

SANTOS, M. and C. MARQUES, “The Impact of Environmental Certification on the shoppers’ store choice”, Proceedings International Marketing Trends Conference 2015)

Abstract

Is the environmental certification of the store an important choice attribute to the shoppers? Although the rising number of companies that had obtained environmental certifications of their management systems, such as ISO 14001, the companies’ green practices may not be visible and understood by the consumers. When shopping in a store that offers multi-brands products, the shopper may identify the certification symbols on the products package, but not the certification of the store brand. Nevertheless, the environmental certifications are being included in all the company’s communication pieces, to raise awareness in all stakeholders. In response to the rising competition through their networks’ private labels, some Portuguese grocery retail chains have applied for environmental certifications of their management systems, such as ISO 14001, in order to spread out a pro-environment message. Indeed, as the recent economic crisis has intensified the level of price based competition, retailers struggle to switch the focus of customers' price perception. Furthermore, the consumers are being more eco-environment conscious by the influence of various pressure groups.

As a contribution to the shoppers’ choice of the store format this study highlights the above research question to the shopping decision process. This study aims to examine the impact of the store brand certification on the shoppers’ buying attitudes, focussed on the decision process of choosing the store to buy of a hyper/ supermarket. An on-line survey was conducted to collect information on the attitudes towards certification and buying of the Portuguese consumers aged 18 years or older. Potential respondents were selected by convenience using a list of 600 employees of a Portuguese large company. We obtained 460 valid answers, corresponding to an answer rate of 77%. The study tests the hypothesis (H1) that suggests that the bigger the importance given to the environmental certification, the higher the importance given to the certification of the store. More specifically to the choice of the store to shop, the hypotheses (H2 and H3) where the bigger the importance to both certifications of the firm and environment, the higher is the probability that the consumer considers this as an attribute to his/her choice. The results confirm the two hypotheses, hence the importance that people attribute to the environmental certification and to the company certification influences the choice of the store. Although, store choice is not influenced by gender or educational qualification, age has a significant impact. Older individuals consider environmental certification more important to the store choice decision.

Keywords: Certification symbols, Environmental Certification, Conscious consumption, Store format choice, Retail grocery.

Introduction

The actual socio-political context motives companies to incorporate the environmental variable in their strategic decisions, in order to gain a competitive advantage. The companies' absence of concern for the environment may be an entry barrier in the global market of Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) (Miles *et al*, 1999). A green marketing stance is increasingly a challenge for a company or a brand, because the consumer is extremely attentive and informed. The more the consumer is aware of his pro-active role in order to build an ethical consumption (Başgöze and Tektas, 2012; Szmigin and Carrigan, 2006), the more the environmental aspects are important attributes to the consumer choice and behaviour. If companies do not respond to this eco-environment expectation, they enable to lose interest from the consumers (Ottman, 2011).

Although the certification practice in all kind of goods and services is crucial to achieve a competitive advantage, there is still lack of consensus about its impact on the consumers' choice decision. According to Zhang *et al* (2012): "eco-certifications of services, which are voluntary environmental programs certifying sustainable features related to customer experience, are an area of emerging interest to operations management. Yet, there is little consensus on how eco-certifications may have an influence on the customer experience and operational performance. Proponents argue that eco-certifications may enable customers to make informed decisions and promote sustainability through service co-production between the service providers and customers. However, critics caution that eco-certifications may be abused for misleading customers and contribute to green washing". More recently, Sudhalakshmi and Chinnadorai (2014, p.) when analysing the purchase of Green FMCG Products in an Indian city, concluded that "though consumers are willing to purchase green products, many business organizations are still behind the need of the eco-friendly society".

Nowadays the debate is much more focused on the "how", rather than on the "why" or "should go or not", as defended by Gupta (2012) when analysing the effect of the green practices in the sustainable competitive advantage management from the restaurant business. The green management orientation should balance the innovation with the maintenance of natural resources, reducing costs to business owners and improving the quality of the human life. However, it still remains a disparity between what customers say they value and the types of products that are being purchased, with some researchers arguing that the difference between the purchasing inconsistencies is more than merely price (Gupta, 2012, Tse, 2001). Furthermore, customers not

always perceived the certification symbols and the green communication. Newell *et al* (1998), argue that consumers have difficulty to evaluate the information of the environmental symbols or notes from the company's communications. Also the authors conclude that consumers are sceptical about the ambient appeals from the companies' advertising. In his research for the green restaurants, Gupta (2012) suggests that the restaurants may effectively influence customers' ecological behaviour intention by conducting green advertisement, because although the company may perform excellent green practices, customers may under perceive the green image of the restaurant.

This study aims to give a contribution to the understanding of how the certification of the company brand can influence the shoppers' choice of buying in its store. More specifically, the study assesses the consumers' relevance attributed to the existence of environmental certification (the ISO 14001 standard) on the store, specifically in hypermarkets. In addition, it analyses the impact of the importance level given to the store certification on the choice of the store to shop.

It was developed and launched an online questionnaire, seeking to evaluate the largest possible degree of awareness and knowledge of Portuguese citizens who make purchases of food for the household. The sample is composed by 460 valid answers.

This paper is organized as follows: the next two chapters introduce the literature review relevant to the relationship between the store format choice and the conscious consumption which supports the proposed conceptual model and the related hypotheses. After, the methodology, measures, and variables are presented, followed by a highlight of the main results. Finally, we outline the main conclusions, limitations and future research.

The choice of store format

Most recent research in shopping behaviour, concerning the choice of the store for shopping, has focused on different research streams: some studies identified desired store attributes for consumers who prefer to shop in specific retail formats and/or specific patrons of a given format (Jayasankaraprasad 2014; Prasad and Aryasri 2011; Carpenter and Brodahl 2011; Seock 2009; Baker *et al*, 2002); several studies have emphasized the relationship between retail store environment and shoppers' satisfaction (Marques *et al*. 2013; Martinez-Ruiz *et al*. 2011,

2010); and other studies have explored the evolving competition through strategies based on specific aspects, such as the price across different retail store formats (Zielke 2010; Gauri *et al.* 2008), the location (Mendes and Cardoso 2006; González-Benito *et al.* 2005;), the logistics clues (Teller *et al.* 2012), or the emotional and arousal aspects intrinsic to the customers (Yoon 2012).

However, the shoppers' knowledge of the store certification about ISO 14001 standard is not considered in the shopping behaviour, namely in the choice process of a store where to buy the food and grocery shopping for household. The environment concept in the shopper buying behaviour literature stream concerns the experienced atmosphere when shopping, which importance as a competitive advantage tool for the retailer was first emphasized and conceptualized by Kotler (1973). Deeping Kotler's concept of atmospherics, Bitner introduced the *servicescapes* concept in 1993, where three dimensions explained and influenced the shopper behaviour and choice: (1) the *ambient conditions* (temperature, air quality, noise, music, etc.), (2) the *space/function* (layout, equipment, etc.) and (3) the *signs, symbols and artefacts* (signage, personal artefacts, style of décor, etc.).

In the last decade, the grocery retail sector has undergone intense change (Wood and McCarthy 2013), where retailers, increasingly aware of the experiential aspects for customers' consumption, manage the store atmosphere in order to offer a distinctive buying experience (Farias *et al.* 2014). Creating a unique environment through a differentiated atmosphere becomes even more desirable and keeps retailers from focusing solely on price as a differentiating trait (Turley and Chebat, 2002), in the actual complex retailing offer, where consumers hardly perceive differences among the products/brands carried by the retailers. Instead, shoppers can be influenced by the store environment, as demonstrated in several studies (Massara *et al.* 2010; Kent and Derby 2009).

The grocery stores follow a combination of formats and strategies to serve the needs of various consumer segments (Gauri 2013). From demand side, the shopper is not only more exigent, as shows a less loyal and cross-shopping behaviour (Jayasankaraprasad 2014; Jayasankaraprasad and Kathyayani 2014). From the offer side, "the retailer creates a firm specific selling vehicle, termed a formula, based on a generalised format, for example supermarket, convenience store, vending machine, discount store, etc." (Dawson 2013). Not only, these several format stores can influence the consumer's choice at several level (Dawson 2013, Wood and McCarthy 2013), but also both retailers and academics' concerns on optimizing the shopping

customer experience, motivate a continuous research in the relevance of the store atmosphere on shopping behaviour, which is an important variable to the store format choice, as reviewed by Farias *et al.* (2014). In response to the environmental changes, large retail chains are also diversifying and competing through their networks' private labels. The service and the environmental experience that each store provides to its customers can be used to create a unique combination by offering a specific service formula that is expected not to be found anywhere else. Furthermore, although the price strategies are still a key factor to the benchmarking retail productivity analysis (Gauri 2013; Zielke 2010), the retailers struggle to switch the focus of customers' price perception as the economic crisis intensified price-based competition.

The certification and the Conscious Consumption

Since nineties consumers and companies enhance their environmental awareness and begin to identify and relate to green brands and buy green products (Makower, 2008). Both companies and regulators feel the need to regulate the market, where each company previously took the environmental measures they consider adjusted to gain consumers. Consequently, the regulatory management system, Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) and International Organization for Standardization (ISO), arise early in this decade. The EMAS and the certificate ISO 14001 are based on the same objective, the promotion of effective environmental management, although they are considered competitors. ISO 14001 standardizes environmental management systems at World and various sectors while EMAS certifies only industrial firms in EU. The ISO 14001 certification was early successful, with at least 188.815 certificates issued during the year 2008 in 155 countries (ISO, 2009) and there has been a growth of 22%. (Marimon *et al*, 2011). According to the same source, the number of companies recognized by Community Regulation EMAS in 2009 (4.470 companies) was substantially lower compared with the ISO 14001 standard.

The consumer awareness about the eco-environmental relevance has intensified over the last three decades (Makower, 2008) and has provoked the development of a new consumer profile that is ecologically and environmentally conscious. Ottman (2011) characterizes as being environmentally conscious the consumer who seeks to consume only products and services that cause less or no environmental impact, by searching for information and advertising about products and services before buying them (Shrum *et al*, 1995). Hailes (2007) characterizes this as

a consumer who associates the act of buying the possibility to act in accordance with the environment. However, the environmental terminology is still difficult to understand by the market players, namely the consumers, although these are generally more environmentally aware than in the past (Kelhkar et al, 2014). But, the level of knowledge in environmental concerns does have direct effect on the consumption practices of individuals. (Beyrouti et al, 2014) . Indeed, a lack of credibility in the information, as well as willingness to take political action can explain the difficulty in move towards a green and more sustainable consumption. The environmental or green consumption has actually not resulted in the ability to command a sustainable premium consumers, who are willing to buy eco-friendly products, but not to pay the higher price (Sudhalakshmi and Chinnadorai, 2014).

Companies have come increasingly to adopt the certification of its Environmental Management Systems (EMS) in accordance with the rules and regulations already on the market, as mentioned. Once certified, companies are keen to showcase their certificates as a way to forward all stakeholders (customers, suppliers, government organizations, among others) about his concern for environmental issues. Different certification symbols are presented in various media, such as brochures, billboards, television advertisements or product packaging. The certification symbols are no more than a vehicle of communication between the company and the consumer and wish to convey precisely its environmental responsibility. As such, the symbols of certification should reach consumers in a clear and fairly immediate way.

The ISO 14001 certification can only have an impact on consumers if that information reaches them quite directly. Consumers have difficulty in evaluating the information in this type of certification and consequently, they need more information about this topic. Initially consumers also show sceptical of environmental appeals in advertising ads. This lack of confidence in the various ecological arguments/communications can cause rejection by consumers, as evidenced by Newell *et al* (1998).

According to Shrum *et al* (1995), consumers are more aware and conscious seeking information about products and services before buying and are generally aware of the various advertising communications of the same, although most are sceptical in relation to advertising. Engel *et al* (1993) suggest that the announcement made in the form of an advertising ad, the packaging of a product or an ecological appeal, constitutes a powerful tool of influence on consumer's behaviour and attitudes. Their study shows that although some consumers consider

themselves involved with the brand or the product, when exposed to ads, their attitudes were affected by the presence of the ecological argument/certificate. Therefore, it is expected that the effects of green certificates themselves are connoted to purchase situations with low involvement. If the purchase is not important and the consumer feels that, he has little to lose with the same, thus his level of interest may increase due to the presence of visible symbols of certification or image that has certification for that brand / product.

Conceptual Model and Hypotheses

In sum there is potential for companies to announce that they hold a particular certification and in particular for the retail grocery sector. Although the percentage of sales in certified labels products is still low, it is increasing, in pair with the conscious consumer segment. So, why not to invest in the certification of the store and not only in selling certified label products? Furthermore, in the recent impulse context of the hypermarkets own label, why not to invest in the company brand for the hypermarket chain? Recent empirical studies show the influence of the quality certification labels on the consumers' purchase behaviour, such as regarding the choice of the stores own brands (Ku *et al*, 2012) or the choice of restaurants (Gupta, 2012) or the hotel industry (Zhang *et al*, 2012).

Under the above research question, we suggest the main proposition that the existence of certification for the store is also an important attribute to consider for the shoppers' decision in what store shopping. Assuming that the socio-demographic variables can have a significant moderator role, as some previous studies showed (Beyrouiti et al., 2014), namely regarding gender, age, education and income they are included in the theoretical framework.

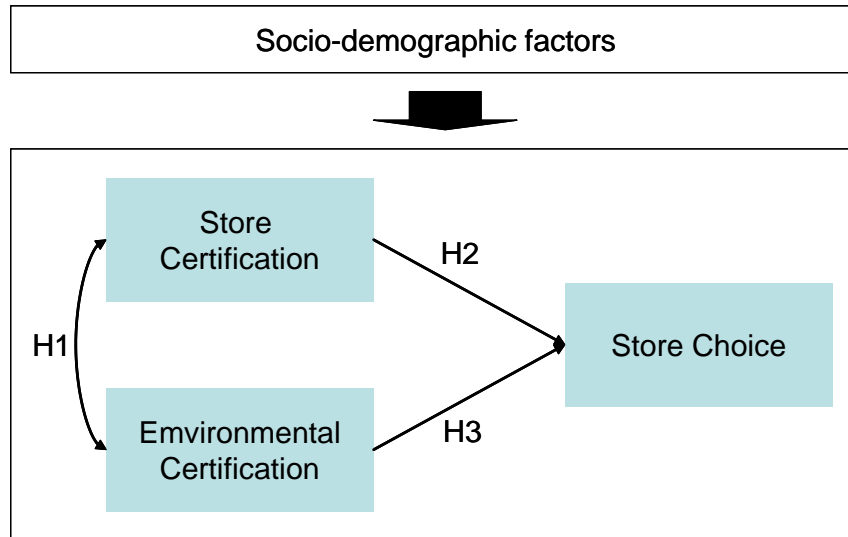
Figure 1 presents the theoretical framework and two hypotheses are defined as follows:

H1 - The bigger the importance given to the environmental certification, the higher the importance given to the certification of the store.

H2 - The bigger the importance to certification of the store, the higher is the probability that the consumer considers this as an attribute to his/her choice.

H3 - The bigger the importance to environmental certification, the higher is the probability that the consumer considers this as an attribute to his/her choice.

Figure 1: Theoretical framework



Methodological Approach

An on-line survey was conducted to collect information on the attitudes towards certification and buying of the Portuguese consumers aged 18 years or older. Potential respondents were selected by convenience using a list of 600 employees of a Portuguese large company. The survey was launched during the summer of 2012. We obtained 460 valid answers, corresponding to an answer rate of 77%.

The questionnaire was composed by four parts: (1) the notoriety and recognition of certification symbols, (2) the notoriety and importance attributed to ISO 14001, the environmental certification, (3) the influences of environmental certification of environmental on the store choice process, and (4) the socio -demographic profile of consumer. Questions about the importance of store and environmental certification were measured in a 10-point Likert scale with a minimum of 0 (no importance) and maximum 10 (Much importance).

Descriptive measures, Pearson and Cramer's V coefficients to measure correlation or association between variables and t Student tests were used to analyze data and answer our research question.

Results

Sample Characterization

There is a slight male supremacy (53%). Over half have between 35 and 59 years. There is also a predominance of respondents with higher education degree (48%). Regarding profession, respondents who are “Technicians/ middle-ranking employees” are the most frequent with 30.3% representation. Most respondents have a household composed by 3 or 4 elements (58%) and the average expenses on household are between 200 and 300 Euros (20%) and between 400 and 500 Euros (20%).

The Consumer’s Importance of Certification

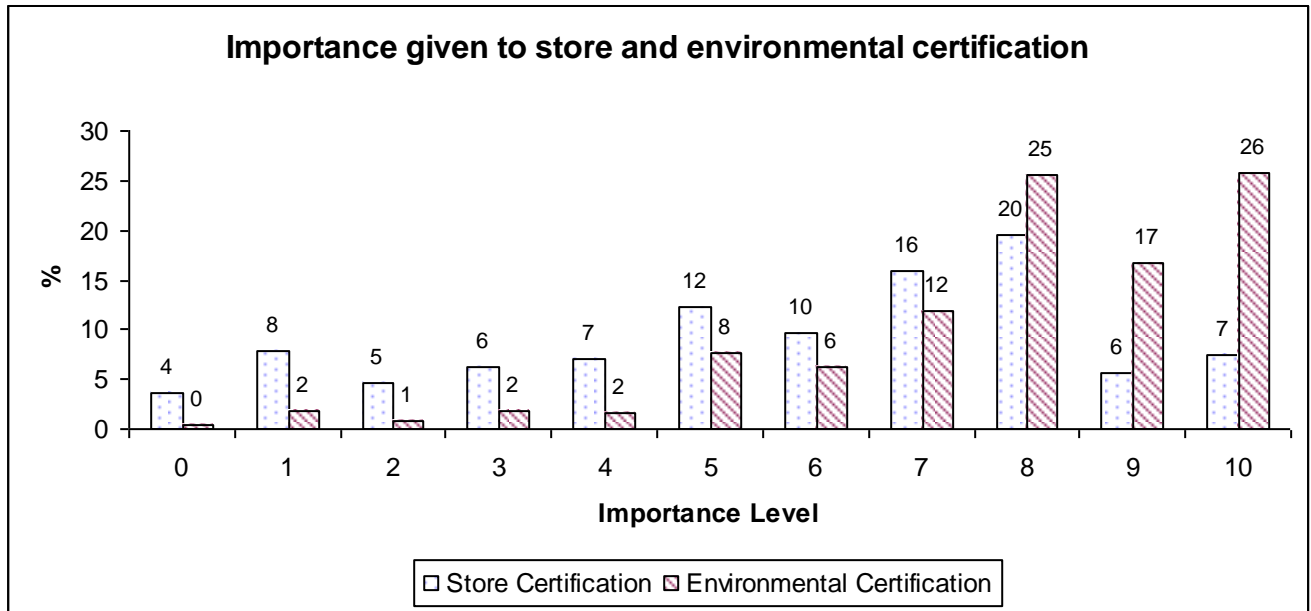
Table 1 presents the average importance of the store and the environmental certification. The average level of importance given to environmental certification is clearly superior to the importance given to the store certification.

Table 1: Importance given to store and environmental certification

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Store Certification	510	5.8	2.7	0	10
Environmental Certification	455	7.9	2.1	0	10

Figure 2 compares the distribution of the two variables. It can be seen that 68% of respondents consider the importance of environmental certification at level 8 or above (very important) while 58% give levels of importance from 5-8 (some importance) to the certification of companies (stores). Figure 2 also shows that the distribution of the importance of the store certification is higher in lower levels unlike environmental certification that clearly has a distribution based on higher levels of importance. These results are in line of those presented in Table 1, that is, the environmental certification has an average importance level substantially higher than the certification of companies (stores).

Figure 2: Distribution of the importance given to store and environmental certifications



Taking the same direction as previous studies reviewed by Beyrouti et al., (2014), female consumers have higher levels of environmental awareness. Considering that the environmental certification is the credit given to environmental responsiveness of the companies, we intend to assess whether female consumers gave more importance to environmental certification than males. Results of the t test shows that these two groups of consumers give importance to environmental certification in a different way ($t = -3.478, p = 0.001$); Women give more importance to environmental certification than men (average of 8.2 (SD=1.8) vs 7.6 (SD=2.2)).

In order to understand whether the importance of environmental certification is correlated with the importance of store certification (hypothesis H1), a correlation analysis using the Pearson's correlation coefficient is used. This coefficient indicates the existence of correlation between the two variables (Pearson's coefficient = 0.433, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the higher the importance given to the certification of the store, the higher the importance given to the environmental certification. Therefore, hypothesis H1 is confirmed.

Influencing factors on store choice decision

Table 2 presents the distribution of factors that influence the store choice. Closeness to the store and a good quality-price ratio are those with higher levels of importance with 75.3% and 63.3% of responses, respectively. The environmental certification factor is the one with less influence on the decision to store choice with 11.4% of responses.

Table 2: Influencing factors on store choice

Factors	%
Closeness	75
Low prices	32
Good quality/price ratio	63
Service quality	30
Promotion	25
Environmental certification	11
Parking	39

In order to understand whether socio-demographic characteristics of consumers influence the store choice decision, chi-square tests are used. Literature review (Beyrouiti et al., 2014) supports the idea that women, younger and higher educational consumers have more often the environmental certification as a decisive factor in store choice than the other consumers. Results show that (1) Although that most choose the store due to environmental certification are women (55%), this factor as influence of store choice is not dependent of the gender of consumers (chi-square=1.433, df=1, p=0.231); (2) The same conclusion could be obtained regarding educational level of consumers (chi-square=1.852, df=4, p=0.763); (3) however there is dependence in what concerns the age of consumers (chi-square=16.883, df=4, p=0.002). Older age classes are those with the highest percentage of people who consider environmental certification a decisive factor in store choice (59% of respondents with age between 45 and 60 years).

The influence of certification on store choice

The importance of store certification is different for consumers who choose the store for its environmental certification and those who do not choose ($t=-6.507$, $p<0.001$). Likewise, it is concluded that the importance of environmental certification is different for consumers who choose the store for its environmental certification and those who do not choose ($t=-6.594$, $p<0.001$). Those respondents that state that the environmental certification is a store choice factor have an average importance level given to both certifications superior than other respondents (table 3).

Table 3: Average level of importance for certifications according to response of environmental certification on store choice

	Environmental Certification	N	Mean (SD)	t Statistic	Cramer's V
Store Certification	Choose this factor	53	7.60 (2.12)	-6.50*	0.30*
	Do not choose	413	5.52 (2.71)		
Environmental Certification	Choose this factor	53	9.00 (1.19)	-6.59*	0.23*
	Do not choose	401	7.72 (2.11)		

* $p<0.05$

Analysing the association between the two groups of variables, we conclude that the value of Cramer's V coefficient is weak but significant either for the store certification ($V=0.303$, $p<0.001$) and or for the environmental certification ($V=0.225$, $p=0.011$). Therefore, there is an association between the importance given to the store or environmental certification and the option of environmental certification as a decisive factor in choosing the store. In fact, as the importance increases, so does increase the percentage of consumers who choose environmental certification as decisive for the choice of store factor. Therefore, the hypotheses H2 and H3 are confirmed.

Other effects of environmental certification

We also analyse the impact of the level of importance of environmental certification on the likelihood of consumer to move further away or to pay more for environmentally certified stores. According to the Pearson correlation coefficient, the correlation between the importance attributed to environmental certification and the willingness to pay more for a environmental certified store is positive but of low intensity (Pearson coefficient =0.211, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, the correlation between the importance attributed to environmental certification and, the predisposition to move further away to a more environmentally certified store is also of low intensity (Pearson coefficient=0.249, $p < 0.001$). This conclusion is in agreement with the literature which states that although a consumer be environmentally conscious or give more importance to the environmental aspects, this fact does not mean that he has environmental behaviour consumption (Shrum et al, 1995, Lages and Neto, 2002).

As above mentioned, women give more importance to environmental certification than men, as above was described, Therefore, it also important to assess whether women are more willing to pay more or move farther by a certified store. Regarding "Predisposition to pay more for a certified store", the results of the t test point out that there are differences between the women and men ($t = -3.039$, $p = 0.003$). According the previous mentioned result, women are more willing to pay more for an environmentally certified store. Similarly we conclude that a woman consumer is more willing to travel further for a certified store than a man consumer ($t = -2.412$, $p = 0.016$).

Table 4: Distribution of consumer to move further away or to pay more for environmentally certified stores by gender

	Female	Male
	(%)	(%)
Willingness to pay more for environmentally certified stores	23.8	15.8
Willingness to move further away for environmentally certified stores	8.5	6.3
Total of respondents	193	217

Conclusion

The consumer is awarding more importance to the sustainable consumption. Moreover, companies are adopting a more pro-environmental stance. However, more information is needed in order to increase the awareness and the confidence level of the green marketing strategies. Research focussed on sustainable consumption in Fast Moving Consumer Goods is also increasing (Kelkar et al, 2014), but the literature is still not very consensual, neither in the constructs used (Başgöze, 2012), neither in the consumer behaviour (Kelkar et al, 2014). The certification of products, services and companies, has been a key determinant of consumer behaviour as it raises the confidence level, leading companies to invest in the certification of their brands. Grocery retailers are offering certified label products, as well as asking for their own brand store certification. However, the impact on the consumer behaviour of these companies still lacks empirical testing. This study provides an important contribution to literature as it shows that store certification is an important clue to the shoppers' store choice.

The results confirm the two hypotheses, hence the importance that people attribute to the environmental certification and to the store certification influences the buying decision process, more specifically, the choice of the store in which one to shop. As for other studies on green consumption (Beyrouti et al., 2014) the demographic variables do not have the same significant effect to the decision. Although store choice is not influenced by gender or educational qualification, age has a significant impact. Older individuals consider environmental certification more important to the store choice decision. Furthermore, results also confirm that female consumers give more importance to environmental certification than men and are more willing to travel farther and pay more for an environmentally certified store. However, when selecting the store, the proximity and the quality/price ratio are the factors most valued by respondents and the environmental certification was regarded as the least important factor. It seems that the consumer is still acting in a more convenience and economic reasoning, although understanding the value of the eco-friendly purchase.

Coherent with previous studies of the conscious consumer, this study reveals a different attitude from the consumers that attribute a high importance to green products. As the importance given to the environmental certification of the store increases, so does the percentage of consumers who choose environmental certification as decisive for the choice of store. However the low significance level between the two groups may be a result of a still inefficient green

marketing as well as the lack of credibility and knowledge of the certification standards for the stores.

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