DO CONSUMERS PERCEIVE A GREEN COUNTRY IMAGE OF A COUNTRY? ATTITUDINAL ANTECEDENTS AND IMPACT ON WILLINGNESS TO BUY[1]

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[1] Although the study is the result of the joint work of the authors, it can be analytically attributed to each of them in the following way: Elisa Martinelli authored section 3 & 6; Castrogiovanni Antonino gave a special contribution to section 1, 2; Elena Sarti authored section 4,5.

Abstract

Context: Consumers are becoming increasingly concerned with sustainable issues: not only products and suppliers but even countries have started to be perceived in terms of their level of green image. This acknowledgement calls for a revision of traditional international marketing models aimed at investigating the impact of a specific country image on consumer behavior, considering also the effect of the image of sustainability possessed by that country.

Purpose: This work aims to exploring the connection between the Green Country of Origin Image (GCoI) of a country and the Willingness to Buy (WTB) by the consumers of another country. This is done by assessing their Attitude Towards Green Products (GATT), considered as a mediating construct impacted by Environmental Concern (EC) and Perceived Consumer Effectiveness (PCE).

Data: Primary research data were gathered through a survey based on the administration of an online questionnaire targeting a convenient sample of Indian consumers, applying structural equation modelling to assess the GCoI of Made in Italy food products.

Results: Findings evidenced the goodness of the proposed model: EC and PCE are positively related with GATT, which, in turn, positively affect GCoI. Finally, GCoI has a positive and significant effect on the WTB.

Originality: GCoI has been poorly investigated. This study enriches the current body of knowledge concerning country image determinants in relation to sustainable consumption, contributing to the international marketing and consumer behavior literature in a sustainable perspective.

Implications: This research holds pragmatic significance for policy makers and scholars alike, and marketers striving to advocate national offerings on international markets through the added value of sustainable food perceptions and practices. It also deeps the comprehension of consumer behavior within the realm of sustainable consumption for stimulating eco-conscious decisions.

Key Words: Green country-of-origin image, Willingness to buy, Attitude towards green products, International marketing, consumer behavior.

1. Introduction and objectives

In recent years, growing consumer concerns regarding food safety, environmental sustainability, and social equity have led to changes in consumption patterns that prioritize sustainability across social, economic, and environmental dimensions (Migliore, 2021). Regarding the latter, not only products and suppliers but even countries have started to be perceived and ranked about their level of green image, the so-called Green Country of Origin Image (GCoI). This is particularly important for the international marketing discipline, as only a limited number of studies have directed their attention to the ecological dimension of CoI, and even fewer have considered the concept of GCoI. Actually, the latter is a relatively new construct in the international marketing field. Hence, this work aims at exploring the role of GCoI as a mediator in the attitude-intention path relating to the purchase of foreign foods by consumers. Specifically, we aim at validating a model where Attitude Towards Green Products (GATT) – conceptualized as influenced by Environmental Concern (EC) and Perceived Consumer Effectiveness (PCE) – influences GCoI, which in turn has a positive impact on consumer Willingness to Buy (WTB). As far as we know, few studies have focused on

the GCoI, and this study endeavors to enrich the current body of knowledge concerning sustainable consumption in the international marketing field.

Our research questions are as follows: do consumers perceive a green country image of a country? What are the attitudinal antecedents of GCoI and what is the impact on consumer intention to buy? The outcomes of this research hold pragmatic significance also in terms of managerial implications, in particular for policy makers and practitioners alike, key players in the food industry, and marketers striving to advocate sustainable food practices at an international marketing level.

2. Conceptual Framework and Research Hypothesis

To investigate the topic of interest, a structural model is proposed based on the literature on Country Image and the attitude-intention path using the model of Green Purchase Behavior (GPB; Sarumathi, 2014). The latter is adopted because it is one of the models that explain the reasons behind the observed attitude-behavior gap with regards to green products. We wish to translate this perspective into the country image formation.

Consumers are increasingly impacted by a range of factors such as safety, environmental considerations, and ethical practices. EC continues to be significant precursors of consumer attitudes. Hartmann and Apaolaza-Ibáñez (2012) found that consumers with positive attitudes and environmental concerns were more likely to engage in green consumer behaviors than those who were not environmentally conscious. Some recent research has highlighted the favorable impact of EC on GATT (Kirmani and Khan, 2016; Maichum et al., 2017; Onurlubaş, 2018). Consequently, we postulate the following hypothesis:

H₁: Environmental Concern (EC) impacts positively on Attitude Towards Green Products (GATT).

Kinnear et al. (1974) stated that PCE - as assessed within personality variables - serves as a tool for anticipating ecological concern. Notably, it differs from conventional environmental concern and plays a distinctive role in forecasting specific environmental behaviors (Ellen et al., 1991). Different studies (Kang et al., 2013; Ellen et al.,1991) show that PCE is uniquely tied to the prediction of certain pro-ecological behaviors. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₂: Perceived Consumer Effectiveness (PCE) impacts positively on Attitude Towards Green Products (GATT).

Although there are numerous studies on CoI, as emphasized by Lee (2020), the ecological dimension of CoI has been somewhat neglected since now. In relation to the intricate facets of this construct, it is actually a relatively new construct in the international marketing field. Hence, the objective of this study is to ascertain whether the GATT has a favorable impact on GCoI and if the GCoI has a positive impact on the WTB Italian food by Indian consumer, addressing a notable gap in existing literature. The following hypotheses are thus postulated:

H₃: Attitude Towards Green Products (GATT) impacts positively on Green Country of Image (GCoI).

H₄: Green Country of Image (GIF) impacts positively on Willingness to Buy (WTB) Italian foods.

3. Research Method

The study focuses on Italian food products and their perception by Indian consumers. Italy is renowned for its high-quality food industry globally and economic interactions between Italy and India have strengthened in recent years, marked by high-level visits and political ties (Obiettivo India, 2022; Biswas and Roy, 2015; Jaiswal and Kant, 2018). While Italian food products make up

a small fraction of India's food imports, their influence is growing rapidly. At the same time, Indian people are increasingly concerned for the environment and interested in sustainable consumption (Biswas and Roy, 2015; Jaiswal and Kant, 2018).

Primary research data were gathered through administering an online questionnaire via Google Forms. The survey targeted a convenient sample of Indian consumers in the period May- June 2023. The data collection process was performed through popular social media platforms, specifically Instagram and Facebook.

The survey was conducted in English, a language with extensive usage and comprehension across India, and brought to the collection of 175 questionnaires that met the required criteria for inclusion in the final analysis.

[Table 1 here]

The sample exhibited a relatively balanced distribution in terms of gender representation (80 males and 95 females) and was also quite reflective of various age groups (details in Table 2).

[Table 2 here]

4. Empirical strategy and findings

Measurement items were derived from extant literature and adapted to the context of this study. Items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree – 1" to "strongly agree – 7". In order to analyze the mechanism at work and investigate if our hypotheses are supported or not, we employed Structural Equation Modelling (SEM).

In the empirical model there are both latent endogenous variables (GATT, GCoI and WTB) and exogenous ones (EC and PCE). Results show that all items are statistically significant (p-values <.05) and of expected sign (+), in addition they present standardised factor loadings higher than the threshold of 0.7 (Hu and Bentler, 1999). Finally, the Cronbach Alpha, used to assess the internal consistency of a set of items, is higher than the threshold (>.70 is acceptable and >.80 is preferred, Cortina, 1993), as well as the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), which is always higher than the threshold of .05.

[Table 3 here]

Switching to the fit statistics, all items exhibit a high item-total correlation, indicating their capability to measure the investigated constructs. We find acceptable fit indices for the model: CFI=0.886, TLI=0.864, SRMR=0.068 and CD=0.973 (Hu and Bentler, 1999). As shown in Figure 1, all hypotheses are supported. More specifically, the two exogenous latent variables, EC and PCE, are positively related with the attitude towards green products (GATT) which, in turn, positively affect the green country image (GCoI). Finally, the latter has a positive and significant effect on the Willingness to buy Italian Foods (WTB) and this final effect has the widest impact within the structural analysis. Finally, all control variables are not statistically significant, except for the education level, which displays a negative and slightly significant coefficient (at 10% level), thus higher is the education level (starting from the bachelor's degree that is the lowest found in the sample) and lower is the willingness to buy.

[Figure 1 here]

5. Discussion

Consumers are increasingly caring about sustainable issues in their everyday life and when purchasing decisions have to be made. However, regarding the latter, academics have mainly addressed this topic with the intent to understand if and how consumer sensitiveness to the environment may impact their intentions to buy products or to select a supplier. Conversely, research on the green image of a country is in its infancy. To contribute in closing this gap, this study has verified a model aimed at exploring the role of GCoI as a mediator in the attitude-intention path relating to the purchase of foreign foods by consumers. Findings confirm the goodness of the proposed model, contributing to the international marketing studies in verifying the importance of the green image also when consumers evaluate the origin of the foods they are prone to purchase. As a consequence, our study suggests that the traditional models used to investigate the effect of a specific country image (CoI) on the proneness to buy products/offerings originated in that country should be revised in order to include constructs aimed at measuring the sustainable image of countries.

This research holds pragmatic significance for policy makers and marketers striving to advocate national offerings on international markets through the added value of sustainable food practices not only regarding India, but also on a broader scale. It also deeps the comprehension of consumer behavior within the realm of sustainable consumption for stimulating eco-conscious decisions. Specifically, companies and institutions aimed at supporting the exports of their country (in this case Italian-based such as: Ministero delle imprese e del Made in Italy, ITA, Chambers of Commerce, etc.) should stress their approach to environmental sustainability in their communication policies and should invest in creating a positive environmental image of the country using colors, images/videos and messages stimulating "green" associations in the target audience (in this case Indian consumers). In so doing, they should emphasize the self-empowerment role of consumers in behaving in respect of the environment in order to exploit the positive PCE. At the same time, they should target the consumers more sensitive to the green issue in order to build value on their environmental concern. In fact, stimulating EC and PCE in a balanced way result in a positive environmental attitude, key to display the strong effect exerted by the green image of a country on consumer purchase intentions.

6. Conclusions

This study sheds light on the role of CoI in the attitude-intention path when a green orientation is considered. In so doing, it contributes to the literature on international marketing and consumer behavior, opening up new perspectives in the study of country image.

Despite its explorative but potential usefulness in this study context, some limitations should be mentioned. First, our sample is small and mainly composed by well-educated consumers; thus, it can be of interest to increase and diversify for demographics the number of observations in order to have a more robust and comprehensive picture. Second, the sample was questioned about Italian foods in general; as we know that consumer evaluations on CoI can differ because of the product category, future studies should focus on specific product categories. Moreover, extending the survey to other country images and consumer nationalities, can better support the robustness of our model. Further studies should also try to integrate the proposed model with traditional constructs employed in the international marketing literature when the country-of-origin effect is involved, such as cognitive and affective CI, as well as FIT.

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Table 1. Variable Description

Variable name	Description
ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN (EC)	
EC1 worried	I am extremely worried about the state of the world's environment and what it will mean for my future.
EC2 abusing	Mankind is severely abusing the environment.
EC3 interfere	When humans interfere with nature it often produces disastrous consequences.
EC4 delicate	The balance of nature is very delicate and easily upset.
EC5 harmony	Humans must live in harmony with nature in order to survive.
PERCEIVED CONSUMER EFFECTIVENESS (PCE)	
PCE1 protect	I can protect the environment by buying products that are friendly to the environment.
PCE2 helping	I feel capable of helping solve the environmental problems
PCE3 contribute	I feel I can contribute in protecting the environment respecting it.
ATTITUDE TOWARDS GREEN PRODUCTS (GATT)	
GATT1 less_damage	I feel good about buying food products which are less damaging to the environment.
GATT2 effort	I am willing to make a special effort to buy food products which are made with recycled packaging.
GATT3 friendly	I will prefer environment friendly food products over non-environment friendly food products in case the product quality is similar.
GATT4 products	I choose to buy food products that are environmentally friendly.
GREEN COUNTRY IMAGE (GCoI	
GCoI1 it_environ	I think Italian food products are environmentally friendly.
GCoI2 it_respect	I consider Italian foods as produced in a way respectful of the environment
GCoI3 it_green	I believe that foods produced in Italy are greener.
WILLINGNESS TO BUY (WTB)	
WTB1 it_willing	I am willing to buy made in Italy food products while shopping.
WTB2 it_intent	Next time I'll go shopping for food, I intend to buy food products made in Italy.
WTB3 it_keen	I'm keen in buying food products produced in Italy in the future.
Seven-point Linkert-scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).	
Female	Dummy variable equals to 1 if female, and equals 0 if male.
Age group	Categorical variable: 1=18-24, 2=25-35, 3=36-50, 4=51-65, and 5=over 65.
Education level	Categorical variable: 1=elementary school, 2=middle school, 3=high school, 4=bachelor's degree, 5=master's degree, 6=post graduate degree.
Employed	Dummy variable equals to 1 if employed (part-time or full-time), and equals 0 otherwise.
Hinduism	Dummy variable equals to 1 if hindu, and equals 0 otherwise.
Num. of family members	Categorical variable from 1 to 5 on the basis of the number of members within the family (5=five or more members).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max
EC1 worried	175	5.903	.933	2	7
EC2 abusing	175	5.954	.883	3	7
EC3 interfere	175	5.771	1.127	1	7
EC4 delicate	175	5.754	1.001	2	7
EC5 harmony	175	5.977	1.017	1	7
PCE1 protect	175	5.629	1.234	1	7
PCE2 helping	175	5.463	1.178	1	7
PCE3 contribute	175	5.731	1.073	1	7

GATT1 less_damage	175	5.583	1.210	1	7
GATT2 effort	175	5.6	1.184	2	7
GATT3 friendly	175	5.749	1.137	2	7
GATT4 products	175	5.64	1.180	1	7
GCoI1 it_environ	175	5.52	1.082	1	7
GCoI2 it_respect	175	5.583	1.090	1	7
GCoI3 it_green	175	5.554	1.026	1	7
WTB1 it_willing	175	5.937	1.024	1	7
WTB2 it_intent	175	5.571	1.058	1	7
WTB3 it_keen	175	5.589	1.068	1	7
Female (dummy var)	175	.543	.500	0	1
Age group	175	2.72	1.258	1	5
Education level	175	4.526	.822	3	6
Employed (dummy var.)	175	.634	.483	0	1
Hinduism (dummy var.)	175	.68	.468	0	1
Num. of family members	175	3.851	.929	1	5

Table 3. Measurement Model

	Coeff.	Std. Error	z	p>|z|	[95% conf. interval]	
EC						
EC1	1 (constrained)					
EC2	.9094912	.0751836	12.10	0.000	.762134	1.056848
EC3	1.090807	.1004656	10.86	0.000	.8938985	1.287716
EC4	1.049122	.0885187	11.85	0.000	.8756288	1.222616
EC5	1.097296	.0877612	12.50	0.000	.9252867	1.269304
Cronbach's alpha = 0.8946 AVE=0.634						
PCE						
PCE1	1 (constrained)					
PCE2	1.04291	.0969643	10.76	0.000	.8528633	1.232956
PCE3	.98754	.0918163	10.76	0.000	.8075833	1.167497
Cronbach's alpha = 0.9151 AVE=0.656						
GATT						
GATT1	1 (constrained)					
GATT2	1.127641	.0863346	13.06	0.000	.9584281	1.296853
GATT3	1.018793	.0837229	12.17	0.000	.8546995	1.182887
GATT4	1.152414	.0870789	13.23	0.000	.9817427	1.323086
Cronbach's alpha = 0.9079 AVE=0.734						
GCoI						
GCoI1	1 (constrained)					
GCoI2	1.029604	.0601509	17.12	0.000	.9117106	1.147498
GCoI3	.8673158	.062385	13.90	0.000	.7450434	.9895882
Cronbach's alpha = 0.9078						

AVE=0.770						
WTB						
WTB1	1 (constrained)					
WTB2	1.224073	.0966843	12.66	0.000	1.034575	1.41357
WTB3	1.274565	.0996267	12.79	0.000	1.0793	1.469829
Cronbach's alpha = 0.8952 AVE=0.745						

Figure 1. Structural Model Results
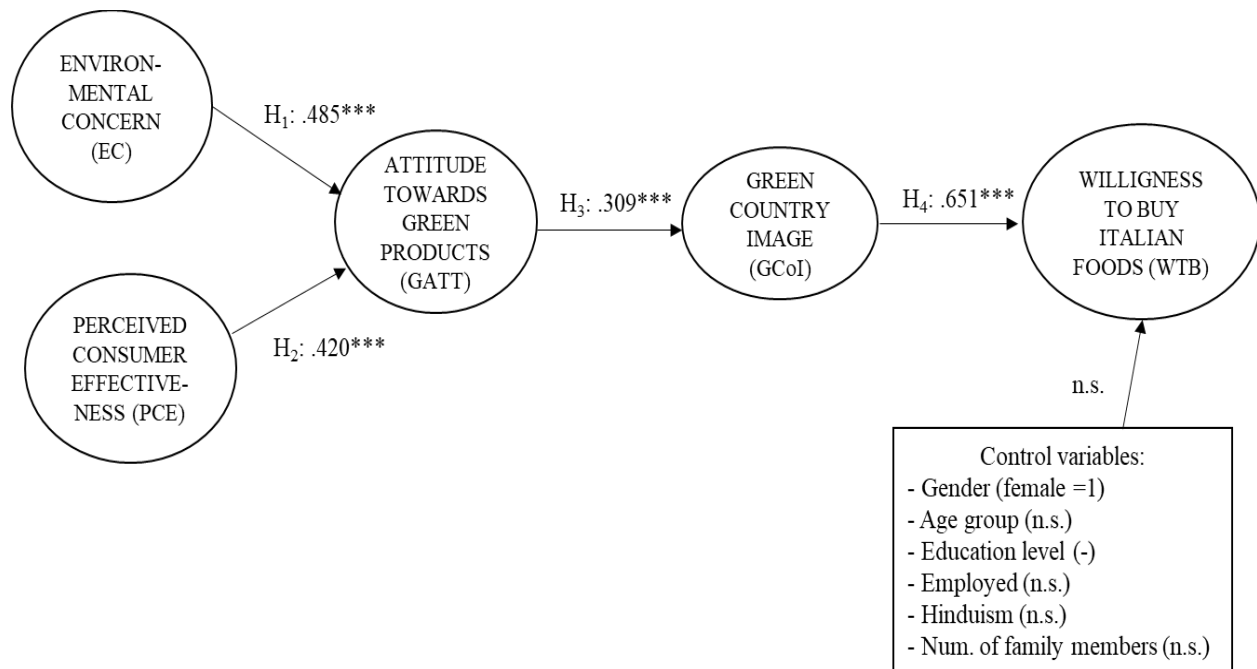
Note: ***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1, n.s → not significant path