

*Country-of-origin and sustainability: An analysis of purchase intention and willingness to pay for sustainable Made in Italy furniture*

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**Abstract**

This study explores how the country of origin (COO) effect interacts with sustainability cues in shaping consumer responses to sustainable Made in Italy furniture. While previous research has treated sustainability and COO as separate factors influencing consumer behavior, we integrate these constructs to understand their influence on consumer behavior. COO research has established positive associations between Italian origin and quality perceptions in the furniture sector, but the integration of sustainability dimensions creates new theoretical questions about how consumers process these cues. Drawing from sustainable consumption and COO effect literatures, we develop and preliminarily test three hypotheses concerning ethnocentrism, familiarity with sustainability and knowledge of Made in Italy, and ethical concerns, through a pilot study based on the analysis of 126 responses. Preliminary findings suggest that (i) ethnocentrism influences purchase intentions, but additional factors such as price sensitivity, product-specific attributes, and individual trade-offs between sustainability and affordability are at stake; (ii) higher levels of familiarity with sustainability concepts and knowledge of Made in Italy products positively influence consumer responses to sustainable Made in Italy offerings; and (iii) ethical beliefs emerge as moderators of the relationship between sustainability cues and intention towards sustainable Made in Italy products. Consumers with stronger ethical beliefs demonstrate high responsiveness to sustainability cues to form their perceptions and show greater willingness to pay premiums for sustainable attributes. Following the pilot study, we recently administered the full-scale questionnaire to consumers in key markets for Made in Italy furniture (Italy, France, Germany, and the United States). The analysis of these data will be presented in subsequent research.

**Keywords:** Country of origin; Made in Italy; Sustainability; Sustainable consumption; Consumer behavior

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## 1. Introduction

The Country of Origin (COO) effect has been treated in the literature as a powerful determinant of consumer product evaluation (Bilkey and Nes, 1982), with Made in Italy representing one of the most positive COO associations (Bertoli and Resciniti, 2012). Traditionally, this effect operates through quality perceptions, brand associations, and images and stereotypes that consumers hold about a country or its products (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2003). However, as sustainability becomes increasingly central to consumer decision-making, the theoretical question of how established COO effects interact with environmental attributes emerges.

This interaction may not be simply additive, but rather complex. While research has begun to explore this intersection, particularly regarding local product preferences (Koschate-Fischer et al., 2012) and country sustainability reputation (Cowan and Guzman, 2020), the case of Made in Italy products presents unique challenges. Made in Italy has historically been associated with artisanal craftsmanship, design excellence, premium quality, and strong territorial connections (Amatulli et al., 2017; De Nisco, 2006), creating a potential alignment with sustainability values that emphasize durability, authenticity, and responsible production (Ceccotti et al., 2024). However, this alignment is not automatic, especially as globalization has challenged traditional production models and consumer expectations have evolved (Chiarvesio et al., 2013).

This study investigates consumer purchase intentions and willingness to pay toward sustainable Made in Italy furniture, focusing on how consumer characteristics, specifically ethnocentrism, familiarity with sustainability and Made in Italy, and ethical beliefs, influence product evaluation and willingness to pay premium prices. The focus on the furniture sector is particularly relevant to explore the interaction between COO and sustainability cues: furniture products occupy a distinctive position in the sustainability debate because they are durable goods with long life cycles, rely on material-intensive production (often wood, textiles, and metals), and hold strong symbolic and aesthetic value for consumers (Barbaritano and Savelli, 2021), making them highly responsive to origin, quality, and social, economic, and environmental responsibility evaluation.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Building on existing literature on COO and sustainable consumption, we argue that consumer attitudes toward sustainable Made in Italy offerings are shaped by three interrelated factors: ethnocentrism, knowledge and familiarity, and ethical beliefs (fig. 1).

First, consumer ethnocentrism – conceived as the tendency to prefer domestic over foreign products due to political, socio-psychological, and economic considerations – is a key determinant of consumer behavior (Shimp and Sharma, 1987), with ethnocentric consumers viewing purchasing domestic products as a moral obligation (Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2004). In the context of sustainability, ethnocentrism is associated with a preference towards local products due to their perceived sustainability attributes (Steenkamp and De Jong, 2010). However, the relationship between ethnocentrism and foreign product evaluation is more complex in categories such as luxury goods, where strong country-specific associations (like Italian craftsmanship) and distinctive sustainable practices could counterbalance the ethnocentric bias. This suggests that:

**H1:** *Consumer ethnocentrism moderates the relationship between sustainability cues and consumer perception of sustainable Made in Italy products, such that the positive effect of sustainability cues is weaker for consumers with higher ethnocentric tendencies.*

Second, when evaluating sustainable offerings, consumers must not only consider traditional product attributes but also sustainability ones, which often require specific familiarity. Han (1989) establishes that familiarity, defined as the degree of knowledge and experience a consumer has with a product, influences how consumers process and utilize COO information. At low familiarity levels, consumers rely on quality cues such as price and made-in labels; at high familiarity levels, consumer knowledge actively shapes country image perceptions. This effect extends to sustainability evaluations, with studies showing that well-informed consumers are better equipped to assess and appreciate sustainability-related attributes (Bhardwaj and Bedford, 2017; Dangelico et al., 2022) and more capable of evaluating sustainability cues (Koszewska et al., 2020). The convergence of these theoretical insights suggests that:

**H2a:** *Higher levels of familiarity with sustainability concepts positively influence consumer behavioral intention towards sustainable Made in Italy products.*

**H2b:** *Higher levels of knowledge of Made in Italy products positively influence consumer behavioral intentions towards sustainable Made in Italy offerings.*

Third, ethical and environmental values influence consumer behaviors, with research showing that environmentally and socially committed consumers are more likely to favor products that align with their principles (Bhardwaj and Bedford, 2017; Akehurst et al., 2012; Dangelico et al., 2022), as strong sustainability consciousness is linked to the ability to assess and appreciate products' sustainability cues such as durability, reparability, and eco-friendly materials (Barbarossa and De Pelsmacker, 2016; Koszewska et al., 2020; Nath and Agrawal, 2023). Thus, we posit that:

**H3:** *Ethical beliefs and environmental concerns moderate the relationship between sustainability cues and behavioral intentions towards sustainable Made in Italy products, such that the positive effect of sustainability cues is stronger for consumers with higher ethical beliefs.*

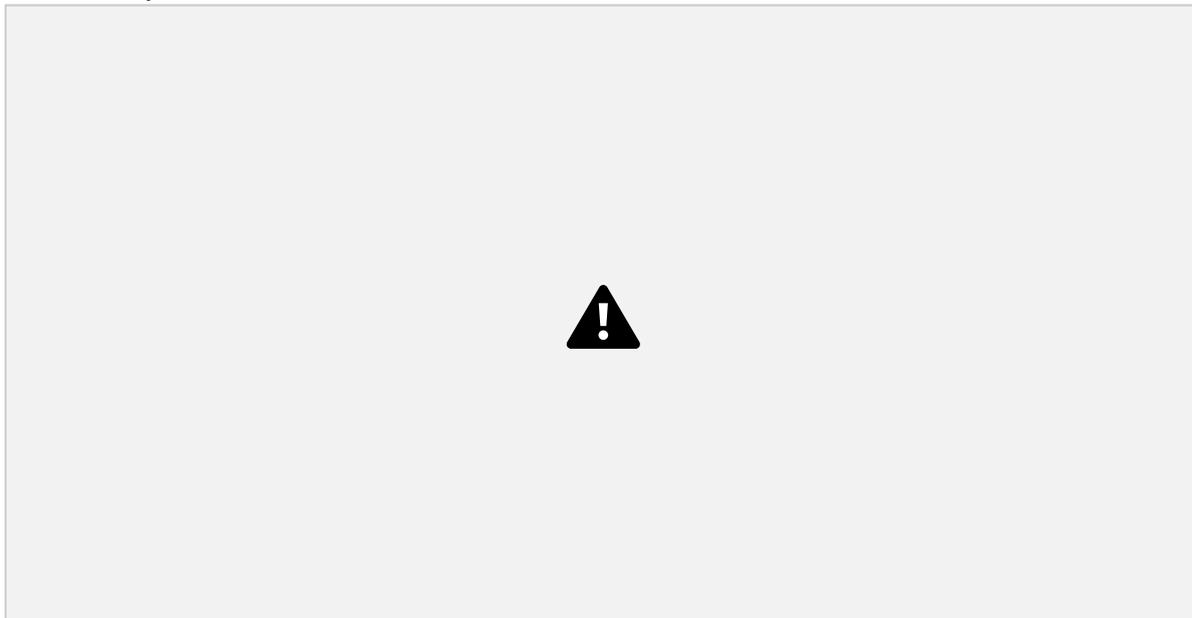


Figure 1 – The model

### 3. Methodology

We conducted a pilot study using a quantitative research design to explore consumers' attitudes towards sustainable Made in Italy products. Data was collected through a Computer-Assisted Web Interview (CAWI) questionnaire.

The questionnaire is structured into 4 main sections, and the measurement scales adopted are derived from prior research in which they were developed and validated, in order to ensure reliability and validity. Section 1 "Sustainability and Made in Italy" evaluates respondents' familiarity with sustainability concepts (Rausch and Kopplin, 2021) and consequent purchasing behavior (Peschel et al., 2016), their knowledge of Made in Italy products and brands (Cappelli et al., 2017). Based on Han's definition of "familiarity" (1989), this construct was measured by combining both knowledge and experience (i.e., purchasing behaviour) that consumers gained about sustainable products, while, regarding "knowledge of Made in Italy", we evaluated the consumers' ability to rightly associate the typical values, brands, and products with Italy. Section 2 "Attitudes and Values" measures consumers' ethical beliefs (Essiz and Senyuz, 2024) - that is, functional, social, emotional, epistemic, conditional, and green value, green advertising receptivity, and conspicuous ethical self-identity - and degree of ethnocentrism (Sharma, 2015). Section 3 "Purchase behavior" investigates consumer purchase preferences. First, we asked respondents to rank important factors during purchasing furniture products (aesthetics, product COO, quality, environmental impact of the product, social impact of the company producing it, price, brand, simplicity of installation and/or use, ease of purchasing it in the usual outlets), based on Koszewska et al. (2020) and Dangelico et al. (2021). Second, we investigate the intention to buy and willingness to pay for a specific sustainable Made in Italy product, that is, an innovative and sustainable chair. Respondents indicated their level of agreement regarding four items: sustainability as a Made in Italy product selection criterion, sustainability influence on Made in Italy purchase intent, preference for sustainable Made in Italy products over non-sustainable ones, and willingness to pay a premium for sustainable Made in Italy products (Konuk, 2019). Section 4 collects socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, including age, gender, nationality, country of residence, occupation, education level, household composition, and monthly household income.

The questionnaire was distributed in Italian and English, and employed various formats, such as Likert scales, multiple choice, dichotomous questions, and open-ended questions. Using convenience sampling, we recruited 126 participants for our pilot study in February 2025. This preliminary administration allowed us to test the effectiveness of the instrument and identify potential areas of improvement for the main study. The large-scale survey was conducted in Autumn 2025 on a sample of 1200 consumers across Italy, the U.S.A., France, and Germany. These countries were selected because they are important furniture markets for Italy: Italy is among the world's leading exporters of furniture, exporting primarily to other European countries. Within Europe, France and Germany consistently rank as the key markets for Italian exports, while the United States consistently ranks among its largest destination markets outside the EU (FederlegnoArredo, 2025; Il Sole 24 ore, 2025).

For the analysis of data, we first conducted a descriptive analysis of the sample and presented a qualitative analysis of open-ended questions and of non-continuous variables. We then tested correlations between variables using correlation matrices for quantitative variables and binary logistic regressions for correlations between qualitative dichotomous variables and quantitative independent variables.

#### **4. Preliminary results and discussions**

The pilot study comprises 126 respondents, predominantly from Italy (N=117), with 54.76% female and 42.06% male respondents (3.17% identify as "others"), and with ages ranging

from 20 to 68 years ( $M=34.47$ ,  $SD=13.69$ ). The sample is characterized by a high education level (59.52% with a university education or higher) and mid-to-high income levels (60.31% reporting monthly income above €2,500). Households are primarily composed of couples with children (44.44%).

Participants demonstrated a high level of recognition and knowledge of sustainability concepts, with “Recycled” demonstrating the highest recognition (mean 4.52), followed by “eco-friendly”, “organic”, and “energy-efficient” (mean 4.10). While the sample exhibited strong overall awareness of sustainability concepts, only 35.7% reported purchasing eco-friendly products within the preceding four weeks. Among these purchasers, sustainable food products were most prevalent (20 responses out of 45), followed by household/cleaning products (16), personal care products (13), and sustainable clothing (5). This discrepancy between knowledge and action reflects a common “knowledge-action gap”, also documented in previous sustainability research (Thøgersen and Schrader, 2012).

Our data also show that the concept of Made in Italy is not automatically associated with sustainability. Sustainability does not emerge as a primary selection criterion when evaluating Made in Italy products, but rather as an added consideration. Respondents moderately agreed that sustainability influences their choice of Made in Italy products (mean 3.29) and that they prefer sustainable Made in Italy options over non-sustainable ones (mean 3.29).

Regarding knowledge of Made in Italy, 61.9% possess moderate knowledge of Made in Italy, that is, they responded correctly to either one of the two questions on Made in Italy features. When asked to identify specific Made in Italy brands, 78.6% of respondents were able to name examples, mainly mentioning fashion brands. Product identification achieved 74.6%, with cheese (31), pasta (22), wine (21), and automobiles (15) being most frequently cited. This knowledge base appears to influence how consumers evaluate sustainable Made in Italy offerings, consistent with Han’s (1989) argument that familiarity shapes the processing of COO information.

Ethical values analysis revealed conditional value – the extent to which consumers derive utility from sustainable products over general alternatives based on extrinsic and situational circumstances (Lin and Huang, 2012) – ranking highest (mean 3.91), followed by emotional value – the fulfillment of affective/moral states and generation of elation from purchasing sustainable products (Lin and Huang, 2012) – (mean 3.76). Green value also scored highly (mean 3.51), reflecting a strong inclination toward environmental protection through consumption choices. Social value received the lowest score (1.91), suggesting sustainable consumption is not primarily driven by social image concerns.

Ethical values correlated positively with purchase intention ( $r=0.424$ ) and significantly predicted willingness to pay ( $\beta=1.14$ ,  $p=0.002$ ). This aligns with previous research (Akehurst et al., 2012; Dangelico et al., 2022), confirming that environmentally and socially committed consumers are more likely to pay a premium for products that reflect their ethical principles. Regression results further suggest that without ethical values, willingness to pay premiums for sustainable attributes remains very low.

Regarding ethnocentrism, based on Sharma’s (2015) scale, respondents demonstrated strong appreciation for domestic products (mean values above 4.69), particularly concerning perceived quality. However, participants were generally unwilling to avoid foreign products when domestic alternatives were unavailable (mean 2.64), indicating that practical considerations outweigh ethnocentric tendencies. Ethnocentrism showed weak but significant positive correlations with purchase intentions for sustainable Made in Italy products ( $r=0.237$ ,  $p=0.007$ ;  $r=0.232$ ,  $p=0.009$ ), consistent with Steenkamp and De Jong (2010), suggesting that ethnocentric consumers may be more inclined toward sustainable domestic products. However, regressions revealed no significant link between ethnocentrism and willingness to pay ( $\beta=-0.210$ ,  $p=0.274$ ), underscoring that while ethnocentric values affect initial evaluation,

they do not necessarily translate into higher price tolerance. These findings should be interpreted with caution, as the pilot sample was composed predominantly of Italian respondents, for whom domestic products coincide with the ‘Made in Italy’ label.”

Willingness to pay showed low premium acceptance, with most respondents (N=55) unwilling to pay more than 10% extra. Reasons for unwillingness to pay more included: (1) economic factors, as reported by one respondent *“Price is an important factor when purchasing a product”*; (2) importance attributed to other features *“Since furniture lasts a long time, I would prefer to buy something that will last longer”*; (3) skepticism about sustainability claims as, *“The cost is usually excessive, and often does not guarantee truly sustainable products”* and *“The definitions of sustainability today are vague, anything but clear”*; and (4) non-essential nature of goods as some rejected paying premiums for luxury/non-essential products.

## **5. Concluding remarks**

This study contributes to the so-far limited literature combining the COO effect and sustainability (Achabou et al., 2023; Dekhili et al., 2021) by examining consumer purchase intention and willingness to pay for sustainable Made in Italy furniture. Three key preliminary insights emerge: first, ethnocentrism enhances purchase intention but not willingness to pay; second, familiarity with sustainability and knowledge of Made in Italy strengthen the capacity of consumers to evaluate sustainability cues; third, ethical values drive both intention and willingness to pay, albeit moderated by pragmatic concerns such as price, durability, and skepticism toward sustainability claims.

Our findings, while being preliminary, provide insights that can be translated into practical implications for managers of Made in Italy brands. First, considering the influence of ethical values on both purchase intentions and willingness to pay a premium price, managers should explicitly communicate the ethical dimensions and environmental attributes of their sustainable Made in Italy offerings. This could include a narrative connecting Made in Italy traditional values with transparent communication about fair labor practices, community support or engagement with the local context, and environmental responsibility combined. Second, our pilot study reveals the existence of a knowledge gap between knowledge and action, with consumers demonstrating a high awareness of sustainability-related concepts but only limited sustainable purchasing behavior. This raises the question of whether this gap is due to a lack of recognition of sustainable attributes in the products being purchased or to the fact that sustainability is a secondary factor in consumers’ decision-making. To address this, companies should enhance the visibility and clarity of products’ sustainability cues through labeling, brand storytelling, and consumer awareness/education initiatives to ensure that sustainability is easily identifiable and valued in the purchase process. Consumer education initiatives might simply empower some typical Made in Italy products’ attributes (i.e., craftsmanship, quality, durability) that concretely match sustainable features. This would convince consumers that acting sustainably doesn’t require additional efforts when Made in Italy products are selected.

Being a pilot study, our research is limited by sample size and geographical imbalance, yet it provides a foundation for our full-scale administration across Italy, France, Germany, and the U.S.A. A more representative sample in terms of socio-demographic characteristics and nationality should guarantee more reliable and extensible results. The three selected countries, indeed, represent the key markets for the Italian furniture industry, and offer the chance to test our hypothesis on a larger scale, and, at the same time, to conduct sub-group analysis.

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