

Global vs. Local: A Quantitative Study of Factors Influencing Italian Consumers' Preference in the Purchase of Food Products

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Submitted: 24.04.2022 | Accepted: 28.09.2022

Abstract

Purpose: The study intends to expand the current literature on Italian consumers' brand preferences between local vs. global alternatives in the specific Italian food sector.

Design/methodology/approach: This study draws on concepts largely investigated like cultural identity theory, consumer ethnocentrism, and product category involvement to examine the mechanisms that drive Italian consumers to prefer alternative local or global brands in the food sector. A non-hierarchical cluster analysis represents the core part of the quantitative research that involved 412 participants.

Findings: By confirming the validity of existing studies, the present paper contributes to the food consumption literature by testing a conceptual model that integrates previous research concepts, thus deepening the analysis of the factors affecting Italian consumers' food brand preferences. The cluster analysis allowed for dividing Italian consumers into two distinguished groups with characteristics coherent inside the same group.

Research limitations/implications: This study emphasizes the key relevance of the investigated variables in the implementation of positioning and communication strategies aimed at meeting the needs of specific markets in which firms operate, and it highlights the importance of analyzing those variables together. The sample composed of Italian consumers did not allow the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, this study focuses on the narrow category of chocolate bar products. Therefore, this does not permit the results to be generalized to other food products.

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Suggested Citation: Aiudi, A., & Curina, I. (2022). Global vs. Local: A Quantitative Study of Factors Influencing Italian Consumers' Preference in the Purchase of Food Products. *Problemy Zarządzania (Management Issues)*, 20(4), 4–27. <https://doi.org/10.7172/1644-9584.98.1>.

Originality/value: The novel research is based on signaling theory that contributes to the local and global branding domains from the Italian perspective. This work is also the first to analyze the food sector and the importance that Italians attribute to their food products and traditions through a cluster analysis approach.

Keywords: local vs. global brand, food sector, Italian consumers, preference, cluster analysis.

JEL: F6

Marki globalne a marki lokalne – ilościowe badanie czynników wpływających na preferencje włoskich konsumentów w zakresie zakupu produktów spożywczych

Streszczenie

Cel: celem badania jest poszerzenie aktualnej literatury na temat preferencji włoskich konsumentów w zakresie marek lokalnych i globalnych we włoskim sektorze spożywczym.

Metodologia: badanie oparto na szeroko przeanalizowanych koncepcjach, takich jak teoria tożsamości kulturowej, etnocentryzm konsumentki i zaangażowanie w kategorię produktową, aby zbadać mechanizmy skłaniające włoskich konsumentów do preferowania lokalnych lub globalnych marek w sektorze spożywczym. Zasadniczą część badania ilościowego, w którym udział wzięło 412 uczestników, stanowi niehierarchiczna analiza skupień.

Wyniki: w artykule potwierdzono wartość dotychczasowych badań. Stanowi on wkład w literaturę dotyczącą konsumpcji żywności, polegający na przetestowaniu modelu koncepcyjnego, w którym połączono wcześniejsze koncepcje badawcze, pogłębiając w ten sposób analizę czynników wpływających na preferencje włoskich konsumentów w zakresie marek produktów spożywczych. Analiza skupień pozwoliła na podzielenie włoskich konsumentów na dwie wyodrębnione grupy o cechach spójnych wewnątrz tej samej grupy.

Ograniczenia/implikacje badawcze: w opracowaniu zwrócono uwagę na kluczowe znaczenie badanych zmiennych w realizacji strategii pozycjonowania i komunikacji ukierunkowanych na zaspokojenie potrzeb konkretnych rynków, na których działają przedsiębiorstwa, oraz podkreślono istotność łącznej analizy tych zmiennych. Próba złożona z włoskich konsumentów nie pozwoliła na uogólnienie wyników. Ponadto badanie koncentruje się na wąskiej kategorii batonów czekoladowych. Nie jest zatem możliwe uogólnienie wyników na inne produkty spożywcze.

Oryginalność/wartość: jest to badanie nowatorskie oparte na teorii sygnalizacji. Przyczynia się ono do rozwoju lokalnych i globalnych marek z perspektywy włoskiej. W opracowaniu również po raz pierwszy przeanalizowano sektor spożywczy i wagę, którą Włosi przywiązują do swoich produktów spożywczych i tradycji, z zastosowaniem podejścia opartego na analizie skupień.

Słowa kluczowe: marka lokalna a marka globalna, sektor spożywczy, włoscy konsumenci, preferencje, analiza skupień.

1. Introduction

In the current context driven by the globalization phenomenon, firms' capacity to understand consumers' attitudes and preferences becomes of crucial importance to adopt policies and strategies in the creation of competitive and successful brands. In the last decades, profound changes

in the marketplace have resulted in international exchanges and in stronger competition for local and domestic brands that are trying to succeed. In this perspective, many local and global brands now coexist and they are preferred in different ways by consumers all over the world. Thus, the way consumers evaluate brands and respond to different brand practices has become a crucial topic in literature (Gürhan-Canli et al., 2018). Indeed, “given the phenomenal rate of globalization, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend consumers preferences without contemplating global forces and their effects on consumer identities, experiences, and practices” (Kim, 2022, p. 4).

Considering these recent evolutions, many theories have been analyzed to study consumers’ behaviors when they face brands that they perceive as global or local. Prior studies in this stream of research have mainly focused on and investigated digital or technical products (Gao et al., 2017; Westjohn et al., 2009), household products (Lin & Wang, 2016; Yang et al., 2019), or general products without specific category mentioned. With the exception of Salnikova and Grunert (2020), research that connects theoretical concepts with consumer food consumption has not been deeply developed (Zhang et al., 2022).

Hence, this study will examine the impact of elaborated theories on consumer preference for local vs. global food brands by deepening this phenomenon through a systematic and empirical approach based on a cluster analysis conducted on a sample of 412 participants.

Moreover, there is no evidence in the literature about the specific Italian food sector and the importance that Italians attribute to their food products and traditions. Starting from these assumptions, this study seeks to fill this gap by specifically focusing on this sector and market.

As a result, this study will attempt to accomplish the following objectives:

- i) to understand the concepts of cultural identity theory, consumer ethnocentrism, product category involvement, and global brand superiority in the category (GBSC) as well as their effect on consumers to predict their preference between a local or global brand;
- ii) to better analyze the dynamics of these theories by specifically applying them to the Italian food sector;
- iii) to determine the division of Italian consumers into clusters to be able to describe the phenomenon;
- iv) to conduct an in-depth study of the correlation and analyze data to be able to specify the role of consumer-brand identification, perceived brand quality, brand trust, and brand attitude in the preference of the brand.

For achieving these objectives, the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a literature review based on local and global brand theories by subsequently focusing on the food sector and the Italian market. Section 3 outlines the adopted methodology, while Section 4 presents the

results. Finally, Section 5 concludes the research by discussing the results and by identifying the theoretical and managerial implications, as well as the limitations of the study and potential directions for future research.

2. Theory and Background

2.1. Research on Local and Global Brands

In order to describe the modern international exchanges, it is fundamental to define two expressions: “global brand” and “local brand”. A definition of global brand is given by Steenkamp (2019), who conceptualizes it as a brand that uses the same name and logo, is recognized, available, and accepted in multiple regions of the world, shares the same principles, values, strategic positioning, and marketing throughout the world, and its management is internationally coordinated. Therefore, they are brands known at an international level and perceived everywhere with the same characteristics since they are conceived with standardized politics and communication practices. On the other hand, local brands are “only available in a specific geographically region or a concentrated market” (Dimofte et al., 2008, p. 351).

Overall, these definitions allow for confirming how global brands create their value through worldwide communication aimed at making consumers perceive their prestige, high quality, and credibility. Conversely, local brands communicate their value through the construction of a local identity able to support the culture of a given place by also adapting to the needs and preferences of the home market.

From a cultural point of view, local brands are perceived as fundamental elements to protect the distinctiveness and uniqueness of a specific place and instruments to fight against the homogeneity pushed by globalization (Steenkamp & De Jong, 2010). More than that, local brands are seen as brands that try to meet local tastes and needs (Halkias et al., 2016), and they build their own image on a cultural and symbolic capital, which conveys a more affective closeness to consumers (Ger, 1999); on the other hand, global brands have privileged access to different resources all over the world by communicating work abilities and reliability.

When dealing with local or global brands, it is fundamental to consider the intensity of the consumer-brand relationship. This phenomenon has been deeply analyzed by Sichtmann et al. (2018), who showed how this relationship had undergone profound changes in the last few years. Indeed, purchased products and their respective brands are seen nowadays as deep meaning bearers able to shape the idea that people have about themselves (Belk, 1988). Consequently, they are no longer simple means to satisfy physiological needs. This extended role of products and brands has led to the consideration of the consumer-brand relationship as more intimate and active, with respect to the “owner-owned” one (Fournier, 1998). For

this reason, literature has begun to focus its attention on the consumer brand identification.

There are many factors that influence consumers' preferences between local and global brands, and they embrace many theories and domains. A recurrent element in these studies is the culture that has a central role in the choice of a brand.

For this reason, subsequent studies began to consider the "local-global brand" phenomenon as specifically related to the consumers' culture and cultural meanings, which are very important in the influence of consumption aptitudes guiding their behaviors (Strizhakova et al., 2011). Starting from these concepts, the cultural identity theory has been elaborated as one of the main characteristics influencing the preference between local and global brands.

2.2. Cultural Identity Theory

Culture is generally defined as a "complex system of concepts, attitudes, values, beliefs, conventions, behaviours, practices, rituals and lifestyles of the people who make up a cultural group, as well as the artifacts they produce and the institutions they create" (Liddicoat et al., 2003, p. 45).

On the other hand, identity represents a socially constructed self that people continually co-construct and reconstruct in their interactions (Paltridge, 2012). Consequently, it is not only the definition that individuals give to themselves but also and above all the reference scheme through which people perceive, recognize, and present others. Furthermore, identity can influence emotions, perceptions, and behaviors, and affects relationships (Leary & Tangeney, 2003). Overall, the relationship between culture and identity is very complex.

A definition of cultural identity is given by the Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication, which conceptualizes it as "the definition of groups or individuals (by themselves or others) in terms of cultural or subcultural categories (including ethnicity, nationality, language, religion and gender) and in stereotyping, this is framed in terms of difference or otherness". Being part of one's own group and interfacing with other communities of the outside world creates negotiating dynamics of one's personal cultural identity and allows the evolution of consumption practices (Stöttinger & Penz, 2018).

Starting from these concepts, the cultural identity theory takes shape, having to do with the study of how people use communication processes to build and negotiate the identity of their cultural group and the interpersonal relations inside specific contexts of life. According to Balabanis et al. (2019), it also has a very important role in influencing the favoritism towards local vs. global brands. Indeed, identifying consumers' cultural identity as global or local is the key to understanding consumers' attitudes towards global versus local products. This theory has been elaborated by Zhang and Khare (2009) to distinguish between a global and local identity/nature of consumers

by measuring the grade through which they consider themselves as global vs. local citizens. Having a local identity means that consumers feel that they belong to their local community, thus identifying themselves with local ways of life. Moreover, it consists in the presence of mental representations which lead people to have major trust in and respect for the local traditions and customs, as well as to be more interested in local events by also recognizing the uniqueness of single communities. Conversely, global identity means that consumers i) feel that they belong to the global community by also identifying themselves with a global lifestyle; ii) have trust in the positive effects of globalization; (iii) recognize more the common aspects rather than the differences of people; (iv) are more interested in the world events (Cannon & Yaprak, 2002) by also showing more positive attitudes and behaviors towards them (Makri et al., 2018).

While marketplace globalization has diffused a global cultural identity, local identity is still a strong frame of reference to many consumers because it represents more familiar ways of life, meanings, and practices (Kim, 2022).

Overall, the study undertaken by Zhang and Khare (2009) clearly demonstrates that when a local identity is more accessible, consumers prefer a local product, and thus, a local brand because it highlights their being part of the local community. Vice versa, when consumers show a global identity, they tend to prefer global brands because they strengthen their being citizens of the world. Therefore, this theory can easily predict consumers' preferences. By predicting consumers' preferences between local and global brands, this scale allows managers to adopt adequate positioning strategies for their products.

Strongly connected to the cultural identity theory is the ethnocentrism concept, which represents, on the one hand, the tendency to judge members, structures, cultures, and histories of different groups based on the values, norms, and customs to which individuals are educated, and on the other, the tendency to reject people who are perceived as different, thus preferring those considered similar to oneself.

2.3. Consumer Ethnocentrism

In the field of marketing, Shimp and Sharma (1987) elaborated the concept of consumer ethnocentrism that encompasses the belief held by consumers about the appropriateness and morality of purchasing foreign-made products. Notably, consumers with a high level of ethnocentrism tend to consider foreign products in a negative way and value, on the other hand, domestic products with a more positive perception and higher quality.

Many studies on this stream of research demonstrated that individuals with a high degree of ethnocentrism have a favorable attitude towards local products and thus, they indicate favoring the purchase of local products over global ones. Conversely, non-ethnocentric consumers tend to prefer global brands. Steenkamp (2019) affirmed that the preference for global brands

is weaker in the case of consumers with high levels of ethnocentrism and who identify themselves with their country of origin (Westjohn et al., 2012).

Overall, even if the culture identity theory and consumer ethnocentrism demonstrated to be factors that can predict the preference of consumers between local or global brands, they are mainly focused on consumers' characteristics. Subsequent studies analyzed and theorized different factors related to the specific product category in order to measure the intensity of its influence (Davvetas & Diamantopoulos, 2016).

2.4. Product Category Involvement

Davvetas and Diamantopoulos (2016) started to develop a theoretical framework to explicate the effects of product category on the global/local brand preference. In particular, these authors sustained that the preference of consumers for these two alternative categories of brands is linked to the specific product category. Starting from this assumption, they hypothesized that consumer perceptions toward global versus local brand superiority vary across product categories. Notably, they introduced in their study a new construct, namely the "global brand superiority in the category" (GBSC) to capture consumers' perceptions of the relative superiority of global vs. local alternatives within a particular product category. In more detail, they showed that responses to global or local brands are determined by product categories and that brand evaluations and preferences depend on whether the product category is perceived as having superior global or local brands. In this way, they demonstrated that when consumers recognize a local brand as the best one in a given product category, they will tend to prefer and to purchase local products and vice versa.

By focusing on the concepts of global brands, ethnocentrism, and brand trust, Rosenbloom and Haefner (2009) tried to determine how their interaction can influence the marketing strategies at a global level. Findings revealed that consumers tend to attribute different levels of importance in the purchase process of a brand depending on its products category. For instance, they are much more likely to buy global brands in the mobile phone, television, and computer categories. This means that, in the technology sector, brand trust is more elevated for global products/brands. Conversely, consumers tend to prefer local brands in the food and beverage category. Indeed, within this industry, brand trust is greater for local brands with respect to global ones. In more detail, the food and beverage sector is strongly linked to cultural contests, thus giving the local brands of this industry the possibility to compete with global ones, especially thanks to their closeness to local taste and traditions (Schuh, 2007).

Overall, the above studies underlined how several constructs play a key role in influencing consumers' preferences for brands. Therefore, the objective of the present paper is to identify how they guide the favoritism by specifically focusing on the food sector within the Italian market.

2.5. Italians and Food

Food is a central topic in individuals' lives, and the food system represents a very complex set of activities defined by Ericksen (2008) as a system that mixes culture, politics, economy, society, and ecosystems.

The consumption of food products represents a very significant factor that influences the way in which individuals perceive themselves and others (Leicht, 2000). Food brings with it not only nutritional functions, but also meanings and practices that, on the one hand, indicate a group culture and identity and, on the other, help differentiate specific groups from others (Wilson, 2006).

At once, the culture suggests somehow what are the products that can be purchased, the consumption practices, and the food customs in each society/group of individuals. To support this theory, Fischler (1988) sustained that food is central to define identity: the way a group of individuals eats helps in the explanation of the organization, its uniqueness, and – at the same time – its diversity to others who have different food consumption patterns. Moreover, food is useful in the definition of individual identities of people since it defines biological, psychological, and social elements. In particular, Alonso, Cockx, and Swinnen (2018) demonstrated that how and why people consume, produce, prepare, share, and eat food products are all aspects profoundly influenced by the culture.

By specifically focusing on the Italian market, Fort (2010, p. 1) said: “For many Italians, their very sense of identity lies in the food, not just of the region in which they were born, but of the town, village, hamlet, even house. And they hold to the superiority of their local produce and dishes with passion. That is why eating your way round Italy is such a continual delight”. This allows for confirming how Italians are known all over the world for their culinary tradition and their strong food culture, which is an element that confirms and strengthens their same identity.

Starting from the relevance of the food sector within the Italian market and from the lack of studies focusing on this context, this specific industry has been selected here in order to analyze consumers' preferences between local and global brands.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

In order to achieve the objective of the present study, a quantitative method has been adopted. In particular, a questionnaire has been administered, whose link was diffused through the social media platforms. Data were collected from September 2019 to January 2020. The final sample was composed of 412 participants.

Table 1 describes the sample's socio-demographic profiles. With the objective of furnishing an adequate and accurate measurement

of the phenomenon and identifying the traits/characteristics of Italian consumers that mainly influence their preference between local and global brands in the food sector, the questionnaire was structured into three macro-sections: i) analysis of the preference of Italian consumers between a local or global brand in the food sector; ii) analysis of the influence of consumers' different characteristics (e.g., socio-demography, economy, identity, level of ethnocentrism) on their purchase process in the food market; iii) analysis of the brands indicated by the respondents in order to examine specific brand-related factors.

The product selected to study consumers' preferences is the "chocolate bar". Notably, it has been chosen for two main reasons: it is a very common product and it offers many alternatives in terms of local and global brands.

3.2. Questionnaire

In the questionnaire design, the extant literature was examined in order to formulate the questions. In detail, it was asked to rate the benefits sought, the cultural identity theory, the consumer ethnocentrism, the GBSC. Participants were then asked to name an Italian/local brand of chocolate bar as well as a global one by also requesting them, in a second step, to indicate which of the two they would rather buy.

Additional questions were inserted to investigate some brand-related characteristics, that is: purchase motivation, perceived brand quality, brand trust, brand attitude and consumer-brand identification. For all the items, a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = "completely disagree" and 5 = "completely agree", was adopted. Table 2 provides a complete list of the items used for this study along with the adopted literature.

Table 1
Description of the Sample

	Frequency	%
Sex		
Masculine	203	49.3
Feminine	209	50.7
Age (years)		
Less than 25	67	16.3
25-35	128	31.1
36-45	72	17.5
46-60	127	30.8
More than 60	18	4.4

Table 1 – continued

	Frequency	%
Members of family		
Have children	208	50.5
Don't have children	204	49.5
Area of residence		
North-East	76	18.4
North-West	45	10.9
Center	144	35.0
South	110	26.7
Islands	37	9.0
Profession		
Student	105	25.5
Teacher	18	4.4
Employee	126	30.6
Freelancer	49	11.9
Out of work	35	8.5
Other	79	19.2
Average annual income (EUR)		
0–10,000	136	33.0
11,00–30,000	203	49.3
31,00–50,000	70	17.0
> 50,000	3	0.7

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 2
Overview of Variables

Constructs	Items	Main sources
Benefits sought	Food is important Food products I purchase must be of high quality	Vidotto et al. (2006)

Table 2 – continued

Constructs	Items	Main sources
Product category involvement	<p>I am very interested in anything related to food products</p> <p>Which brand of food products I buy matters a lot</p> <p>I value food products as an important part of my life</p> <p>Food products mean a lot to me</p>	Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012)
Cultural identity theory	<p>My heart mostly belongs to the whole world</p> <p>I believe people should be made more aware of how connected we are to the rest of the world</p> <p>I identify myself as a global citizen</p> <p>I care about knowing global events</p> <p>My heart mostly belongs to my local community</p> <p>I respect the local traditions</p> <p>I identify myself as a local citizen</p> <p>I care about knowing local events</p>	Tu et al. (2012)
Consumer ethnocentrism	<p>Buying local products helps to maintain local employment</p> <p>Even if it's more costly, I prefer to buy products from my local region</p> <p>To protect local products, there should be a tax on imported products</p> <p>I prefer to buy from my local region, rather than products manufactured outside of it</p> <p>Only products that have been manufactured in my area should be marketed locally</p>	Yldiz et al. (2018)
Global superiority in the category	<p>When it comes to food products, Italian (local) brands are better than global brands</p> <p>A local food product is better than a global food product</p> <p>In the product category of food system, I usually prefer local brands</p> <p>In the product category of food system, there are no good global alternatives</p>	Davvetas & Diamantopoulos (2016)

Table 2 – continued

Constructs	Items	Main sources
Local/global brand	What do you think is a local brand?	Halkias et al. (2016)
	What is the association you have with a local brand?	
	What do you think is a global brand?	
	What is the association you have with a global brand?	
	Indicate a non-Italian chocolate bar brand that comes to your mind	
	Indicate an Italian chocolate bar brand that comes to your mind	
	Indicate the country of origin of that brand	
	Which brand, among those indicated, would you buy?	
Purchase motivation	Why would you buy the brand you indicated?	Mascarello et al. (2015)
	Freshness of the products	
	Taste	
	Because it is produced in Italy	
	Because it has origin certificates (i.e. IGP)	
	Quality-price ratio	
	Importance of the brand	
Perceived brand quality	About the brand indicated:	Schuilning & Kapferer (2004); Sichtmann et al. (2019); Konuk (2018)
	It is of high quality	
	The likely quality of this brand is extremely high	
	This brand is always better compared to others	
	I can always count on the high quality of its products	
	Compared to other brands that produce chocolate bars, this brand is of very high quality	
	This brand represents what I want	
	This brand has all the characteristics that I look for	

Table 2 – continued

Constructs	Items	Main sources
Brand trust	About the brand indicated:	Song et al. (2019)
	I trust the brand	
	I think this brand strives to keep its promise to customers	
	I would like the brand to continue to provide quality service to its customers	
	These brands' products meet my expectation	
Brand attitude	My opinion about this brand is negative/positive	Halkias et al. (2016)
	This is a good brand	
	I do like this brand	
Consumer-brand identification	This brand reflects who I am	Sichtmann et al. (2019)
	I can identify with this brand	
	I feel a personal connection to this brand	
	This brand suits me well	

4. Results

4.1. Cluster Analysis

For describing the main traits and characteristics of the phenomenon, a cluster analysis has been carried on. The cluster analysis allows for grouping into subsets (clusters) elements belonging to a larger set in order to identify groups that are internally more homogeneous and, simultaneously, more heterogeneous than other groups. This type of analysis has been previously adopted in many marketing studies (Luna-Arocas & Li-Ping Tang, 2005). In particular, Ketchen and Shook (1996) affirmed that this methodology gives the possibility to include different variables that can help establish the definition and create powerful descriptions of the analyzed phenomenon.

Thanks to the software used (SPSS), a K-Mean methodology has been adopted, which ensures minimized inertia within single groups and between clusters. The number of the singled-out clusters that emerged was 2, after a series of tests that showed this was the value that returns the clearest and most distinguished differences.

For this analysis, the final cluster centers have been developed (Table 3). By showing the mean of each variable, they allowed for defining and describing the cluster characteristics and profiles as well to identify the peculiar elements for each cluster. The greater or lesser distance between two cluster centers indicates respectively their diversity or similarity.

Table 3 shows the differentiation between the two identified groups: the first one is composed of 221 respondents, the second one comprises 191 subjects.

The first cluster is composed of people who, in the question about the preference between a local or global brand, have indicated the local one because they are certain about the high quality of the used ingredients and because the chocolate bars are produced in Italy and they have labels of origin, which confirms their authenticity and quality. In the scale of the cultural identity theory, their identity tends towards the local extreme; they perceive themselves as Italian citizens who appreciate and respect their country traditions and who are very interested in their country's events. They consider food products as important elements in their lives. These individuals are characterized by elevated levels of ethnocentrism. For this reason, they tend to appreciate Italian food products and to consider them totally superior and of higher quality than global brands. As regards the brand they indicated, they have a big tendency to feel a strong identification with it and to create a more personal connection, because in the majority of the cases, they have indicated brands of products that are produced in their specific living region, allowing an easier identification and a more intimate approach with it.

On the other hand, the second cluster includes people who prefer to purchase global brands of chocolate bars, which are characterized, in their opinion, by a higher level of quality. Moreover, even if they consider food products as a significant part of their life, they are not very involved or interested in the food sector's evolution. These subjects are marked by a very low level of ethnocentrism and their cultural identity is more defined by the global characteristics. Notably, considering that they feel themselves as global citizens and that they are interested in the events of all over the world, they are not very attached to the culture and traditions of their own country. Finally, they do not feel any connection or deep interaction with the brand and they do not perceive it as "warm" or personal.

Table 3
Final Cluster Centers

	Cluster	
	1	2
Consumer-brand identification	3.49	2.71
Purchase motivation	4.41	3.33
Global identity	2.56	4.14
Product category involvement	3.97	3.56

Table 3 – continued

	Cluster	
	1	2
Benefits sought	4.53	4.15
Local identity	4.67	3.10
Consumer ethnocentrism	4.71	2.99
Global superiority in the category	4.52	2.66
Average annual income (EUR)	11,000–30,000	11,000–30,000
Area of residence	Center	Center
Age	36–45 years	25–35 years
Preference	Local brand	Global brand

Source: Own elaboration.

In the second step, the ANOVA (Table 4) was conducted in order to identify the variables that helped better describe the clusters within the sample. Notably, the ANOVA analysis through the F-test revealed how the identified clusters are mainly influenced and determined by two factors: consumer ethnocentrism (520.442) and global brand superiority in the category (574.905). Therefore, by opposing the two clusters based on these two factors, it emerges that, on the one hand, the first group is composed of people who (i) present a very high level of ethnocentrism; (ii) tend to select local brands as the best choice in the food products category, while on the other, the second cluster consists of individuals who (i) are not ethnocentric; (ii) indicate a global brand as the best choice in the food products category.

Table 4
ANOVA

	Mean square	Degrees of freedom	Mean square	Degrees of freedom	F-test	Sign.
Consumer-brand identification	62.844	1	.889	410	70.695	.000
Purchase motivation	119.463	1	.251	410	476.277	.000
Global identity	256.164	1	.720	410	355.962	.000
Product category involvement	17.335	1	.414	410	41.887	.000
Benefits sought	14.579	1	.323	410	45.122	.000

Table 4 – continued

	Mean square	Degrees of freedom	Mean square	Degrees of freedom	F-test	Sign.
Local identity	251.821	1	.517	410	487.514	.000
Consumer ethnocentrism	302.134	1	.581	410	520.442	.000
Global brand superiority in the category	357.003	1	.621	410	574.905	.000
Average annual income (EUR)	10.748	1	.484	410	22.199	.000
Area of residence	3.894	1	1.470	410	2.649	.104
Age	90.148	1	1.173	410	76.832	.000
Preference	30.426	1	.132	410	230.150	.000

Source: Own elaboration.

4.2. Correlations and In-Depth Analysis

In addition to the cluster analysis, other manipulations of data and correlations have been realized in order to better analyze the investigated phenomenon.

Table 5

Correlation Cultural Identity Theory * Consumer Ethnocentrism * GBSC

		Local identity mean	Consumer ethnocentrism mean	Global superiority in the category
Local identity mean	Correlation	1	.859**	.819**
	Sign.		.000	.000
Consumer ethnocentrism mean	Correlation	.859**	1	.882**
	Sign.	.000		.000
Global superiority in the category	Correlation	.819**	.882**	1
	Sign.	.000	.000	.000

Source: Own elaboration.

The correlations analyzed among the levels of consumer ethnocentrism, local identity, and global/local brand superiority in the category allowed for underlining how these elements are strictly connected with each other. Indeed, this demonstrates how they (i) are in direct proportion to the

answers given for these categories; (ii) influence the preference between local and global brands in the food sector. Moreover, these factors are determinant and coherent with the consumers' choice: elevated levels of ethnocentrism, a high propensity towards a local identity, and a positive consideration of the fact that a local brand represents the best choice in the food sector corresponds to the selection of a local chocolate bar brand. On the contrary, low levels of ethnocentrism, the idea that a global brand represents the best option for food products, and a prominent global identity, push consumers to indicate a global brand as the favorite one.

Other in-depth analyses allowed for clarifying further aspects:

- **Perceived brand quality:** the brands indicated and chosen by respondents are considered to be of high quality in the case of preference for both the local brand and the global brand. The chocolate bar indicated is then chosen in any case for its high quality.
- **Brand trust:** consumers who preferred a local brand generally demonstrated higher levels of trust than those who selected a global brand: 81% of respondents attributed brand trust to the Italian brand (vs. 75% for the global brand).
- **Brand attitude:** attitudes and considerations about the preferred brands are positive in the case of both local and global brands. The percentages of positive attitudes towards the brands on the scale are: 87% of positive attitudes for respondents who chose a local brand and 88% for those who preferred a global brand.

Table 6

*Consumer-Brand Identification * Preference*

		CBI				
		1	2	3	4	5
Preference	Italian/ Local brand	19	88	105	60	21
	Global brand	19	39	46	10	5

Source: Own elaboration.

- **Consumer-brand identification:** overall, this value is medium-low, but if we take into consideration also the specific brand indicated during the choice, the survey shows that people tend to identify themselves more strongly with those brands that are strictly linked to the place where they are conceived and manufactured. Therefore, the levels of identification are higher for the respondents indicating a local brand since they feel more “represented” by them by also showing a more personal connection with respect to the individuals preferring global brands. In more detail, 28% of consumers indicating an Italian/local brand attributed a rating on the Likert Scale equal to 4 or 5 for what

concerns the level of identification, while this percentage is significantly reduced (13%) for consumers preferring a global brand.

Finally, by analysing the socio-demographic features, it emerged how some characteristics significantly influence the tendency of individuals to prefer local brands with respect to global ones, and in particular: (i) the age range from 36 to 45; (ii) having children; (iii) the occupation as office workers; (iv) the geographic origin (i.e., south of Italy). Conversely, sex and average annual income do not represent characteristics that can significantly affect consumers' preferences.

5. Conclusions, Implications, and Future Research

The present study enriches the existing global branding literature by integrating the theoretical perspectives on the preference between local and global brands.

From the reading of the results, responses about cultural identity theory clearly demonstrate that when a local identity is more evident, favoritism is to the local brand. Conversely, when identity falls to the global end of the scale, consumers tend to prefer global products and brands, thus confirming the theory and scale elaborated by Zhang and Khare (2009).

The findings also identify a strong correlation between the factor "global brand superiority in the category" (referring to the product category involvement) and the specific choice made by the consumer; indeed, when the respondent thinks of a local brand to be the best one in the food category, they will automatically choose the local chocolate bar and vice versa, thus corroborating the results of Davvetas and Diamantopoulos (2016).

The other aspect considered is consumer ethnocentrism, and for this item too, responses demonstrate a strong correlation with the brand preference; consumers with high levels of ethnocentrism prefer the local brand and conversely, non-ethnocentric consumers prefer global products, thus allowing the theories of Shimp and Sharma (1987) and Steenkamp (2019) to be confirmed.

Considering that these three theories can be particularly valuable and reliable not only separately, the present study proposes an additional novelty by integrating them. In greater detail, by merging the factors identified by Zhang and Khare (2009), Davvetas and Diamantopoulos (2016), and Shimp and Sharma (1987), this study detected their interrelation along with their capability to predict consumers' general characteristics, and consequently their preference between local and global brands. Therefore, the key relevance of considering all these factors together when analyzing customers is underlined.

Moreover, this paper is the first contribution adopting a cluster analysis approach in the Italian food sector. Notably, in order to identify and classify the Italian consumers' characteristics that can predict their preference between local and global brands in the food sector, a non-hierarchical analysis has been performed, which is considered the most appropriate methodology when dealing with quantitative data sets (Malhotra & Birks, 2007).

Particularly, the analysis has allowed the identification of two distinguished groups of consumers: the first group is composed of people (i) showing a more local cultural identity; (ii) with a high level of ethnocentrism; (iii) preferring a local brand when dealing with food products. Conversely, the second cluster consists of individuals (i) showing a more global identity; (ii) with low levels of ethnocentrism; (iii) considering global brands as the best option in the food products category, thus preferring them to local ones. This classification of Italian food consumers suggests some relevant implications for branding managers in terms of communication and positioning strategies for helping organizations to remain competitive in global markets.

Overall, the cluster analysis, the correlations testing, and the in-depth study focused on the main features characterizing the selected brands allowed for highlighting the existence of several factors influencing the preference of consumers between local and global brands in the food sector, thus underlining the relevance of analyzing them in order to predict consumers' favoritism.

Thus, this study uncovered intriguing insights from the Italian market when dealing with the consumption of food products, demonstrating that consumer ethnocentrism and global brand superiority in the category are important signals impacting the brand preference when dealing with local or global food products.

From a managerial perspective, this study emphasizes, for the firms operating in the food sector, the key relevance of the investigated variables in the implementation of positioning and communication strategies aimed at meeting the needs of the specific markets in which they operate. For this reason, they should constantly monitor their customers' characteristics by specifically understanding the general tendencies related to consumer ethnocentrism, cultural identity theory, and GBSC with the final aim of meeting their customers' needs, thus implementing specific communication strategies for each of their products. In more detail, the findings suggest that positioning and communication strategies focused on the global image should be directed to those consumers who: (i) show a more global identity; (ii) do not consider themselves as ethnocentric people; (iii) think that global brands are the best option in the chocolate bar category. Firms should monitor their consumers and strengthen their worldwide image and feeling. Furthermore, they should consider the purchase motivation items that mostly played a role in the choice: "freshness of the products", "taste", "quality-price ratio", and particularly "importance of the brand". For this reason, these companies should stress the relevance of their global image since it represents the main strength of their products and the reason why consumers attribute high quality to them. This factor is also highlighted by the results related to the CBI items. The relationship consumers build with global brands is not "warm" or personal; they feel represented by them because they are a symbol of a global community. Therefore, by purchasing them, they feel part of the entire world, thus corroborating and reinforcing their global cultural identity.

On the contrary, the adoption of local positioning strategies becomes crucial when the firm's target is consumers who (i) show local identities; (ii) feel ethnocentric; (iii) indicate local brands as the best option in the category of chocolate bars. In particular, this study suggests that firms producing local brands should monitor their consumers' characteristics and reactions to their brands, communicate feelings strictly connected to the local area, and particularly focus on the relationship their consumers create with the brand. In this respect, the findings confirm a strong sense of identification when dealing with domestic brands; identification that even rises when the manufactured product is strongly related to a very restricted geographic area. It is thus crucial for these firms to concentrate on the emotional aspects of their local brands with the final aim of creating a "warm" environment for the relationship with consumers, as already stated by Sichtmann et al. (2019). Another important aspect to consider is related to the purchase motivation items: firms operating in domestic environments should pay particular attention, when communicating their values, to the "made in Italy" concept and to the origin certificates (e.g., IGP). Indeed, for the Italian consumers preferring local brands, it is important that the brands they purchase present meaningful origins through, for instance, the presence of origin labels that certify and guarantee the Italian origin.

Table 7 synthesizes, for each identified cluster, the characteristics as well as the main strategies firms should adopt.

Table 7

Cluster Profiles and Related Strategies

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2
Frequency	221 units	191 units
Cultural identity theory	Local identity	Global identity
Consumer ethnocentrism	High level	Low level
Global brand superiority in the category	Local brand – the best one in the category	Global brand – the best one in the category
Consumer-brand identification	High level	Low level
Purchase motivation	Italian origin; Origin certificates (i.e., IGP...)	Worldwide relevance of the brand
Strategies	Monitoring; Local image communication and positioning; Local identification	Monitoring; Global image communication and positioning; Worldwide identification

Source: Own elaboration.

Overall, the findings revealed that cultural factors are essential for brand positioning, particularly in terms of targeting, segmentation, and marketing communications. According to these findings, the consumer local identity is a significant predictor of the local brand preference since consuming local food might protect the cultural and personal identities of consumers (Ferguson & Thompson, 2020). For this reason, marketers of local food products should concentrate on consumers who openly show a stronger local identity by (i) attributing, to their local food brands, associations of confidence in the local culture; (ii) using elements of local traditions; (iii) following local events in local food marketing. For attracting and retaining consumers who show a higher degree of local identity, branding managers should also consider storytelling practices about local brands with the final aim of enhancing the brand uniqueness connected to the specific territory. In addition, local managers should use social media to develop various communication campaigns emphasizing the brand's authenticity and quality in order to boost consumers' perception of localness. Global brands should do the opposite: use the communication channels spread thanks to internet platforms to strengthen and promote the status symbol and prestige connotations to which their key customers are usually attracted.

The present study is the first to simultaneously consider the theoretical approaches analyzed for realizing a cluster analysis in the Italian food sector, and as such, the findings presented herein are by no means conclusive and are subject to several limitations that indicate directions for future research.

Firstly, given that the sample is composed of Italian consumers, this did not allow the generalizability of the results. Considering that consumers' purchasing patterns can vary according to the geographical context, it would be interesting to apply the same methodological approach to other countries, thus detecting possible similarities/differences in consumers' favoritism between local and global brands.

Secondly, the sample is mainly made up of participants who live in mainland Italy. Therefore, this did not allow the islands (i.e., Sicily and Sardinia) to be deeply considered. It could be interesting to extend, in future research, the analysis to these regions with the final aim of identifying and verifying if the consumers coming from these geographical areas present different tendencies with respect to their preferences for global or local brands. The researchers adopted the snowball sampling technique, which cannot guarantee the representation of samples. As a result, the participation of respondents in this study was limited, but the sample was diverse and spread across the country. For future research, the sample could be increased with the final aim of providing a more realistic picture of the Italian consumers' perception of global and local brands.

Thirdly, this study focuses on the narrow category of chocolate bar products. Therefore, this does not allow for generalizing the results to

other food products. However, it could be assumed that the results could be applied to other culturally-loaded Italian food products.

Finally, the interpretation of the findings should also consider that our study is confined to a single country in an economically developed European market. It would be interesting to further analyze this aspect since consumers of emerging markets tend to exhibit a stronger preference for global brands than consumers of mature markets (Batra et al., 2000) where local brand offerings are highly competitive.

Acknowledgements

This publication includes, among the authors, a researcher awarded with a fixed-term type A research contract on innovation topics as per art. 24, para. 3 of Italian Law no. 240 of 30 December 2010, co-financed by the European Union – NOP Research and Innovation 2014-2020 resources as per Italian MD no. 1062 of 10 August 2021.

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