

Exploring consumer perceptions of sustainable Made in Italy products: towards a theoretical framework

Elisa Carloni

Researcher

Department of Economics and Management, Università degli Studi di Brescia

elisa.carloni@unibs.it

Anna Codini

Associate Professor

Department of Economics and Management, Università degli Studi di Brescia

anna.codini@unibs.it

Giuseppe Bertoli

Full Professor

Department of Economics and Management, Università degli Studi di Brescia

giuseppe.bertoli@unibs.it

Najeeb Arghistani

Postdoctoral fellow

Department of Economics and Management, Università degli Studi di Brescia

najeebullah.arghistani@unibs.it

Abstract

Sustainability has increasingly become an important factor in consumer decision-making, influencing product evaluation jointly with traditional attributes such as country of origin (COO). This study explores the relationship between sustainability and the COO effect, particularly in the context of sustainable Made in Italy products. We start from the assumption that, as sustainability gains importance, the interaction between these attributes influences consumer perceptions and attitudes toward Made in Italy products. By means of a literature review, this study aims to develop a conceptual framework identifying key factors – derived from the COO literature and the sustainable consumption one – that influence consumer perception and willingness to pay a premium price for sustainable Made in Italy offerings. The resulting framework presents three macro-categories of factors: (1) attitudinal consumer factors; (2) product-level factors; and (3) company-level factors, together with socio-demographic characteristics.

Keywords Sustainability, Made in Italy, Country of origin, sustainable products

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1. Introduction

In the past decade, sustainability has emerged as a key factor in consumer decision-making. Increasingly, consumers are seeking for products that not only meet their needs but also minimize negative environmental impacts, promote social equity, and ensure economic viability throughout their lifecycle (Lim, 2016). This shift is reshaping how products are produced, marketed, and consumed, with sustainability becoming a central dimension of consumer expectations.

As this trend gains importance, it also intersects with other well-established factors that the literature has explored concerning consumer behavior, among which is the country of origin (COO) effect (Hsu *et al.*, 2017; Achabou *et al.*, 2023). Traditionally, COO has influenced consumer perception by signaling product quality and authenticity, among others (Bilkey and Nes, 1982). Yet, with the growing importance of sustainability-related considerations, the traditional associations of COO seem to be evolving to also include sustainability attributes (Dekhili and Achabou, 2015; Dekhili *et al.*, 2021). This shift is particularly relevant for Made in Italy products, which have traditionally been associated with handcrafted production, high-quality design, and close ties to the territory and cultural heritage (Amatulli *et al.*, 2017). Today, these traditional attributes are expected to converge with sustainable practices, including environmental responsibility and ethical production. Several Made in Italy companies have started to address this challenge and to embrace sustainable practices (Deloitte, 2023; Ceccotti *et al.*, 2024).

Such evolving context – characterized by the interaction between COO and sustainability – offers the opportunity to explore if and how COO effect associated with Made in Italy products are being reshaped by sustainability attributes. In this sense, while studies have started to investigate how the values of Made in Italy align with sustainability (Bernardi *et al.*, 2021; Amatulli *et al.*, 2017; Ceccotti *et al.*, 2024), there is a lack of research addressing this issue from a consumer perspective and aimed at the investigation of how Made in Italy – as a COO attribute – can create a positive consumer attitude towards sustainable products. In fact, while extensive research exists on both COO effects and sustainable consumption independently, the interaction between these factors in shaping consumer perception towards sustainable Made in Italy products is not yet fully explored. This study aims to provide a preliminary response to this gap through a comprehensive literature review aimed to identify and analyze the factors that influence consumers' attitudes towards sustainable Made in Italy offerings and their willingness to pay a premium price for such products. By integrating insights from both COO and sustainability literature streams, we seek to develop a conceptual framework that highlights the key determinants of consumer perceptions and purchase intentions for such offerings.

2. Theoretical background

The role of country image in international marketing strategies has been extensively discussed in prior research (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2003). Indeed, the location of production can be approached as an informational cue, providing consumers with a basis for product evaluation (Bilkey and Nes, 1982). For unfamiliar consumers, COO may serve as a stereotype or surrogate for product quality, while for those more familiar with the product, it functions as a heuristic or summary index to streamline decision-making (Roth and Romeo, 1992).

As consumers' priorities shift towards sustainability, the COO effect seems to increasingly incorporate sustainability-related attributes. The concepts of COO effect and sustainability are in fact increasingly intersecting and represent an emergent area for research in international marketing. Recent studies have started investigating the interplay between the image of a country and consumer evaluations of sustainable products. For example, Cowan and

Guzman (2020) have introduced the concept of “country of origin sustainable reputation”, showing how a country’s sustainability image can positively influence corporate brand performance and signal quality to consumers.

While sustainability appears to be increasingly related to COO effects, these effects are not homogeneous but vary across product categories, consumer familiarity with products, and nationality. For example, a positive connection between sustainable products and COO has been observed, with consumers generally preferring local ecological products (Koschate-Fischer *et al.*, 2012), particularly in the case of certain product categories such as food (Götze *et al.*, 2016). Götze and Brunner (2020) demonstrated that sustainability and consumption of domestic food products are linked due to better knowledge of production conditions. Similarly, also D'Souza *et al.* (2007) confirmed that consumer familiarity with products affects the consumption of ecological products. Achabou *et al.* (2023) revealed varying tendencies based on nationality, suggesting that consumer characteristics play a role in the interaction between COO and ecological product attributes. Furthermore, Xiao and Myers (2022) found that product COO significantly influences consumer perceptions of eco-friendly products, with COO information supporting consumers in evaluating the credibility of green claims.

For Made in Italy products, the interaction between COO and sustainability is particularly relevant, as the values traditionally associated with the Made in Italy label (derived from reputation for craftsmanship and quality) may create a “halo” potentially extending to the domain of sustainability. In this context, the COO effect may act as a heuristic for consumers evaluating the credibility of sustainability claims, especially in categories where Italy holds a strong reputation, such as fashion, furniture and food. Based on existing studies (Xiao and Myers, 2022; Koschate-Fischer *et al.*, 2012), we can assume that when Made in Italy extends to sustainable products, it may exert a positive influence due to favorable COO perceptions.

However, it's important to consider the complexity of COO effects as indicated by the literature (Bertoli and Resciniti, 2012). While the Made in Italy label benefits from strong country associations, its influence on consumer perceptions of sustainable products is part of a larger, multifaceted decision-making process; thus, the Made in Italy label alone might not drive consumer perceptions of sustainable products. The multiple-cue perspective in COO research acknowledges that country of origin, while significant, interacts with various other factors in shaping consumer evaluations (Vianelli and Marzano, 2012).

Another point for reflection is represented by globalization, which has introduced new dynamics that challenge the traditional concept of Made in Italy. Historically, this label was linked to small-scale craftsmanship, sophisticated design, and close ties to Italian heritage. However, as production increasingly moves abroad or is outsourced, the connection between design and production is becoming more distant, potentially affecting consumer perceptions of authenticity (Chiarvesio *et al.*, 2013). The evolution of Made in Italy might therefore complicate its alignment with sustainability, which is a relatively new attribute in the minds of consumers. Bisson *et al.* (2024) suggest that the brand’s identity, rooted in historical and cultural imagery, may no longer fully reflect the modern, globalized nature of production, requiring a rethinking of the Made in Italy narrative.

3. Determinants of consumer attitudes towards sustainable Made in Italy offerings

To develop a comprehensive framework for analyzing consumer perceptions of sustainable Made in Italy products, we draw from two literature streams: COO effect and sustainable consumption. This approach allows us to explore the intersection of these concepts in the context of Made in Italy sustainable products.

3.1. Factors from COO literature

Studies on COO have identified several factors shaping consumer perceptions and attitudes towards products from certain countries (see Bursi *et al.*, 2012 for a review). Early research has pointed out how consumer characteristics and experiences are at the core of the COO effect. Schooler (1965) seminal work highlighted how factors such as age, gender, education, and income, significantly influence how COO impacts product evaluations. This suggests that consumer **socio-demographic** characteristics may play a role in the perception of sustainable Made in Italy offerings, as different groups may assign varying degrees of importance to COO when evaluating a product's sustainability. Building on this, studies conducted in the 1980s have also highlighted the role of **consumer familiarity** with a product or product category. Han (1989) introduced the concept of familiarity as the degree of knowledge and experience a consumer has with a product, conceived as previous purchase experience. With low levels of familiarity, the attributes of the products are drawn by quality cues – such as price and made in label - available to the consumer when evaluating the product. With high levels of familiarity, the consumer knowledge of products influences the image of that country.

Closely related to these individual characteristics is the role of consumer **ethnocentrism**. Balabanis and Diamantopoulos (2004), building on Shimp and Sharma's (1987) work, describe ethnocentrism as a belief system in which consumers prefer domestic products over foreign-made ones due to moral or patriotic convictions. Ethnocentrism adds another layer of complexity to COO perceptions of sustainable Made in Italy products. Depending on the market, ethnocentric tendencies may either enhance or diminish the appeal of Italian sustainable products, based on how consumers balance their propensity towards national products against preference for foreign products.

Moving beyond individual consumer factors, the **complexity of a product and its attributes** also play a key role in determining the strength of the COO effect. Gaedke (1973) shows how COO effect varies with the degree of product complexity. For sustainable Made in Italy products, this complexity may be further amplified by the interaction between traditional quality attributes and innovative sustainability features. Another important factor related to the **degree of consumer involvement** in the product, conceived as the degree of personal interest, relevance, and importance consumers attribute to the product (Irene *et al.*, 2024; Celsi and Olson, 1988). For Made in Italy products, high involvement consumers invest significant time and effort in evaluating a product's attributes, such as quality, prestige, and design. Low-involvement consumers are more likely to make decisions and prioritize other cues. However, the relationship between involvement and COO effect is not straightforward, but rather complex and multifaceted. Some studies suggest that the COO effect is higher with a limited degree of involvement (Day, 1970; Verlegh *et al.*, 2005), while others argue that for high involvement products, consumers more actively utilize COO information as a critical evaluation criterion (Celsi and Olson, 1988).

Additionally, the **brand** associated with a product plays an essential role in moderating COO effects. Research has focused on the effects that the interaction between the country of production of the good and the country with which the brand name of that good is associated has on consumer choice processes (Bertoli *et al.*, 2005). Johansson and Nebenzahl (1986) argued that strong brand identities can either amplify or mitigate the influence of COO, particularly for high-involvement products. For Made in Italy products, brands known for their heritage of craftsmanship and quality may reinforce the COO effect, especially when the brand's sustainability efforts are linked to these traditional attributes of craftsmanship and quality.

The interaction between brand, COO, and sustainability is further influenced by consumers' **knowledge of a country's reputation** as a determinant of COO effects (Roth and Romeo, 1992). The awareness of Italy's historical craftsmanship and quality production enhances consumers' overall perceptions of products labeled as "Made in Italy." This country-

specific knowledge likely influences perceptions of sustainability as well. Italy's positive image may lead consumers to view sustainable Made in Italy products more favorably.

3.2. Factors from sustainable consumption literature

The literature exploring sustainable consumption patterns highlights various factors shaping consumers' perceptions. The core concept is that of **consumer values** (Amin and Tarun, 2021; Young *et al.*, 2010), which encompasses an array of values such as green values, or **moral judgment**, reflecting a consumer's assessment of products based on their environmental benefits, which is often driven by their level of environmental consciousness (Bovea and Vidal, 2004; Bolsunovskaya *et al.*, 2023; Barbarossa and De Pelsmacker, 2016), as well as **functional values**, related to the product's inherent utility, particularly durability and efficiency (Yuan *et al.*, 2022; Essiz and Senyuz, 2023; Wei and Jung, 2017). These values are further influenced by the visibility and clarity of environmental benefits, in terms of how a product's sustainability is communicated.

These core values are complemented by **social or symbolic values**. Products can carry social significance, either through self-reward or as a means of signaling wealth, power, or status (Bhardwaj and Bedford, 2017; Bossle *et al.*, 2015; Essiz and Senyuz, 2023). Sustainable Made in Italy products may serve as status symbols, where sustainability-conscious purchasing aligns with existing social norms of responsible consumption. Also, **emotional values**, which concern the psychological satisfaction derived from buying or using a product, can impact purchasing decisions (Bossle *et al.*, 2015; Essiz and Senyuz, 2023; Lin and Huang, 2012). For sustainable Made in Italy products, the positive emotions associated with eco-friendly purchases can enhance consumer appeal. Finally, curiosity or novelty-seeking behavior of consumers, that is **epistemic values**, can drive interest in exploring sustainable products, often prompting initial purchases (Bolsunovskaya *et al.*, 2023; Essiz and Senyuz, 2023; Yuan *et al.*, 2022; Lin and Huang, 2012).

These values are further reinforced by **ethical beliefs (or concerns)** – including environmental, social, and economic sustainability – and **knowledge about sustainability**. Environmentally and socially committed, well-informed consumers are more likely to favor products that align with their ethical principles and are better equipped to assess and appreciate eco-friendly/sustainable attributes (Bhardwaj and Bedford, 2017; Amatulli *et al.*, 2017; Akehurst *et al.*, 2012; Dangelico *et al.*, 2022; Laroche *et al.*, 2001; D'Souza *et al.*, 2007; Testa *et al.*, 2015). This suggests that well-informed consumers are more likely to have positive attitudes toward sustainable Made in Italy products, especially when clear **sustainability cues**, such durability, reparability, and eco-friendly materials are present and signaled through **eco-labels, packaging, and certifications**, are present (Koszewska *et al.*, 2020; Nath and Agrawal, 2023).

At the company level, **brand image**, based on its associations with quality, sustainability, or Italian heritage, can significantly impact consumer attitudes and trust, supported by strong **communication and marketing strategies** that effectively convey a brand's commitment to environmental and social causes (Bernardi *et al.*, 2021; Essiz and Senyuz, 2023). **Entrepreneurial values**, reflecting a company's ethos and approach to sustainability, further contribute to shaping consumer perceptions (Bernardi *et al.*, 2021).

The reviewed factors operate within a broader context of situational influences, where the **availability** of sustainable products within the distribution network and the use of **promotions and discounts** play a critical role in purchase decisions (Codini *et al.*, 2020; Nath and Agrawal, 2023; Bezawada *et al.*, 2013).

4. Towards a conceptual framework for analysis

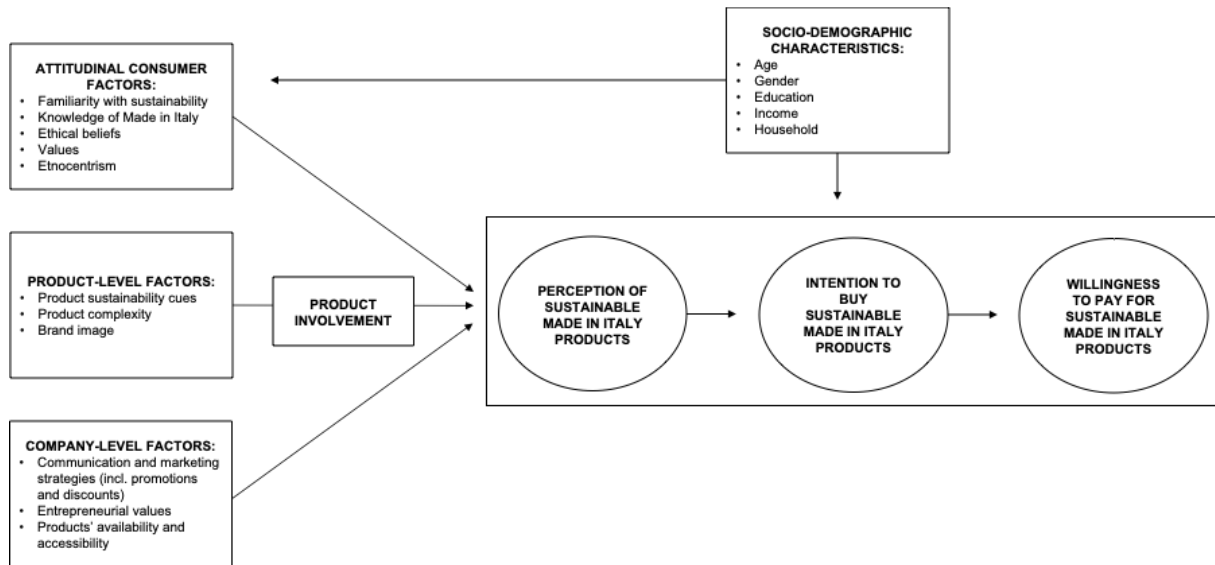


Figure 1 - The derived theoretical framework

The derived framework, depicted in Figure 1, shows how various elements contribute to the perception and the consequent intention to buy sustainable Made in Italy products, and, ultimately, influence consumers' willingness to pay a premium price for such offerings.

By integrating aspects emerging from the COO effect literature (i.e., familiarity and ethnocentrism) and from sustainable consumption research (i.e., values, ethical beliefs, situational factors), we consider three main categories of factors, that is (1) attitudinal consumer factors; (2) product-level factors; (3) company-level factors. These factors shape the perception of sustainable Made in Italy products, which, in turn, influences the willingness to pay a premium price for such products. Socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, education, income, and household) are included in the model as control variables. Product involvement serves as a moderating variable between product sustainability cues and consumers' responses to sustainable Made in Italy products. Based on this conceptual framework and on the reviewed literature, we propose the following hypotheses to test the key components of the model and their interactions. In particular, we posit that:

HP1: Higher levels of familiarity with sustainability and knowledge of Made in Italy products positively influence consumer perception of sustainable Made in Italy offerings.

HP2: Ethical beliefs (or concerns) moderate the relationship between product sustainability cues and consumer perception: the relationship is stronger for consumers with higher environmental concerns.

HP3: The positive effect of entrepreneurial values on consumer perception of sustainable Made in Italy products is stronger when communication and marketing strategies effectively highlight these values.

HP4: The level of product involvement moderates the relationship between sustainability cues and consumer responses to sustainable Made in Italy products, influencing product perception, intention to buy, and willingness to pay.

5. Conclusions

Although in its preliminary stage, this research can contribute to both theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, on the one hand, it contributes to the so-far limited literature combining COO effect and sustainability (Achabou *et al.*, 2023; Dekhili *et al.*, 2021), providing new insights into how attitudinal, product-specific, and company-level factors interact to influence perception, intention to buy and willingness to pay a premium price; on the other hand, it advances our understanding of how sustainable Made in Italy offerings are perceived by consumers (Amatulli *et al.*, 2017; Bernardi *et al.*, 2021; Irene *et al.*, 2024). In terms of managerial implications, the research will help managers develop tailored marketing strategies based on specific factors, such as familiarity with sustainable products, knowledge of Made in Italy, and ethical beliefs. By identifying distinct consumer segments, companies can frame targeted communication, pricing strategies, and distribution channels that resonate with each segment. For example, understanding the factors influencing willingness to pay a premium price can inform pricing decisions. These efforts aim to enhance the perceived value of sustainable Made in Italy products and encourage their adoption.

In the next steps of the research, we will concentrate on selected independent variables of the model (e.g., communication strategy and product sustainability cues) to test the related interactions, and their impact on the dependent variables (e.g., consumer perception, intention to buy, and willingness to pay a premium price), using experimental studies. Based on the results of this first analysis, the overall model will be consolidated and then tested.

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