

Fair trade awareness: Exploring its relationship to public policy and sustainable outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the roles that public policy, stakeholder involvement and Fair Trade (FT) information dissemination play in increasing consumer FT awareness. The relationship between consumer FT awareness and FT consumption behavior is also examined. Some proven FT outcomes are reviewed from economic, social, and environmental perspectives. The need for consumers to move to FT as a sustainable consumption behavior is underscored. Finally, a conceptual framework, research propositions and a plan for related empirical testing are discussed. Overall, this paper represents a step toward understanding FT consumption behavior, which has environmental sustainability and quality of life implications globally.

Keywords: Fair Trade, public policy, consumer awareness, stakeholder involvement, sustainable development



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INTRODUCTION

In the attempt to gain or retain competitive advantage, firms operating in diverse sectors seek ways to reduce costs. These days, a common approach to cost-reduction is the use of lower-cost labor (Kogut 1985; Porter 1986) by way of production in, or procurement from developing nations. While this approach might provide financial and competitive advantages for firms operating in industrialized nations, it also introduces the potential for opportunism, and exploitation of producers/suppliers. Fair Trade (FT) practices and certification were developed to address this potential consequence in global business, and a growing number of consumers have adopted FT purchase behaviors. One definition of FT is: “a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect; that seek greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers – especially in the South. Fair Trade Organizations, backed by consumers, are engaged actively in supporting producers, awareness raising and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional trade.” (World Fair Trade [WFTO] Organization 2014).

The principles and practice of FT relate to a number of international initiatives which seek to promote sustainability. For example, FT supports the premise of Principle 5 of the United Nations (UN) Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992), which states: “All States and all people shall cooperate in the essential task of eradicating poverty as an indispensable requirement for sustainable development, in order to decrease the disparities in standards of living and better meet the needs of the majority of the people of the world” (Principle 5 of the Rio Declaration 1992). The Rio Declaration as well as Agenda 21 emanated from The Earth Summit held in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil in 1992. The former was developed to establish international partnerships characterized by equity and cooperation for the purpose of advancing socio-economic and environmental sustainability for all. The purpose of Agenda 21 is to provide comprehensive guidelines for action to be taken in every area in which people interface with the environment (<http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/agenda21/>).

Over the years, the UN has put forth many and varied efforts to address environmental sustainability, poverty eradication and other socio-economic issues and problems. The UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) plays a pivotal role in reviewing the progress of implementation of Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration. Since the Earth Summit at Rio, The UN convened the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South African in 2002. It was agreed at the WSSD that poverty eradication and sustainable management of our natural resources are priorities. The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI) was developed to ensure that these priorities are pursued. Chapter III of the JPOI specifically addresses changing unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. Another important result of the WSSD was the draft 10-year framework of programs on sustainable production and consumption. The Marrakech Process was initiated in 2003 to support implementation of sustainable production and consumption and elaboration of the 10-year framework. .

PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

Clearly, various international agencies recognize the role that promoting sustainable consumption might play in addressing global problems and issues. Key in changing consumption behaviors toward sustainable ones is increasing our knowledge about the current state of consumption behavior and the factors that impact it. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the role that public policy regarding stakeholder involvement and FT information dissemination might play in increasing consumer awareness and FT consumption behavior. In addition, it explores the proven outcomes of FT from economic, social, and environmental perspectives while underscoring the need for consumers to move to FT as a sustainable consumption behavior.

This research is significant because developing an understanding of FT consumption behavior represents an early step in increasing its prevalence. Increased FT consumption behavior is necessary because FT can improve the lives of substantial numbers of individuals and communities in developing nations who regularly face great challenges in earning a decent living and accessing the very basic necessities of life. Increasing sustainable production and consumption behaviors (such as FT) is so important that it is elaborated in Principle 8 of the Rio Declaration, which states “to achieve sustainable development and a higher quality of life for all people, States should reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of production and consumption and promote appropriate demographic policies” (Principle 8, Rio Declaration 1992 at <http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?documentID=78&articleID=1163>, accessed 9/27/12).

This research is also significant because FT addresses more than socio-economic challenges faced by small-scale producers, it also addresses the environmentally sustainable production of products. FT farmers, growers, and producers agree to supply their customers with products, which were produced in a manner that minimizes environmental degradation (e.g., without the use of pesticides) assuring minimal degradation to the air, water, and soil. Needless to say, reducing the negative impact to our natural environment is a concern that must be fervently addressed by all - governments at all levels, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), businesses and individuals world-wide.

An additional contribution of this research is that it analyzes the key role that public policy plays in increasing consumer awareness, which in turn is theorized to impact increases in sustainable consumption behaviors. According to Leire and Thidell (2005), it appears that consumers find it difficult to draw the connection between their consumption of products and sustainability problems. It is easy to see how this premise applies to FT, where consumers might fail to see how their individual purchase behaviors relate to producers' quality of life. Clearly, it is important for consumers to overcome this disconnection.

In order to examine these important topics, a review of the existing literature is presented. This is followed by the presentation of four research propositions and a discussion of the proposed research methodology. The paper concludes with potential implications for practice.

It should be noted that given the paucity of previous research on specific FT issues relevant to this research, the researchers will often rely upon established policies, practices, efforts, and published academic research as foundations for the proposed model. It is believed that this parallel is valid because both FT issues and environmental issues relate to sustainability, and the practice of FT actually incorporates environmentally-friendly methods of production.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fair Trade Consumption Behavior

The practice of FT has a history, which spans over 60 years (<http://www.european-fair-trade-association.org/efta/Doc/History.pdf>, accessed 4-18-13); however, a formal system for labeling FT certified offerings was not instituted until the mid-1980s (http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/what_is_fairtrade/history.aspx, accessed 4-18-13). Fair Trade addresses the disparities in “conventional” trade and seeks to secure viable livelihoods and sustainable development for producers in developing nations. Some of the foundations of FT include: suppliers’ ability to reach a broader market, equity in business, fair pay to suppliers, and production of environmentally-friendly products (WFTO – Charter of Fair Trade Principles 2012). Some of the purported benefits of FT include enhancement of suppliers’ economic and social statuses and positive environmental outcomes, which support some of the UN Millennium Development Goals (<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/> accessed 10-4-12).

While coffee is the most common FT product, a wide array of FT offerings - from flowers to clothing, and more are available in the global marketplace today (<http://www.fairtrade.net/products.html>, accessed 10-4-12). In addition to increasing product variety, the sales of Fairtrade certified products to consumers had essentially tripled in the three-year period from 2004 to 2007, increasing from US \$1.2 billion to US \$3.4 billion (Krier 2007). Still growing rapidly, worldwide sales of Fairtrade products have nearly doubled since 2007, topping US \$6 billion in 2011 (a 12% gain over 2010; Fair Trade International Annual Report 2011 – 2012). In terms of premium paid to producers, coffee has remained the biggest selling Fairtrade product, while continuing to show strong growth, up 12% year-over-year (Fair Trade International Annual Report 2011-2012). The average annual sales growth rate for FT coffee in the decade leading up to 2008 has been estimated to be 40% (http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/organicexports/docs/Market_Organic_FT_Coffee.pdf, 2012). The same source suggests that, although the FT share of “specialty” coffee is nearly twenty percent, just over three percent of all coffee sold in the US is FT. Thus, there is room and expectation for growth.

Chapter 4 of Agenda 21 provides a solid foundation for the development and advancement of sustainable production and consumption policy. It also addresses the need to ensure that people choose to replace unsustainable production and consumption patterns that cause environmental strain with sustainable ones, as well as the importance of reinforcing values that take the basic economic and environmental needs of developing nations into account. Chapter 4 undoubtedly supports the value of FT as a sustainable consumption behavior. A subsequent section of the literature review describes how public policy can contribute to increases in FT consumption through stakeholder involvement and increased consumer awareness.

Sustainable Outcomes of Fair Trade Consumption Behavior

Clearly, the intent of FT is to make positive and meaningful impacts on the lives of producers/suppliers and on the natural environment. Evidence exists, which support the notion that FT helps enhance the lives of participants on both economic and social levels. For example, Parish, et al. (2005) referred to data they collected spanning a three-month period from 100 small

coffee growers in Tanzania, as well as documents maintained by coffee boards. The study revealed that, as a result of the growers' participation in FT production and sales, they enhanced their financial position, experienced some developments in community infrastructure, increased their level of global industry connectedness, and experienced increased organization among local growers.

Becchetti and Costantino (2008) also found that Kenyan farmers' participation in FT was related to increased financial and economic and social well-being, with FT-affiliated farmers reporting higher levels of income satisfaction compared to a control group of farmers living in the same geographic area and under similar circumstances. However, the researchers also found that improvements in farmer productivity and technical skills presented an additional opportunity for improvement. In addition, Becchetti and Costantino (2008) found that farmers' ability to sustain healthier lifestyles through increased food expenditures and higher dietary/nutrition quality was attributed to FT.

Additional benefits to FT producers include land ownership security or perceived security (Bacon 2005; Lyon 2007), increased access to credit (Lyon 2007; Ruben and Fort 2012) and enhanced gender equity (Utting-chamorro 2005; Lyon 2007; Lyon et al. 2010). Case studies conducted by Reynolds, et al. (2004) with seven Latin American coffee growers revealed similar social and economic benefits along with enhanced health, educational, and employment opportunities.

The relationship between FT and environmental sustainability has also been documented. FT organic coffee imports have steadily increased since 1998, with the number of pounds imported being approximately equal to conventional FT coffee in 2012 for the first time (http://fairtradeusa.org/sites/default/files/2012_Fair-Trade-USA_Almanac.pdf, accessed 7-24-13). As the result of training provided by FT coffee cooperatives, Latin American farmers learn sustainable agriculture practices of which they would have not otherwise been aware (Reynolds, et al. 2004). Farmers' use of these sustainable agriculture practices not only enables them to meet the environmental criteria associated with FT, which benefits the environment and consumers; it also has the potential to impact the quality of life of farmers, their communities, and beyond (Reynolds, et al. 2004). For example, growers that use organic farming methods avoid the use of chemical-based pesticides and herbicides, which have the potential to negatively impact their health as well as the quality of the air, water, and soil in their communities.

Public Policy on Fair Trade – Stakeholder Involvement

The importance of public policy in advancing FT is evidenced by concerned stakeholders' development of a FT pledge. According to The FT Advocacy Office, individuals who seek positions in the European Parliament pledge: "If elected Member of the European Parliament (2009-2014), I will strive to ensure that the European Parliament and other EU Institutions give, as far as possible, public support to Fair Trade. In particular, I will do my best to ensure that the needs of marginalized producers and poor workers in the South are reflected across all EU policy areas and adequate EU support is made available for FT projects that help them to trade their way out of poverty". (www.fairtrade-advocacy.org 2009). U.S. policymakers have yet to adopt such a pledge, though U.S. government agencies such as the EPA do set out to involve relevant stakeholders regarding a range of sustainability issues (<http://www.epa.gov/evaluate/pdf/stakeholder/stakeholder-involvement-public-participation-at-epa.pdf>). Governments at all levels

will play a pivotal role in moving FT forward; however many other stakeholders exist. The following discussion further examines stakeholder involvement in FT as a public policy.

The premise of sustainable business practices acknowledges that business decisions impact multiple stakeholders. In the realm of FT, some relevant stakeholders include consumers, trading partners in the supply chain, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations. When considering sustainable production and consumption, stakeholders of all types must attain adequate levels of knowledge and awareness of issues, if optimal decisions are to be made. According to previous research (e.g., Jaffe, et al. 2000; Grob 1995), involving stakeholders and sharing pertinent information with them is helpful in promoting the shift toward the desired sustainable behaviors. Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration notes that engaging and informing individuals and groups at the national, state, and community level assists in the effective pursuit of solutions to sustainability issues and problems (Principle 10, Rio Declaration 1992 at <http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?documentID=78&articleID=1163>, accessed 6-14-13). Information sharing and stakeholder involvement efforts for the purpose of advancing sustainable production and consumption is prevalent in several regions of the world, and have been formalized through various agreements and conventions (Bruch 2002).

Local government agencies can also support stakeholder participation in FT issues through implementation of public policy. For example, when an area is designated as a Fairtrade Town; governmental entities formalize their support of FT in writing and put their support into practice through the purchase and use of FT products whenever possible. Further, local policy-makers actively seek out the support of schools, religious institutions, groups, and individuals in adopting FT consumption behaviors. Finally, policy-makers solicit the assistance of the media to enhance awareness, and they bring together people from various sectors on a steering committee charged with implementing actions that support the Fairtrade Town's goals (Fair Trade Foundation 2012). Of particular importance here is the fact that local policy-makers' involvement is the first step and the catalyst in promoting FT.

Involving and engaging stakeholders in the advancement of FT would be incomplete without the input of NGOs. NGOs can play a vital role in disseminating information to the relevant stakeholders, and contributing to the decision-making process. Often NGOs exist for the purpose of serving the interests of society as a whole, and they provide information to the community about various entities' unsustainable practices and policies. When NGOs disseminate this type of information to concerned stakeholders; it has the potential to spark interest and support for positive change (Bruch 2002). The work of Bruch (2002) also suggested that national governments must collaborate with NGOs to address the goals established in the United Nations' 10-year Framework of Programs on Sustainable Consumption and Production.

Historically, collaboration between governmental agencies and NGOs has not been an easy task, as evidenced by previous publications, including a book titled "Reluctant partners?: Non-governmental organizations and the state in sustainable agricultural development" by Farrington and Bebbington (1993). This challenge is fueled, at least in part by mutual suspicion (Jennings 1995). However; tackling sustainability issues, including poverty (an issue FT seeks to address) requires the collaborative efforts of all stakeholders (Jennings 1995). In fact, according to Jennings (1995) various donor entities increasingly insist upon governments' inclusion of NGOs in the implementation of programs intended to alleviate poverty. Therefore, governments and NGOs must find a way to put its differences aside to work for sustainable outcomes.

Public Policy – Support of Consumer Access to Fair Trade Information

Informed consumers are better positioned to make sound decisions and take the appropriate actions to address sustainability issues (Bruch 2002). Access to complete and accurate sources of information allows consumers to draw the connection between their consumption behaviors (e.g., buying FT products) and social, and environmental sustainability. Some sources of FT information include: packages and labels, reports in various media, NGO meetings, and of course, the Internet. Through the development and implementation of public policy, governmental agencies can facilitate the availability and accessibility of FT information to consumers. Krier (2007) pointed to the relationship between governmental efforts in increasing public awareness about FT and the market success of FT products in Europe as an example for other government agencies around the world.

In the U.S., political reality and pragmatism could impose constraints on FT information flow. Trade can be a risky topic for democratically elected leaders; commitments to free trade and domestic employment must be delicately balanced (Hays et al. 2005). Moreover, “fair-traders” are often mistaken for “protectionists” (Ehrlich 2010). Recent research also shows that certain demographic groups (older people vs. younger people, men vs. women) have significantly different trade preferences or feelings towards protectionism (Mayda et al. 2007). Thus, considering political risk and required lobby calculations, the dissemination of fair trade information in the U.S. will likely (in the near term at least) continue to come from stakeholders such as NGOs. For example, there is now a “Fair Trade Month” (<http://www.fairtradeusa.org/fair-trade-month>), a Fair Trade Town movement in the U.S. (<http://fairtradetownsusa.org/towns/>), and there are even fair trade elementary school lesson plans (<http://www.globalexchange.org/fairtrade/cocoa/classroom>). Moreover, information will continue to be disseminated from the private sector, as companies like Starbucks and Dole illustrate (<http://www.starbucks.com/responsibility/sourcing/coffee>; <http://dolecrs.com/performance/certifications/fairtrade/>).

Labeling can serve as an important information source to consumers. Increasing numbers of consumers consider product attributes beyond mere functionality (i.e., what the product does) in their purchase decision, and also assess how the product was produced as well as its impact on the environment and society. With this in mind, some companies use “value-based” labeling to signal to concerned consumers that the product was produced in a manner that was socially-conscious and that minimized environmental degradation (Basu and Hicks 2008). For consumers who value these aspects in the product, it is important for them to understand the benefit of paying attention to labels (Becchetti and Rosati 2007).

Companies are not the only entities able to provide sustainability information to consumers via labels. Governmental agencies can do the same. For example, Energy Star is a US-based certification and voluntary labeling program that allows products, which are energy-efficient to bear its label (<http://www.energystar.gov/> accessed 7/18/13). Governmental agencies that choose to collaborate with certifying entities (e.g., The Fairtrade Labeling Organization) and retailers can provide similar support, and promote the dissemination of FT information via labels. In addition, governmental agencies can support promotional activities intended to both communicate the benefits of buying FT products, and educate customers about the merits of seeking out products bearing FT certified labels. This governmental support might be in the form of grants to the relevant entities involved in the production/marketing of FT offerings as well as NGOs.

Chaudhuri (2002) noted that stakeholders can promote sustainable consumption (including the purchase and use of FT products) via collaborative marketing efforts involving supply chain members, NGOs, various governmental entities, and media outlets. In addition, Chapter 4 of Agenda 21 recognizes the key role that advertising plays in educating consumers, and helping to promote positive attitudes toward sustainable consumption behaviors.

Awareness and Sustainable Consumption Behavior

Leary, et al. (2013, p. 2) define sustainable consumption as “behavior intended to meet the needs of the current generation and benefit the environment without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to satisfy their needs”. It would stand to reason that increasing levels of consumer awareness would be associated with increased levels of sustainable consumption behavior. However, existing academic research has proven to be inconclusive, with some studies suggesting the relationship holds true, while others find no such relationship (see Joergens 2006; Ballantyne and Packer 2002). According to the research of both Skanavis and Sarri (2002) and Leire and Thidell (2005), the majority of consumers are unaware of the impact their purchases have on the environment and society. Therefore, the starting point in addressing sustainability issues is making people aware of the connection between their consumption behaviors and sustainability problems (Skanavis and Sarri 2002). Becchetti and Rosati (2007) supported this premise and noted, since some consumers consider physical as well as environmental and social attributes of products, the future success of FT products versus “conventional” ones depends, at least in part on consumers’ awareness of the products sustainability features. The authors further highlighted the need for increased investment in strategies to both promote FT products and educate/inform (potential) consumers.

RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

The research model is depicted in Figure 1 (Appendix). It should be noted that only the highlighted constructs will be empirically tested. Based on previous research in the environmental and social sustainability literatures as well as current policies, practices, and efforts directed toward enhancing sustainable consumption behaviors, the following are proposed.

- P1: Significant differences in FT awareness will exist across the three groups of respondents.* Specifically, those who report heavier use of FT information will report higher levels of FT awareness.
- P2: Significant differences in FT consumption behavior will exist across the three groups of respondents.** Specifically, those who report higher levels of FT awareness will report higher levels of FT consumption behavior.
- P3: A positive, significant relationship will exist between FT information use and FT awareness.
- P4: A positive, significant relationship will exist between FT awareness and FT consumption behavior.

*Study participants will be categorized by their responses to questions on FT information use. The categories will be defined as “light”, “moderate”, and “heavy” use of FT information. ** Study participants will also be characterized by their responses to questions on FT awareness and will be categorized as and having either “low”, “moderate”, or “high” levels of FT awareness.

PROPOSED METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

The survey, which will be developed by the researchers, will be based on a number of sustainability issues examined in the Carrigan and Attalla (2001) study. The self-administered survey will be composed of two demographic questions (gender and age); items intended to assess five different types of FT information (packaging, labeling, mass media, organizational meetings, the Internet), four items to assess the “FT awareness construct” and four items to assess the “FT consumption behavior” construct. Each variable will be measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The researchers will likely employ a convenience sample of undergraduate students. The smaller standard errors associated with a relatively homogenous sample will provide a more powerful test in a given subpopulation (Lynch 1982). Moreover, the authors feel comfortable with the convenience sample because (1) it is assumed that any potentially interacting background factors held constant in the sample will be normally distributed across the treatment groups and (2) the authors are interested in relative (not absolute) levels of response to treatment conditions (Lynch 1982).

The data will be analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) 21.0. In order to test P1 and P2, one-way ANOVA will be employed. ANOVA is the appropriate statistical technique when the researcher is interested in ascertaining whether statistically significant differences in means exist across three or more population groups when examining the dependent variable (Hair, et al. 1998). ANOVA is used when the dependent variable is continuous and the predictor variable or variables are categorical. In this case the predictor variables “FT information use” and “FT awareness” will be converted to categorical variables by dividing the sample into three categories based on responses to the survey items. These categories will identify respondents as light, moderate, and heavy users of the various types of FT information. Similarly, respondents will be categorized as low moderate or high with respect to FT awareness. Simple Pearson Correlations will be used to test P3 and P4.

IMPLICATIONS AND POTENTIAL FOR CONTRIBUTION

Government agencies that seek to advance the dissemination of FT information to consumers might consider employing social marketing. According to Kotler and Roberto (1989), social marketing can be defined as: "the use of marketing principles and techniques to influence a target audience to voluntarily accept, reject, modify, or abandon a behavior for the benefit of individuals, groups, or society as a whole" (p. 5). Government-supported social marketing can take many forms from print ads to public service announcements, which urge consumers to seek out FT certified products and communicate how FT products provide value. In addition, in collaboration with NGOs, government agencies can encourage consumers to become members of organizations that support and promote FT. Finally, as previously noted; government agencies can support FT through the voluntary development of FairTrade towns. The use of social media to complement social marketing might also be particularly helpful, as its use is pervasive and it can support scalability of FT efforts. The premise here is that the success of social media in

promoting various brands is also relevant to promoting FT consumption behavior as social and environmental issues. While consumers can currently access and share FT information via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc., opportunities exist to broaden the reach via these and other social media outlets.

Social marketing as a matter of public policy might serve to inform and/or remind consumers that products, which are FT certified are produced in a manner that minimizes environmental degradation (e.g., green products). This means that many FT products in the US (e.g., food items) are also certified as organic by the US Department of Agriculture. This information has the potential to draw substantial numbers of additional consumers, as the marketplace has seen growing interest in organic products, as evidenced by their increasing prevalence on the shelves of various types of retailers.

Social marketing might also focus on communicating a message that assists consumers in drawing the connection between their purchase/consumption behaviors and societal and environmental issues and problems. Various government agencies' role in this might include extensive dissemination of FT successes across a broad array of stakeholders, including consumers. Further, government agencies might provide financial support (possibly via grants) for NGOs to engage in similar communications with stakeholders. Conversely, providing information to consumers and others about the negative effects of prolonged unsustainable purchase/consumption behaviors might also prove to emphasize the importance of changing consumption patterns toward FT products.

Principle 10 mentions participation of all concerned citizens in terms of both accessing information and involvement in decision-making with respect to issues of sustainability. Continued effort on the part of Member States to develop and implement policies that support stakeholder involvement is vital in advancing FT. Broad stakeholder involvement on the part of academicians, various supply chain members, NGOs and others might result in new insights to the barriers associated with the adoption of FT consumption behaviors, and other unanswered questions. Principle 10 further notes that people are entitled to access to information held by public authorities. Taken together with the call of Principle 10 for stakeholder input in decision making, this means that information flow should be bi-directional between governments and all stakeholders.

Government agencies could also work closely with firms to develop public-private partnerships. The value of such an arrangement was supported by the United Nations at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002). The potential outcomes from such a partnership are diverse and numerous, and success is predicated on extreme cooperation and the collective financial, natural, and human resources of participating partners. The goal of these partnerships should not only be to increase awareness, but to also enhance the accessibility, quality, and/or value of FT products; thereby increasing their attractiveness to customers.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1 – Proposed Research Model

