaces conducive to active listening within internal groups and collectivities that are characterised by diversity (Couldry, 2010; Downing, 2016). It also reinforces the need for listening spaces to be adapted to specific local environments. An evaluation of how such spaces can be created is beyond the scope of this study; but for fair trade communication strategies to prove effective and empowering, they would need to be accompanied by the creation of listening opportunities on multiple levels, local and global.

**Conclusion**

Fair trade movements represent an economic platform that aims to promote social and economic justice in countries of the Global South through fostering relations of care between Northern consumers and food growers in the South. These relations are meant to be built though fair trade’s moral education, a strategy that relies heavily on discursive embodiments and stereotypical representations of the distant farmers that emphasise the farmers’ dependency on the benevolent Northern consumer; and encourage neo-colonial relations by reinforcing a sense of difference. This article sought to move beyond current critiques and calls for less commodified producers’ representations by arguing for the need to better understand the significance of these representations and create space for producers’ unheard voices, stories and narratives in producer-consumer interactions. The article’s main argument was underpinned by a conceptualization of representation through the concepts of self-representation and voice, which highlighted how fair trade communication can be understood as a process that denies producers’ sense of identity and the opportunity to be heard outside the audible positions of the victim/beneficiary. This paved the way for a new question to be asked about if and how fair trade communication strategies could provide a platform where speaking and active listening can take place, challenge stereotypical narratives and empower producers. The question was explored through a novel experiment that involved short videos produced by a group of Indian farmers and the responses of consumers in the UK with whom the videos were shared.

The Wayanadan farmers’ stories and the consumers’ reactions provide evidence of alternative representations that can be employed to bring producers and consumers closer together based on knowledgeable and educational material. More importantly, the farmers’ capacity to create pedagogical content, and consumers’ recognition of the value of this content demonstrates that it is possible to promote fair trade through stories and images of farmers that challenge existing stereotypes. This type of information exchange and communication can become integrated in fair trade’s marketing strategies towards the mainstream consumer. For instance, the Fairtrade Foundation’s campaigns are built on the combination of different media outputs and digital channels through which it engages consumers (Vizard, 2017). The same marketing platforms could be deployed to gradually integrate farmer-generated content. The same applies to affiliated fair trade organizations and brands. As the consumers interviewed for this research attested, they rely on trusted brands and organizations to guide them towards such content, while some of the European companies sourcing products from the Wayanadan farmers are already making the farmers’ videos available to their consumers.

By creating a space for voice expression and listening, marketing and communication strategies can play a critical role for fair trade’s principle of social justice, as they can lead to action and positive change. The Wayanadan farmers’ positive and inspiring experience of making and watching their own videos provides evidence of the importance of representation in fair trade movements not just as an output that connects farmers with consumers, but as a ‘voice production’ process that creates a sense of identity for the producers. For the farmers in Wayanad, the video creation and playback process offered a space for reflexivity, where they negotiated their local reality and developed strategies for action that are crucial for their sustainability. Their reported sense of self-esteem and community building was another encouraging outcome of the process. The significance of this finding lies in highlighting the need to re-think fair trade representations as vital for human development and to approach representation as an integral part of fair trade’s remit to achieve social justice; and the disciplines of sociology, psychology and development studies are areas that scholars can turn to for this task. Moreover, theories of voice can inform future analysis of fair trade as an institutional pattern of cultural value, and facilitate more nuanced understanding of the different layers of subordination and exclusion of farming communities.

At the same time, for farmers’ self-representations to be recognised and valued there needs to be a space where active listening can take place. A dynamic and reciprocal producer-consumer interaction would require the dedicated efforts from trading and development organizations that can show interest and commitment to farmers’ well-being and are willing to invest in building such interactive spaces. In addition, farmers’ participation in such endeavours will inevitably be impeded by the unequal distribution of resources such as time and access to technology, and by inequalities and parameters including confidence, participation in local and global farmers’ groups/ cooperatives, and gender-related issues. Many of the farmers from the Organic Wayanad cooperative were unable to participate because they lived in remote areas that created logistical problems; while others, especially women, lacked the confidence to speak in front of a camera.

For farmers to truly benefit form self-representation, creating listening spaces should also be tailored around their unique local environments. The experiment reinforced theorisations of voice as nuanced and contextual (see Madianou et al, 2015); and for the farmers in Wayanad, what counts as voicelessness is the lack of recognition and respect by the local society, which is directly linked to their capacity to continue their farming practices and safeguard their sustainability. A change in fair trade communication strategies will therefore be insufficient in empowering producers, unless parallel efforts are made to change the circumstances that are responsible for the mis-representation of farmers on a local scale, and to situate listening spaces more strategically within activities aimed at increasing recognition (Plush, 2015). Besides, if local mis-representation is also feeding into the establishment of colonial discourses, as the Wayanadan farmers’ testimonies implied, creating spaces conducive to listening on a local level could ultimately help challenge colonial narratives on a wider scale.

The farmers’ local reality also highlights the significance of the material dimension of voice for marginalised communities. This is an aspect of voice that scholars could engage more closely with, not just in agri-food studies but also in the fields of communication, sociology and social movements where the experiences of marginalised communities can be a source of valuable knowledge. As Downing attests, these communities’ experiences ‘…are no fiction, and bypassing what can be learned from them is a form of political suicide’ (2016: 10).

Clearly, the findings of this case study cannot be generalised since the specific farming community is not representative of the wider population of Indian or Southern producers. Moreover, participatory research remains subject to bias, rendering any conclusions also subject to cautious reading and interpretation. Nevertheless, the same limitations could become strengths. It is by focusing on and closely studying small and marginal projects that new openings and new spaces of possibility can be created in the study of representation in food networks. Small local studies will produce the type of theorising that may be more localised in its reach and purview but also more open to innovative alternatives to the status quo in the global food market more broadly.

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**Appendix**

**Farmers - Demographics**

|  |
| --- |
| **Gender**  |
| FemaleMale  | 1264 |
| **Age**  |
| 20-30 years31-40 years41-50 years51-60 years61-70 years | 102125182 |

**Focus groups, September 2016**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Focus Group No** | **Location**  | **Date**  | **No of Participants**  |
| Focus group 1Focus group 2Focus group 3Focus group 4Focus group 5Focus group 6Focus group 7Focus group 8 | Wayanad WayanadWayanadWayanadWayanadWayanadWayanadWayanad | 12 September 201612 September 201613 September 201613 September 201614 September 201615 September 201616 September 201616 September 2016 | 76677878 |

**Focus groups, January 2017**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Interview No** | **Location**  | **Date**  | **No of Participants** |
| Focus Group 9Focus Group 10Focus Group 11Focus Group 12Focus Group 13 | Wayanad WayanadWayanadWayanadWayanad | 11 January 201712 January 201713 January 201716 January 201717 January 2017 | 44444 |

**Focus groups, September 2017**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Focus Group No** | **Location**  | **Date**  | **No of Participants**  |
| Focus group 14Focus group 15Focus group 16Focus group 17Focus group 18Focus group 19 | Wayanad WayanadWayanadWayanadWayanadWayanad | 13 September 201714 September 201715 September 201715 September 201716 September 201716 September 2017 | 677776 |

**Consumers, Demographics**

|  |
| --- |
| **Gender**  |
| FemaleMale  | 2822 |
| **Education/qualification** |
| Degree (UG/PG/ProfessionalA Levels | 3515 |
| **Age** |
| 20-30 years31-40 years41-50 years51-60 years | 9161510 |
| **Ethnicity** |
| White British White other Black African Black Caribbean Asian | 285746 |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Focus Group No** | **Location**  | **Date**  | **No of Participants**  |
| Focus group 1Focus group 2Focus group 3Focus group 4Focus group 5Focus group 6Focus group 7Focus group 8Focus group 9Focus group 10 | LondonLondonLondon LondonLondon Midlands Midlands Midlands MidlandsMidlands | 08 June 201713 June 201713 June 201715 June 201715 June 201720 June 201721 June 201727 June 201728 June 201728 June 2017 | 5555555555 |

1. It is important to mention the Fair Tracing Project as the only initiative that implemented IT Tracking and Tracing Technologies to provide consumers and producers with enhanced information and help small producers make a presence in global markets (Light and Anderson, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All the farmers agreed that in Kerala, organic farmers are often looked down on by their peers for prioritising environmental protection. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Personal communication with Digital Marketing Manager, 24 May 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Personal communication with Policy Officer, 12 March 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This includes the farmers’ cooperative in Wayanad, where officials are devising their own fair trade label. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)