

AN ANALYSIS ON CONSUMER PERCEPTION VIA “STEREOTYPE CONTENT” MODEL BETWEEN SUSTAINABLE BRAND AND COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to analyze the Country of Origin (COO) effect and the consumer's intention to purchase green brands, applying the revised Stereotypic Content Model, in which the competence dimension is combined with the warmth dimension divided into two stereotypic sub-dimensions of morality and sociality. While previous analyses have investigated the role of stereotypes of competence and warmth with regard to Country of Brand (COB) and green brands, so far the dimensions of morality and sociality have not been considered separately. This research aims to investigate how the competence and the two components of the warmth (morality and sociality) of the green brand and its country of origin can positively/negatively be related to the perceived quality and purchase intentions of a green brand.

Considering the importance of understanding if and how COB stereotypes can be related to those of the green brands and how this can be related to the perception of quality and the purchase intention of the brand, an exploratory quantitative research has been conducted on a sample of Italian consumers. In particular, the empirical research has been developed considering three COO: Italy, Germany and USA and two brands: green cars and green fashion clothing. The data, processed using SPSS software, have been analyzed through different statistical analysis.

The results suggest that the dimension of competence related to the green brand and its country of origin seems to affect the consumer's perception of quality and purchasing intentions; as well as morality and the combination of morality and competence, particularly for Germany and the United States. The same is not true in the case of Italy where the dimension of sociality becomes more relevant. Moreover, perceiving the moral and/or competent COO could help the green brand to be perceived positively. This research can provide useful suggestions to managers, committed to promoting green consumer styles, in terms of strategic positioning.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Brand origin and country of brand

In the global branding scenario, where manufacturers use multiple countries to find components and to produce and/or assemble goods (hybrid products) and often use brand naming that suggest linguistic origins other than the true origin of the brand (Samiee *et al.*, 2005), understanding how consumers correctly identify the origin of a brand is a very relevant issue. In fact, associating a brand with the wrong COO can affect the perception of its value and the consumer's willingness to buy it (Pegan *et al.*, 2020).

The country of brand, develops from the correspondence between the image of the country of origin and the product (Roth and Romeo, 1992), can be learned explicitly (by storing information) or implicitly (by classifying the brand in the country of origin through attributes). According to Hutchinson and Alba (1991), consumers in most cases don't learn intentionally. The predominance of implicit learning can be explained by the process of categorization, i.e., the tendency of consumers to structure their knowledge of product/brand alternatives into categories (Gutman, 1982). Han (1989) has shown that the COO can serve both as a stereotypical measure (coding function or summary construct) and as a proxy for other product attributes (inference function or halo effect) to simplify choice.

2.2 Stereotype Content Model and the country of brand

One way to explore how implicit and explicit country stereotypes can influence preferences for brands with different origins is using the Stereotype Content Model (SCM). This model is based on a construct able to effectively operationalize the stereotypes of the country not linked to any class of product or idiosyncratic category (Fiske *et al.*, 2002; Brambilla and Leach, 2014). Stereotypes are semantic associations about a particular group, activated, often automatically, with little cognitive activity in the presence of a member or symbolic equivalent of the stereotyped group (Blair, 2002). According to the SCM, each group can be described through its competence and warmth. In the context of the country of origin, the dimension of warmth should capture those aspects related to friendliness, availability, sincerity and trust, while competence would reflect aspects related to intelligence, capacity and effectiveness (Fiske, 2007). At the theoretical level, the more a country is characterised by a high level of warmth and/or competence, the more we expect a positive response to the products of that country (Chen *et al.*, 2014). The presence of information on the country of origin of the brand could

therefore automatically activate the stereotypes related to the country that will later influence the buying behaviour. Based on SCM (Fiske *et al.*, 2002), as well as on previous bi-dimensional models of the content of stereotypes, it can be found that warmth and competence are the basis of the content of most group stereotypes. Recent research has suggested that the dimension of warmth should be considered as divisible into two distinct constructs: sociality and morality (Leach *et al.*, 2007). While the construct of sociality is about being benevolent towards people in such a way as to facilitate affectionate relationships with such people (friendliness, kindness, pleasantness and sympathy), the construct of morality refers to being benevolent with people in such a way as to facilitate correct and principled relationships with them (honesty, reliability, credibility and sincerity). Morality traits may be more relevant to infer the intentions of others than those of sociality and competence (Brambilla, 2013).

2.3 Green brand and Stereotype content model

The response of firms to the global call of consumers to solve the most pressing societal problems (Pegan *et al.*, 2020) has led to a significant increase in the availability of green products/brand in the marketplace (Pinna, 2020). These products/brands are aimed to consumers who want to integrate ethical concerns into their consumption choices. Although consumers claim to be concerned about environmental well-being, the share of market of green products and brands is very low (Pinna, 2020). A critical aspect to assess is whether the association between a social stereotype and responsible consumers represents a psychological obstacle to buying green brands. Consumers are constantly engaged in maintaining or improving the concept of self through symbolic consumption that manifests itself in the purchase of brands that match a specific dimension of themselves (Sirgy, 1982). In short, a consumer with positive attitudes towards green products also has a positive image towards green brands in order to have consistency between personal goals and behaviour (Hogg *et al.*, 2000).

The general socially widespread view of responsible consumers as stereotypical is frequent (Burgess *et al.*, 2013). Because brands are also used to influence consumers' perceptions of characteristics, brands can lead to bias. The SCM provides a useful framework for examining the stereotyping of "responsible" consumers. The key point is that personality traits attributed to a brand are also applied to its clients/users (Fennis and Pruyn, 2007). Brand identification research documents that users see brands as expressing their personal values and meanings (Stokburger-Sauer, 2012). It has also been seen that animosity towards a country can influence the perceptions of brands stereotypically associated with the country subject to

prejudice. From this perspective, if brands are perceived in terms of their warmth and competence, it is reasonable to expect that users of the same brands are perceived with the same type of social perception. In the way that buying a green brand is perceived as an ethical and/or altruistic action (Shang and Peloza, 2016) consumers of such alternatives are stereotyped as warm. According to the theory of the SCM, stereotyping is driven by the ability of consumers to recognize the ethical and altruistic nature of brands that convey an interest in society or the environment. Responsible brands tend to underline their "green" or "ethical" credentials and this, probably, influences the social perception of those who buy them. Luchs *et al.* (2010) saw that the perceived ethicality of a product or brand can be positively associated with attributes related to kindness, a trait in contrast to perceptions of effectiveness and competence. Ethical consumption choices are probably subject to less imitation as the stereotype of warmth seems to convey a relatively low social status. This effect is explained by the influence that warmth exerts on feelings of admiration and envy. Admiration is due to the appreciation of something praiseworthy that others have done or achieved (Smith and Decoster, 2000). Admiration is an emotion involved in learning as the individuals being admired become models and providers of information on the form of behaviour to be adopted. In a consumer context, the behaviour of others can easily be imitated: by buying the same brands, a consumer can share with his model the same symbols and meanings that generate admiration. Although research into admiration is limited, the evidence in international marketing shows that admiration for a country can lead to a more positive attitude towards products from that place. The issue is that stereotypes of warmth have a negative influence on envy (Cuddy *et al.*, 2008), as a result, the ethical characteristics of a brand can indirectly reduce the envy felt towards consumers who bought them. From this point of view, the stereotype of warmth can damage green brands because it makes them less likely for improving the social status of consumers. Lastly, the stereotypes of warmth attributed to brand green users could have a positive influence on admiration and a negative influence on envy. Since both these emotions contribute to explain social imitation, there will be two indirect effects with opposite directions (Zhao *et al.*, 2014). The importance given to admiration and envy in driving the consumption imitation determines which pathway will be most relevant. Brambilla and Leach (2014) have suggested that warmth is composed of two distinct dimensions: morality and sociality. Therefore, this article, concerning the dimensions of morality and sociality in relation to brand origin and green brand aims to investigate how the competence and the two components of the warmth, morality and sociality, of the green brand and its country of origin can positively/negatively be related to the perceived quality and purchase intentions of a green brand.

3. An Applied Analysis

In this section, in order to investigate the role of the three dimensions of the "Stereotype Content" model, competence, morality and sociality, applied to the country of origin as a function of the consumer's perception of quality and purchase intention of a green brand, we present the questionnaires and a descriptive analysis.

3.1 The Questionnaires

The quantitative analysis is performed using structured questionnaires based on a seven point Likert scale. Six different questionnaires were developed using Google Drive Modules, with a different combination of countries and products associated with the sustainable brand:

- green fashion clothing brand from the United States, Germany, Italy.
- green car brands from the United States, Germany, Italy.

The choice of these countries lies in the fact that Germany and the United States represent, for Italy, an important voice in both imports and exports¹. In fact, in the first semester of 2019 Italian imports see Germany and the United States respectively in first and seventh place. In the same semester of 2019 as regards Italian exports the two nations are in first and third place respectively.

Moreover, this decision was also made considering some sustainability factors of the selected countries. In this respect, reference was mainly made to the EPI² (Environmental Performance Index). Germany occupies the thirteenth place in the global ranking, followed by Italy in sixteenth place and the United States in twenty-seventh place. These data, combined with those relating to imports and exports, have made it possible to make a choice of equipped countries considering both the economic and environmental aspects, no longer considering countries (Switzerland, France, Denmark) or less virtuous (India, Congo, Bangladesh, Burundi) from an environmental point of view but which do not have important trade with Italy (with the exception of France). In addition, it was also decided not to use countries at

¹Source MISE website:

(https://www.mise.gov.it/images/stories/commercio_internazionale/osservatorio_commercio_internazionale/statistiche_import_export/paesi_import.pdf)

(https://www.mise.gov.it/images/stories/commercio_internazionale/osservatorio_commercio_internazionale/statistiche_import_export/paesi_export.pdf)

² Source Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy:

(<https://epi.envirocenter.yale.edu/2018/report/category/hlt>)

opposite ends of the EPI ranking in order not to run the risk of having extreme results mainly due to this dichotomy.

As regards the brands used, we opted for the non-use of well-known brands, this to avoid any association or familiarity with some brand that might have an influence on the opinions of the participants. In all questionnaires the words "hypothetical brand green" were used leaving, therefore, a certain freedom to the imagination of individuals to try to have a certain neutrality of judgment on implicit or explicit preferences for a particular brand and trying to have a greater focus on the country of origin and sustainability. To limit excessive abstraction and give consumers more concrete information about what they had to imagine and evaluate, two green products i.e., cars and fashion clothing were used. Such products could be sufficiently known to the participants or part of the basket of goods of Italian consumers.

Once the development of all 6 types of questionnaire was completed and they have been tested on small groups of Italian customers, 6 different links were created, one for each questionnaire and, subsequently, from July 2019 to October 2019 each link was administered to 100 consumers, who were, as far as possible, predominantly workers of at least 23 years of age. Each questionnaire, in the end, had a section in which participants were required to provide feedback on their propensity for sustainable products and brands.

In the first part of the questionnaire the participants were asked to give their opinion on the degree of agreement with a sentence containing adjectives related to each of the 3 constructs of the "Stereotype Content" model so the participants had to express their degree of agreement with 12 statements containing, each, a different representative attribute of a "Stereotype Content Model" construct: competence, morality and sociality. The second section of the questionnaire consists of four parts. First of all, participants were presented with a description of what is meant by sustainable car or sustainable fashion clothing. Subsequently, the participants were asked to give an opinion on the perceived quality of the sustainable brand of one of the 2 possible products from one of the 3 possible countries, then they were asked to give their judgment on the attributes used in the first section. Finally, they were asked to give an opinion on claims to measure purchase intent. The third section was developed with the aim of measuring, the propensity to sustainability and the intention of purchasing brands and sustainable products by consumers (Environmental concern). In addition, they were asked to provide an opinion on claims aimed at assessing their perceptions about the country to be judged (CSR). The fourth and last section was implemented with the aim of collecting socio-demographic data of the participants, while maintaining anonymity. It has been requested to indicate the gender, age, last qualification obtained, profession, marital status, number of family members, family life cycle, economic situation compared

to peers, an approximate indication of annual gross family income, nationality and, finally, the country of residence. We can summarize the fourth parts of the questionnaire in the Table 1.

Table 1 – The questionnaire.

I part	Stereotype Content Model applied to the Country
II part	Perceived quality of the green brand Stereotype Content Model applied to the green brand Purchase intentions of the green brand
III part	Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) of the Country Consumer environmental concern Consumer's intention to purchase sustainable brands
IV part	Socio-demographic data

3.2 The Statistical Analysis

In order to investigate the role of the three dimensions of the "Stereotype Content" model, competence, morality and sociality, applied to the country of origin as a function of the consumer's perception of quality and purchase intention of a green brand, we tried to answer the following questions:

1. What is the relationship between a green brand and the stereotype of its country of origin?
2. What is the relationship between the perceived morality of the brand's country of origin and the perceived morality of the green brand analyzed?
3. What is the relationship between a green brand's perceived morality, its perceived quality, and the brand's purchase intention?

As regards the relationship between a green brand and the stereotype of its country of origin we can considered the medians and the Kruskal-Wallis test.

As one can see from Table 2 Germany is at first place for competence while Italy is at first place for morality and sociality in the case of a green fashion clothing brand. From Table 3 we can observe that Germany is at first place for competence and morality while Italy is at first place for sociality. The differences by type of product are all significant as regards competence and sociability, not for morality.

Table 2 – Median of the constructs Competence, Morality, Sociality of Italy, Germany, United States for the green fashion clothing brand.

	Italy	Germany	United States
Morality	3.00	4.00	3.75
Sociality	5.12	3.25	3.75
Competence	3.50	5.75	5.25

Table 3 – Median of the constructs Competence, Morality, Sociality of Italy, Germany, United States for the green car brand.

	Italy	Germany	United States
Morality	3.50	4.25	3.25
Sociality	5.00	3.75	4.00
Competence	3.25	5.62	5.25

As regards the relationship between the perceived morality of the brand's country of origin and the perceived morality of the green brand analyzed and the relationship between a green brand's perceived morality, its perceived quality, and the brand's purchase intention we calculated the medians and the Kruskal-Wallis test.

As one can observe from Table 4, Table 5 and Table 6 green fashion clothing Italian brand is better as regards morality, sociality, competence, perceived quality and intention to purchase than green fashion clothing German and United States brand. Green car German brand is better as regards morality, competence, perceived quality, intention to purchase than Green car Italian and United States brand, while Green car Italian brand is the best for sociality. The differences are all significant except for the sociality of the green car United States brand.

Table 4 – Median for green fashion clothing Italian brand and Green car Italian brand.

	green fashion clothing Italian brand	green car Italian brand
Morality	5.00	4.25
Sociality	5.00	4.50
Competence	5.50	4.75
Perceived Quality	5.40	4.60
Intention to Purchase	4.87	4.00

Table 5– Median for green fashion clothing German brand and green car German brand.

	green fashion clothing German brand	green car German brand
Morality	4.25	4.75
Sociality	4.00	4.00
Competence	5.00	5.50
Perceived Quality	5.20	5.60
Intention to Purchase	4.00	4.25

Table 6 – Median for green fashion clothing Italian brand and green car Italian brand.

	green fashion clothing United States brand	green car United States brand
Morality	4.25	4.25
Sociality	4.50	4.00
Competence	4.75	4.75
Perceived Quality	4.60	4.60
Intention to Purchase	4.25	3.12

Specifically, with regard to the relationships between the morality of a green brand from the three countries and perceived quality and purchase intention, respectively, correlations were calculated (Table 7 and Table 8). In general, there are high correlations between the morality of a green brand and perceived quality, while this is not the case between the morality of a green brand and purchase intention (see for example the Italian green clothing brand and the German green car brand).

Table 7 – Correlations between morality and Perceived Quality and Morality and Intention to Purchase for green fashion clothing brand.

	Perceived Quality	Intention to Purchase
Morality brand green Italy	0.587	0.400
Morality brand green Germany	0.650	0.589
Morality brand green United States	0.625	0.554

Table 8 – Correlations between morality and Perceived Quality and Morality and Intention to Purchase for green car brand.

	Perceived Quality	Intention to Purchase
Morality brand green Italy	0.691	0.562
Morality brand green Germany	0.670	0.338
Morality brand green United States	0.759	0.565

4 Conclusions

In this paper we consider a revised Stereotypic Content Model in which the competence dimension is combined with the warmth dimension divided into two stereotypic sub-dimensions i.e., morality and sociality is considered.

We analyzed if and how the Country of Brand (COB) stereotypes can be related to the Country of Origin (COO). For the three constructs of the «Stereotype Content» model, matching between the country and the brand could have a positive impact on the perception of quality and consumer purchasing intentions. In particular, the results suggest that the dimension of competence related to the green brand and its country of origin seems to affect the consumer's perception of quality and purchasing

intentions; as well as morality and the combination of morality and competence, particularly for Germany and the United States. The same is not true in the case of Italy where the dimension of sociality becomes more relevant. Moreover, perceiving the moral and/or competent COO could help the green brand to be perceived positively. Finally, especially for Germany and the USA, there seems to be a correlation between green brand and COO in the perception of stereotypes of competence and morality. This research, although still in the exploratory phase, can provide useful suggestions to managers, committed to promoting green consumer styles, in terms of strategic positioning: a green brand and its origin perceived as competent and/or moral could have positive effects on the perception of quality and the consumer's willingness to buy a specific category of product. The lack of such stereotypes could be a useful indicator of possible repositioning strategies. Nowadays green brands can also be perceived as competent and not just warm, and this would be a strategic aspect on which managers should focus.

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SUMMARY

An analysis on consumer perception via “stereotype content” model between sustainable brand and country of origin

This paper aims to analyze the Country of Origin (COO) effect and the consumer's intention to purchase green brands, applying the revised Stereotypic Content Model, in which the competence dimension is combined with the warmth dimension divided into two stereotypic sub-dimensions of morality and sociality. While previous analyses have investigated the role of stereotypes of competence and warmth with regard to Country of Brand (COB) and green brands, this research aims to investigate how the competence and the two components of the warmth (morality and sociality) of the green brand and its country of origin can positively/negatively influence the perceived quality and purchase intentions of a green brand. Considering the importance of understanding if and how COB stereotypes can be related to those of the green brands and how this can influence the perception of quality and the purchase intention of the brand, an exploratory quantitative research has been conducted on a sample of Italian consumers. In particular, the empirical research has been developed considering three COO: Italy, Germany and USA and two brands: green cars and green fashion clothing. The data have been analyzed through different statistical analysis.

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