

## **IT'S HARD TO BE FAIR**

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## **Abstract**

Over the last ten years, Fair Trade (FT) has experienced a substantial increase in sales volumes. In 2009, the sale of FT products amounted to over 4.84 billion US\$, as opposed to 1,38 billion US\$ in 2003.

This trend should however not be overestimated: FT accounts for only 0.01% of global trade and in many countries, including France, it is still a niche market.

It is therefore essential for the FT industry to better understand the underlying reasons for non-consumption of FT products and particularly to understand the weak link between product image and the act of purchasing. Our empirical work uses a qualitative-quantitative comparative methodology combining, with the same population (customers of a cafeteria in a French higher education institution), a self-administered questionnaire, an *in situ* observation of behavior, and semi-structured interviews.

The choices concerning FT products (compotes, i.e. stewed fruit desserts) made by the customers of the cafeteria (an average 148 meals a day) were monitored for four weeks. The analysis of these behaviors was complemented with 18 interviews with customers. and with a self-administered questionnaire sent to the regular customers of the cafeteria (71 respondents). Our experiment showed that consumers seem to be interested in information on FT and willing to choose FT products but are quick to lose interest. Interviews reveal the traps that can explain the lack of appropriation. The interviews reveal the pitfalls of the representational process in the case of FT, which could explain the absence of appropriation. We highlighted the traps of over-anchoring, under-anchoring, under-objectifying and over-objectifying. Beyond the subject of FT, this research highlights the need to take into account consumers' adjustment strategies when faced with a social innovation. To do so, the concepts of social identity and social innovation need to be further explored in future research.

## IT'S HARD TO BE FAIR

### INTRODUCTION

Over the last ten years, Fair Trade (FT) has experienced a substantial increase in sales volumes, a diversification of products and a multiplication of agents world-wide. This trend should however not be overestimated: FT accounts for only 0.01% of global trade and in many countries, including France, it is still a niche market. While the image associated with FT is highly positive, this favorable attitude does not necessarily translate into actual purchases.

FT agents need to better understand the underlying reasons for non-consumption of their products and particularly to understand the weak link between product image and the act of purchasing. Some researchers begin thinking of FT as a social innovation, and analyzing the process of appropriation of FT by a given group in society (Phills, Deigmeier and Miller, 2008). The shift of a social invention (such as the initial concept of FT) to the status of social innovation inevitably involves a simultaneous transformation of the economic, social and symbolic relationships in a social group (Alter, 2003). The appropriation and legitimization of a new social practice such as FT take time, and require the development of representations that will circulate within that social group. This article seeks to shed light on the development of FT as a social innovation. The first part reviews the existing literature on FT consumption and the contributions of social representations theory, with a particular focus on the concept of representational processes. Our empirical work presented in the following parts uses a qualitative-quantitative comparative method by combining, with the same population (customers of a cafeteria in a French higher education institution), in-depth interviews (17 respondents), *in situ* observation of choice behaviors (an average 148 meals a day) and a self-administered questionnaire (71 respondents). The findings reveal that even in a favorable context, the choice of a FT

product requires a social appropriation by a group of consumers. The conclusion discusses our results. In particular, it considers the existence of flaws in the representational process not only of non-consumers, but also of FT consumers. The aim of this work is to contribute to a better understanding of consumers' behavior in their social environment and to suggest directions for future research by drawing on theories of social innovation and social representations.

## **CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND**

### ***The Consumption of FT Products***

The literature on FT consumption mainly focuses on the difficulty of access, the cost of products and the lack of information (Arnot, Boxall and Cash, 2006; Nicholls and Lee, 2006; De Pelsmacker, Driesen and Rayp, 2005; Becchetti and Rosati, 2007). In parallel with the study of obstacles to FT consumption, researchers take interest in the underlying motivations for FT consumption. The FT initiative is rooted in the search for another model, be it of production or trade. The purchase of FT products can therefore be thought of in terms of consumers' altruistic motivations (Pirotte, 2007) or of their various forms of engagement (Özçaglar-Toulouse, 2007).

### ***FT as a Social Innovation***

The concept of social innovation seems to have emerged in 1970 in the field of social psychology, in both Taylor's and Gabor's works. Social innovation refers to new ways "of doing things" with the aim of meeting social needs (Taylor, 1970). The emergence of a social innovation is necessarily the result of cooperation between different actors. Social innovations can serve to challenge economic inequalities and violence, and aim for the development of a new social set-up or a new equilibrium (Gabor, 1970). Gershuny (1983) defines social innovation as a change in a society's consumption habits to better ensure its well-being. Henderson (1993) contends that social innovation involves transcending purely economic objectives and adhering to new social values. They mainly

stem from the pressure applied by citizen movements on governments (Chambon, David and Devevey, 1982). The Fairtrade network, relayed and promoted by activist groups stands at the international level as an example of a pressure group that succeeded in developing the entire supply chain of FT products. However, little work on social innovation has studied it from the point of view of consumption (Phills *et al.*, 2008). Studying FT as a social innovation allows for making a conceptual distinction between the new solution to an economic and social problem (development inequalities) offered by FT, and the cooperation and implementation process carried out by a variety of actors, including consumers (Dadoy, 1998; Audebrand and Iacobus, 2008). The issue of collective implementation is indeed central to social innovation (Alter, 2003). An invention (for example the concept of “trade, not aid”) truly becomes an innovation (here, the consumption of FT products) through a complex process based on economic, social and symbolic changes, and which necessarily involves the appropriation and legitimization of a new practice by the actors involved. However, according to Taylor (1970) and Henderson (1993), social innovations that seek to resolve social issues receive a more mitigated response than technological innovations since they more often require members of a population to undergo a significant identity transformation.

### ***The Representational Process of a Social Innovation***

When a person strongly identifies with a group, she/he has a positive attitude towards it (Ashforth and Mael, 1989) and readily promotes a positive image of that group (Turner, 1984). Social identity is defined as the part of an individual's self that is determined by this individual's awareness of belonging to a social group as well as by the value and emotional significance that she/he attaches to this sense of belonging (Tajfel et Turner, 1979). We propose here to think of this identity as constructed through the representations that circulate in society, by drawing on the theory elaborated by Moscovici (1988), which posits that a social innovation must spread within a given culture, be

transformed in the process and in turn change individuals' own perception of themselves and of the world which they inhabit. The dynamic aspect of social representations is emphasized by the fact that the construction of a representation is fueled by the interactions between the members of a group or between groups. This approach emphasizes the dynamic aspect of social representation: to appropriate an innovative concept such as FT that is initially relatively abstract, individuals must integrate some of its elements into their older systems of thought (for example, FT can be related to the notion of ethical consumption, as well as to that of humanitarian aid or organic farming). This triggers a process of collective communication, during which the representation's consistent knowledge is developed and shared. This representational dynamic revolves around two distinct yet complementary stages: "anchoring" and "objectifying". Anchoring, which serves a dual purpose, is the process through which representations enter the sphere of familiar objects. It consists first in naming and classifying the innovative object, so that it can become a topic of conversation, and then in characterizing the new object by attributing specific characteristics to it so as to integrate it while still distinguishing it from similar objects that are already familiar. In between these two phases of anchoring, from the moment when the object can become a conversation topic, the process of objectifying begins (Moscovici, 1994). Objectifying consists in turning what is abstract and intangible into something concrete and physical, and inserting what belonged to the world of ideas into the physical world (Markovà, 2000). The latter process is composed of three phases: selection of information based on certain cultural and normative criteria; schematization (the formation of a core with which the object is materialized); and naturalization (decontextualized reification of the elements, allowing for the circulation of the new content and ultimately for it to acquire the status of tangible reality of the core for the group) (Deaudelin, 2001). The objectified elements produce words and images as a frame of reference for the group of individuals who identify with them as well as for those who

disagree with them. According to Moscovici (2001), insofar as objectifying is a more active process than anchoring, it requires more efforts by the population concerned, but then ensures the sustainability of the representation of the object (see Figure 1).

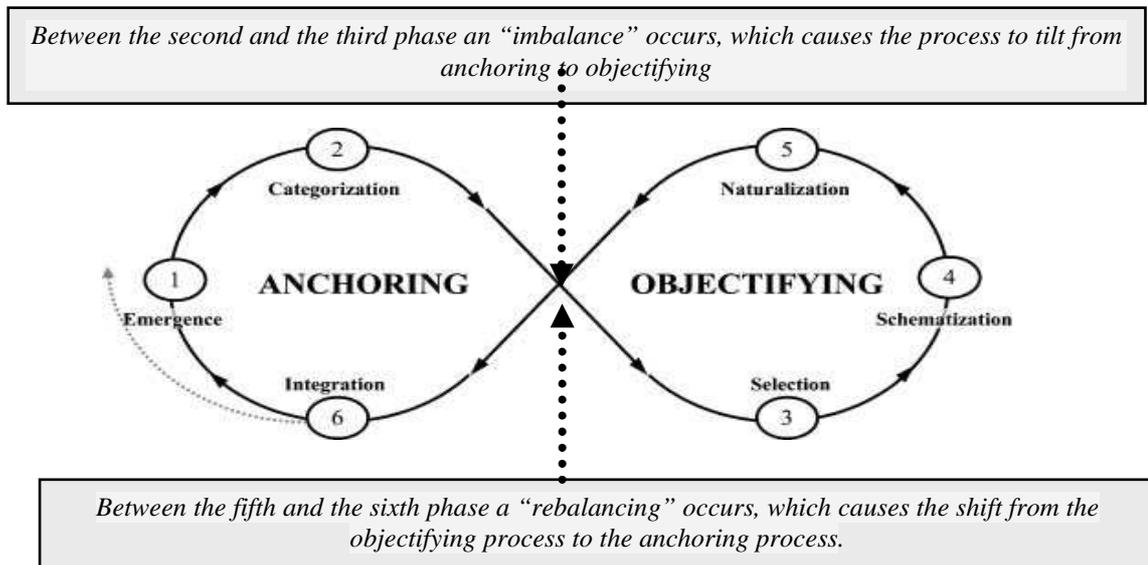


Figure 1. Simplified dynamic representation of the representational process (from Audebrand and Iacobus, 2008)

At the end of the process, the representation reaches a relatively stable structure. But at each stage rifts can appear, due to the dialectic nature of the process enabling the appropriation of new objects such as FT. The anchoring process, by embedding a new object into a sphere of familiar objects can be either too strong or too weak; so can the objectifying process, which attempts to provide an immaterial concept with a material form. Audebrand and Iacobus apply these four “pitfalls” to the promotion of FT (see Table 1). Every time the process fails, the mechanism of construction of the representation can no longer operate sustainably, thus preventing its appropriation by society. The social identity cannot develop and the consumption of FT products remains an individual phenomenon without sharing with a group, to which individuals could identify positively based on a common representation.

TABLE 1. The four pitfalls of the promotion of FT (from Audebrand and Iacobus, 2008)

TRAP	PHASE OF THE PROCESS	DEFINITION
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<b>Trivialization</b>	Categorization ( <i>over-anchoring</i> )	Situation in which the object of representation possesses no or few distinctive features compared to other objects in its environment.
<b>Abstractization</b>	Selection ( <i>under-objectifying</i> )	Situation in which the object of representation is difficult to comprehend because it lacks connections with the sentient world and concrete reality.
<b>Reification</b>	Naturalization ( <i>over-objectifying</i> )	Situation in which the object of representation possesses no or few symbolic aspects because it has been reduced to the state of a thing or a good.
<b>Exoticization</b>	Reintegration ( <i>under-anchoring</i> )	Situation in which the object of representation shares no or few aspects in common with the other objects in its environment.

To our knowledge, there are as yet no empirical studies attempting to understand FT consumption as the result of the development of a social innovation. The experimental framework that we have put in place seeks to provide a better understanding of the motivations and difficulties linked to FT consumption.

### A THREE-PART METHODOLOGY

We simultaneously used a self-administered questionnaire, the observation of non-domestic consumption behavior *in situ* and during 4 weeks, and in-depth interviews, all with the same population. We chose as our field the cafeteria of a higher education institution, used by students, academics and administrative staff. In the case of FT, according to the PFCE (Fair Trade Platform), while two thirds of FT sales happen in supermarkets, the “non-domestic” sector is the most dynamic one (57% increase in 2008) and is a strategic market for FT. Direct observation was made possible by a system of daily recording of the numbers of trays used by customers of the cafeteria (an average 148 trays a day for four weeks). The behavioral analysis was complemented with 17 interviews, the content of which was coded and analyzed by the authors, and with a self-administered questionnaire sent to regular customers of the cafeteria (71 respondents). However, contrary to laboratory experimental methods, our system is significantly constrained by contextual elements, namely the features of the population studied and our limited ability to intervene regarding the offers made by the manager of the cafeteria. Thus the price of

the FT product had to stay identical to that of the other desserts, which cancelled out the issue of cost, often highlighted as a drawback.

The features of the population studied meant that it consisted mainly of a young, predominantly female population, with higher education. In practice, this population corresponds to targeted FT consumers and does not pose a problem for the aim of our research. The choice of a FT product concerned individual sealed jars of FT compote from the Ethicable brand. This choice was based on the analysis of the usual desserts offered in the cafeteria. We substituted a dessert normally available (apple compote) with a FT dessert (banana or banana and passion fruit compote) that is relatively similar but still has a different taste. To control the taste variable, a substitution phase was initially implemented: the compotes in sealed jars were taken away and replaced with compotes with exotic flavors, but in ramekins and therefore without any information on the composition or origin. Each day, a table summarizing choices was drawn up to keep a record of customers' actual individual choices (identifying customers with their badge number) during the 3 following phases:

- Phase 1 (four days during week W0<sup>1</sup>): no changes introduced in the food items to choose from; filmed observation of the trays and daily data collection using badge numbers.
- Phase 2 (5 days during week W1): introduction without information of FT compotes (two types: banana and banana-passion fruit) in ramekins (we instructed the staff to say that it was due to a change in the fruits used, to vary the desserts offered).
- Phase 3 (the following two weeks, W2 and W3, five days a week): the non-labeled compotes were kept and two desserts of the same sort in sealed jars with the “Fair Trade” label on the lid were introduced. An information system was set up, with a

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<sup>1</sup> Week W0 included a public holiday when the cafeteria was closed.

display stand, leaflets by the compotes, and two “Fair Trade” posters hanging between the entrance of the cafeteria and the place where people pick up their tray.

During Phase 3, we distributed a questionnaire about behaviors concerning food purchases in general, with a question concerning the frequency of FT product purchases, and some socio-demographics (age, gender, occupation). Finally the real-time analysis of choice behaviors made it possible to identify FT compote eaters and non-eaters. We carried out a structuring content analysis of 17 interviews to identify the expression of social representations of fair trade and its consumers.

## **FINDINGS: FROM STATED PRACTICES TO THE STUDY OF THE REPRESENTATIONAL PROCESS**

### ***A Favorable Context for the Consumption of FT Compotes***

Our questionnaire was completed by 71 respondents. Respondents declared an over-consumption of FT products compared to studies of the French population at large. Those who reported regularly consuming FT products (more than once a month) represent 34.9% of the sample but are significantly more present among non-students (57.6%) than students (28.8%). However these statements concern the consumption of FT products in general, and not specifically that of the product used for the experiment, the FT compote. Nevertheless, the context could be deemed favorable at least to the willing of consuming a FT product.

### ***But Inconclusive Observed Results***

Observation over the four week period made it possible to track the choices of the cafeteria customers, particularly regarding their consumption of compote in ramekins (therefore not labeled FT) or in sealed jars (with the FT label), before and after the information phase (posters on the wall and leaflets next to the sealed jars of compote). The results were quite inconclusive, namely with regard to the reported behaviors in the

questionnaires. In fact, the analysis of choices shows that while there is a “FT compote” effect, it remains limited in time.

For each day we calculated the proportion of compote choices as a share of all the dessert choices, as well as the number of dessert choices (for which the variations remained within the norms during the observation, thus providing a stable environment for the observation).

Table 2 – Phase 1: Choices during the week of observation W0 without any intervention

	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
Total desserts	141	106	104	101
Total customers	190	172	152	130
dessert/customer	74%	61%	68%	77%
<b>compote/dessert</b>	<b>21%</b>		<b>28%</b>	<b>3%</b>

Apart from the Wednesday, when the cafeteria ran out of stock, the consumption of compotes in the cafeteria corresponded to the manager’s estimate of 25-30 stewed fruit desserts per day when he puts them on offer. It is also worth noting that the choice of desserts was quite large, and can be distinguished as rich desserts (éclair, floating island, donut, etc.), light desserts (stewed fruit, pear with chocolate sauce, peach with syrup) and fruits. It seems that the rich desserts were more popular.

The second phase was centered on the change of compote: we substituted the usual apple compotes (in ramekins or sealed jars) with FT compotes (banana/passion fruit) but in the ramekins, therefore without information. This phase was essential to neutralize the “taste” effect, since the two stewed fruit desserts are very different in terms of taste.

Table 3 – Week 1: Introduction of the FT compote without information

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WED.	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	TOTAL
Apple compote	18					18
<b>FT in ramekins</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>87</b>
Total dessert	105	70	77	58	69	379
Total customers	200	158	170	129	158	
dessert/customer	68.6%	54.4%	57.6%	55.8%	58.2%	
<b>compote/dessert</b>	<b>12.3%</b>	<b>22.8%</b>	<b>27.2%</b>	<b>24.1%</b>	<b>33.3%</b>	

On the Monday, the FT compotes in ramekins were first placed next to the sealed jars of apple compote by the cafeteria staff, which introduced a bias in customer choices. After the definitive removal of the apple compotes, the proportion of choice for compotes compared to the other dessert choices remained stable. Overall, the compote choices did not change significantly in spite of the introduction of a new flavor.

During the third phase (weeks W2 and W3) the information on FT was introduced: next to the non-labeled compotes in ramekins, customers had the choice of the same compote but this time clearly labeled on the lid of the sealed jars, and the posters and leaflets provided them with information about FT.

Table 4: Observation of W2 (introduction of information)

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WED.	THURS.	FRIDAY	TOTAL
<b>FT compotes</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>compote in ramekins</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>45</b>
Total desserts	135	105	109	95	115	559
Total customers	181	146	142	122	152	
dessert/customer	74.50%	71.90%	76.70%	77.80%	75.60%	
<b>FT compotes %dessert</b>	<b>20.70%</b>	<b>23.80%</b>	<b>17.40%</b>	<b><u>11.50%</u></b>	<b>11.30%</b>	<b>17.10%</b>
<b>compotes in ramekins%dessert</b>	<b>9.60%</b>	<b>2.80%</b>	<b>5.50%</b>	<b><u>13.60%</u></b>	<b>8.60%</b>	<b>8.05%</b>

Table 5: W3 (information kept in place)

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WED.	THURS.	FRIDAY	TOTAL
FT compotes	9	15	7	9	4	44
compote in ramekins	9	8	6	4	5	32
Total desserts	115	109	88	87	83	482
Total customers	174	147	115	140	97	
dessert/custom.	66%	74.10%	76.50%	62.10%	85.50%	
<b>FT cpte%dessert</b>	<b>7.80%</b>	<b>13.70%</b>	<b>7.90%</b>	<b>10.30%</b>	<b>4.80%</b>	<b>9.10%</b>
<b>compotes in ramekins%dessert</b>	<b>7.80%</b>	<b>7.30%</b>	<b>6.80%</b>	<b>4.50%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>6.60%</b>

The analysis of the evolution over weeks 2 and 3 shows that during the first three days of week 2 when the FT compotes were introduced in sealed jars, these were chosen far more than other desserts, and particularly the compotes in ramekins. However from the Thursday, the proportions were reversed. In W3, the levels of consumption in relation to the total of desserts did not increase again, in fact they decreased compared to the level observed before the introduction of information. On the last day, again, the proportion of choices of compotes in ramekins was greater than that of choices of compotes with a FT label, even though the two desserts consist of the same product.

An ANOVA analysis carried out over weeks W2 and W3 shows that the FT compotes were chosen significantly more than even the same compote in ramekins. This shows a greater preference for the closed jars, and therefore the potential impact of the

information on FT. But it also shows a significant decrease over that period of total choices of compotes that was not observed when the new flavors were introduced in W1. The analysis of this last finding, however, cannot overlook the impact of the number of

competing desserts or the appeal of some other desserts offered sporadically during that period.

The separate analysis of the results from weeks W2 and W3 highlights the significant decrease in the proportion of FT compote choices in the total of desserts between W2 and W3 (T of Student at 5%, p-value 0.024), whereas the change in choices of compotes in ramekins, between W2 and W3 is not significant (p-value 0.444). Finally, testing the proportions of choices of compotes in ramekins and choices of FT compotes reveals that the choice of FT compotes was greater than the choice of compote in ramekins for both weeks, but significantly in W2 (p-value 0.020) and non-significantly in W3 (p-value 0.167). These data suggest that there is indeed a “FT information” effect, but that this effect is not very strong – especially given the favorable environment conveyed by the answers to the questionnaire – and that it is limited in time.

If we consider FT as a social innovation, it must go through a phase of appropriation, which culminates from a representational process allowing individuals to interact and construct a positive social identification for the “FT consumer” group. Yet the significant decrease in choices of FT compotes between W2 and W3 underlines the absence of a sense of consumer loyalty, which could be due to the lack of appropriation of FT by the group of individuals we observed. The choice of a FT product seems to remain an isolated act, rather than a practice embedded in a sense of group membership.

### ***Fair Trade, a Social Representation Still in Construction***

The first phase of anchoring, categorization (see Figure 1), first implies a generalization process, which allows for the new object, here FT, to be anchored among similar objects that are already familiar. The interviews show that generally, the interviewees already knew the concept, whether they had chosen to eat FT compotes or not. However while they may be able to name FT, they have trouble categorizing it. The flaws in the representational process are therefore present as early as in this first phase.

Since we knew what each of our respondents had eaten, we were able to compare their statements with their choices (see table 6). In the following we analyze the statements made by the individuals who did not choose FT compotes, followed by the statements of those who did.

Table 6: Respondents

Name	Age	gender	occupation	FT compote in W2+W3
Cécile	23	F	Student	1
Marine.	23	F	Student	1
Marion	23	F	Student	6
Sophie G.	21	F	Student	2
Morgane	22	F	Student	2
Julie	20	F	Student	2
Fabrice	39	M	Professor	8
Liliane	28	F	Technician	1
Romain	37	M	Technician	6
Sophie C.	45	F	Executive	3
Charles	22	M	Student	
Jean-Michel	20	M	Student	
Mélanie	22	F	Student	
Sophie D	20	F	Student	
Marthe	20	F	Student	
Katia	25	F	PhD stud.	
Idir	24	M	PhD stud.	

*Non-Consumers: Fragmented and Abstract Knowledge, and Indifference or Rejection of FT*

The respondents who had never chosen the FT compotes seem rather indifferent to the information. Katia did see the information but did not take one of the leaflets on display. For Idir, FT remained very abstract: *“it’s more on the theoretical level, not very practical”*. He did not notice the posters; he picked up a leaflet but his memories of it are vague: *“it was about something organic or...”* The other respondents who did not choose FT compotes offered quite similar arguments: FT does not have distinctive features clearly separating it from concepts perceived as similar (trivialization) and remains distant from everyday life (abstractization).

***Trivialization***

The concept has not acquired the status of a conversation topic (*“It’s not a topic of conversation”* (Sophie D), *“it’s not part of the norm yet”* (Charles). For most of the negative respondents, it is difficult to differentiate FT from other innovative offers regarding sustainable food consumption, particularly organic products: *“more money goes to the producer than for a standard product sold in supermarkets, then it might be organic, fewer pesticides or no pesticides”* (Sophie D). The information is not sufficiently processed to provide a better understanding: talking about the leaflets, Marthe L. said that she read that *“[FT] was all that, giving more to small producers so they can be better off... well that’s the gist of it, but I don’t really remember the details”*. This lack of distinctive features prevents FT from becoming a part of standard eating habits: *“I don’t think the taste is different with FT uhm... I don’t normally take it so I don’t see why I would eat any”* (Charles).

### ***Abstractization***

When trivialization does not stall the process, objectifying is still weak (abstractization): the respondents do not appropriate the concept because it lacks connections with concrete reality. Jean-Michel can provide quite an in-depth account of the principle of FT, ending on a positive note *“so it’s true that it’s good for them [small producers in the South], and especially it’s all good products”*. He had tasted the compote in a sealed jar that a friend had chosen and liked it, but he never chose the FT compotes and he did not differentiate them from the ones in ramekins (*“well, they’re pretty much the same”*). Even though there is knowledge about FT, it is too abstract and detached from daily reality to become a meaningful social practice: *“I took a leaflet and I looked at the compotes’ flavors, I saw that there was mango/passion fruit, banana... It’s true, I didn’t take any, but well I could have... It’s just that among the desserts offered there was something else I preferred”* (Mélanie).

This incomplete representational process therefore does not allow for the anchoring and objectifying necessary for the core of a representation to develop. There is no identification to a consumer group that could be played on. How do these respondents perceive those who chose the compotes, and those who regularly consume FT products? They are first of all different from themselves: older individuals, women, according to Charles and Jean-Michel, “*not students*”, “*rather people who have money*” (Charles). FT is only for a minority of people : “*They would have to be ‘bohemian bourgeois’ to buy that*” (Sophie D). It’s about political choices (“*it’s someone environmental, with leftist ideas... well someone who is against everything to do with globalization, capitalism*” Mélanie). Doubt is even expressed regarding its effectiveness: “*it’s a drop in the ocean*” (Marthe). For respondents who did not choose the compotes, FT does not have the status of social representation that would likely be appropriated by a group, and does not have the symbolic character that would make its consumption meaningful.

*Those who chose the FT compote: an individual act that is not shared with a group*

For these individuals, the first phase of the anchoring process takes place, and FT becomes a part of their sphere of familiar objects: they can not only name it but also classify it (“*it’s a way of trading generally with small producers from the South, in fact, it guarantees small producers a set price and a fair price that allows them to... to ensure a decent standard of living for their families and to envisage their farming in a more long-term perspective and to start off with to live off their farming income. And so this FT is certified by labels, and these labels have criteria...*”, Julie). Those who chose the FT compote are also able to distinguish FT from similar concepts they are already familiar with, as organic food

***The lack of shared representation***

However the objectifying process only occurs once the object can become a topic of conversation. Yet the analysis of the interviews shows that there is not really shared knowledge of FT. The introduction of FT compotes in the cafeteria was a very minor topic of conversation: *“more on the new products than on FT”* (Sophie G). *“Oh, it was quite short, we didn’t spend our whole meal... yes well it’s Max Havelaar, it’s FT, they’re good, there you go”* (Romain). In some cases, it is even an issue of avoiding discussing consumption choices with others. *“I’m not going to buy a product to say ‘I bought a FT product’ (Morgane)”*, and *“It’s even sometimes topics that people avoid discussing I think because there’s always people who have not very nice ideas on this type of initiative and it bugs me so... I do it quietly in agreement with myself, without discussing it basically... I don’t want to have to defend my position, so I won’t necessarily discuss it...”* (Sophie C.). Nowhere are there references to a “we” that would signal a positive sense of belonging to a group of FT consumers.

### ***Abstractization and exoticization***

Choosing a FT compote therefore remains an individual act that is not shared with a group. The representational process seems to be disrupted by the abstractization process, and even by the reification process in the case of Liliane for whom *“it’s just a new product and that’s it”*. FT lacks connections with concrete reality; *“it’s a sort of perhaps win-win system”* for Romain. FT is not really part of regular food purchases: *“They [organic and FT] are still two categories of products that are a bit marginal compared to standard supermarket products”* (Marion). Without shared knowledge about FT, no social representation of FT can develop, even among FT compote consumers.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The first result of the empirical phase of this study is to show that designating cost as the main obstacle to purchase FT is surely often no more than a rationalization by consumers: since the prices were fixed, the FT compotes were offered at the same price as

other desserts, without it leading to sustained overconsumption. What contributes to the construction of a social representation are the interactions between the members of a group or between groups. However the analysis of the interviews shows that because its process is unfinished, it cannot exert its influence on attitudes and behaviors. FT consumption is experienced as an individual choice, without interaction with others around one or an identity group.

### ***FT and cultural representations of food consumption***

Varul (2009) points out the cultural contextualization of FT consumption, by comparing the United Kingdom and Germany. In the French market, FT food products are likely to face two difficulties. The key idea of FT (*Trade, not aid*) goes against the social representation of trade which is mainly negative. Furthermore, food consumption is embedded in a very powerful cultural repertoire which associates food and conviviality: respondents see the cafeteria as a place to get together with friends and colleagues. FT does not enter the realm of those interactions, because it has difficulty becoming a part of the sphere of dietary habits: “*well those are for me the three criteria that mean that one can't buy [FT]: the taste, the price or because eating it is not part of one's dietary habits*” (Jean-Michel). For FT to truly acquire the status of social innovation, its promotion must strive to make it compatible with those strong symbolic representations that make up French food culture.

Obstacles generally pointed out in the literature, such as issues of accessibility, cost and taste do not fully explain consumers' lack of interest in FT. In this article we show that the analysis of FT could go beyond individual-product approaches, and to study it as a social innovation which requires social appropriation by a group of consumers. Through our experiment in a cafeteria and our interviews, our methodology allowed us to research the meaning of the consumption of FT products based on *in situ* observation of the customers' perceptions and actions, by identifying the systems of representation

underpinning their consumption of FT products. This approach provides an original contribution to the field of research on consumer behavior, insofar as most studies on FT either use quantitative methods (Cailleba and Casteran, 2010) or qualitative methods (Wright and Heaton, 2008) without articulating the two. Our research methodology sought to provide a contextualized approach that would coordinate the observation and data processing throughout, so as to make the most of both approaches.

This experiment in a cafeteria indicates that many consumers seem to be interested in information on FT and willing to choose FT products but are quick to lose interest. The interviews we held revealed the pitfalls of the representational process in the case of FT, which could explain the absence of appropriation. We highlighted the traps of over-anchoring (trivialization, which is widespread), under-anchoring (exoticization, which is revealed even by positive respondents), under-objectifying (abstractization, which is also widespread) and over-objectifying (which did not transpire much). If FT is to move beyond the status of a niche market, it is important for its proponents to organize its promotion in a way that will succeed in doing so. It is also likely, given the strength of existing social representations in the minds of French consumers, that the social representation of FT will only be able to develop slowly, and that the existence of a group of FT consumers feeding a positive social identity is a long term goal.

Even though this study articulated observation, a questionnaire and interviews, it has not afforded a full understanding of the representational process. Using the statements made by respondents we identified the flaws that arise during the different phases of this process, but a study over a long period of time would be necessary to understand the shift from one phase to another within a social group.

Beyond the subject of FT, this research highlights the need to take into account more fully the social dimension of consumption; it is not sufficient to include influential variables in models that remain focused on an individual's choices. It would also be

interesting to study consumers' adjustment strategies when faced with a social innovation, as Mick and Fournier (1998) did in the case of technological innovations.

To do so, the concepts of social identity and social innovation need to be further explored in future research. This would correspond to the now well-entrenched research tradition that seeks to look beyond individual/product (or brand) interaction by taking into account the social interactions at play in consumption choices and practices.

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