

Full Length Research Paper

The influence of ethnocentrism and Halal trust on attitudes toward products from non-Muslim countries: A study of Moroccan consumers

Giada Mainolfi^{1*} and Riccardo Resciniti²

¹Faculty of Economics, University of International Studies of Rome, Via C. Colombo, 200-Rome, IT, Italy.

²Department of Law, Economics, Management and Quantitative Methods, University of Sannio, Piazza Arechi-Benevento, IT, Italy.

Received 6 August, 2018; Accepted 25 October, 2018

Several studies show that the consumer ethnocentrism is capable of influencing consumption patterns both in terms of negative impact on consumer attitudes toward foreign products and positive influence on the intention to purchase domestic offers. The study extends the investigation of this research area toward Muslim countries, analysing the impact of interactions between consumer ethnocentrism and halal trust on the use of country image components, as well as the propensity to consume halal products from non-Muslim countries. The analytical framework was tested through an empirical study conducted on a sample of Moroccan consumers, called to evaluate Made in Italy Halal products. The findings contribute to advancing the theory and empirical studies on consumer ethnocentrism in a cross-cultural perspective. Moreover, the results can support international companies to design effective marketing strategies capable of exploiting the potential of emerging Muslim countries.

Key words: Ethnocentrism, general country image, Halal trust, product beliefs, product receptivity.

INTRODUCTION

During the past few decades, many articles have dealt with the role of product-country images (PCI) in consumer behaviour, emphasising the role of country-of-origin (COO) on consumer perceptions of foreign products (Manrai and Manrai, 1995; Demirbag et al., 2010). This growing interest is due to the competitive pressures that foreign firms must cope with in different parts of the world. The global marketplace has allowed companies to easily access many customers from a wide range of international markets. In developed countries, businesses search for new markets, namely emerging

countries, since their domestic markets are mature and saturated because of high competition. Emerging economies are often characterised by very different cultural, social and religious norms, thus requiring careful assessment of consumer perceptions about the receptivity of foreign products (Kaeeni, 2014).

Accordingly, researchers have intensively examined the effect of country-of-origin both on judgements made regarding product beliefs (Nagashima, 1970; Parameswaran and Pisharodi, 1994; Papadopoulos and Heslop (2000) and purchasing behaviour (Ettenson,

*Corresponding author. E-mail: giada.mainolfi@unint.eu. Tel: (+39) 06.51077203.

1993). Studies suggest that consumers in developed markets prefer products manufactured in their home country (Bilkey and Nes, 1982). Similarly, research has found that products from culturally similar countries, in contrast to those from countries perceived as culturally divergent, are preferred (Watson and Wright, 2000). A relevant cultural dimension that may explain these effects is consumer ethnocentrism, interpreted as the consumer's belief that it is right, or rather morally appropriate, to prefer products from their home country rather than goods coming from foreign ones (Lantz and Loeb, 1996; Sharma et al., 1995; Shimp and Sharma, 1987). The relevance of this topic is also testified to by increasing attempts recently at investigating behavioural patterns of consumers in cross-national settings. Kaynak and Kara (2002), for example, emphasised the need to widen the area of investigation to include emerging countries such as Turkey or Latin America. Despite the vast literature on this topic, studies have so far focused their attention on limited geographic areas, mainly in developed countries (USA, Canada, Europe), neglecting Muslim countries (El-Omari, 2008). This condition has had a clear impact on the cross-national validation of theoretical assumptions related to the wide phenomenology of the country-of-origin effect. Moreover, recent studies have also highlighted the feelings of hostility of consumers across Muslim countries toward US and European products (Tabassi et al., 2012; Leong et al., 2008; Rose et al., 2008). It has been acknowledged that consumers make rational decisions about products by comparing attributes of the products (Ahmed et al., 2013).

However, emotions, above all when linked to cultural issues, play an incisive role in consumer perception and purchase of foreign products, as demonstrated by previous studies (De Nisco et al., 2016; Maherswaran, 2006). Although religion has always played a key role in consumer behaviour studies, religion itself and its influences have been perceived as a sort of banned subject matter in marketing areas (Hirschman, 1983; Kaynak and Eksi, 2011). Nonetheless, there is still a dearth of investigation about the influence of religion on the consumer decision making process. Only a few studies in the literature on country-of-origin effects have investigated the potential influences exerted by religiosity and ethnic-religious certifications on the country image components of foreign nations (Asgari, 2015; Haque et al., 2011). An example in this sense is the Halal certification, which certifies the compliance of some types of products (food, toiletries, fashion, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics and services) with the Islamic doctrine.

The Arabic word "Halal" means lawful, and it is associated with everything that is in conformity with the Shariah, the sacred law of Islam. Considering that currently the Muslim population constitutes about 25% of the world population (1.65 billion), and that in 2030 it will reach 2.2 billion, it is clear that the issue of Halal

certification cannot be underestimated. Promoting Halal products to foreign markets can be considered an innovation especially for non-Muslim countries, but it increasingly requires the activation of proper international marketing strategies (Pew, 2015; Lada et al., 2009). Therefore, there are still some open questions. Are Halal brands from non-Muslim countries reliable? To what extent can the positive image of the foreign country assure the Muslim consumer? The scarcity of theory-driven research on behavioural relationships between Halal trust, purchase intentions and country image calls for further research investigations (Abdul and Chok, 2012; Zainalabidin et al., 2008).

Following this perspective, the purpose of the present study is to widen the knowledge on consumer ethnocentrism through the proposal and empirical verification of a research model aimed at evaluating the influences exerted by consumer ethnocentrism and Halal trust on the use of country image components by Muslim consumers. More specifically, the paper aims at examining how the interaction between Halal certification and ethnocentric tendencies can impact the foreign product-country image and the consumption of Halal products from non-Muslim countries.

As highlighted earlier, although consumer ethnocentrism is a well-developed research subject, some gaps emerge from the literature review, thus guiding the goals of this study. First, although the main studies on ethnocentrism have analysed consumer perceptions of foreign products and readiness to buy them as dependent variables, this research also contemplates the influence on the general country image of a foreign country. Second, recent studies acknowledge that country-of-origin can impact the purchase of Halal products (Borzooei and Asgari, 2015). However, no prior research has empirically examined consumer ethnocentrism as an antecedent of Halal trust. The present study delivers a framework aimed at clarifying the relationships between the two constructs and their influence on intentions to buy Halal products from non-Muslim countries. Furthermore, we also test the indirect effect of consumer ethnocentrism through Halal trust on the receptivity of Halal products.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Globalisation has allowed companies to transfer their products all over the world, thereby giving customers the chance to choose from a great variety of products and services. Sometimes, due to poor product adaptation, consumers find it difficult and expensive to gain extra information on foreign product quality and on the reputation of foreign firms. This may push international consumers to reject foreign products for not being adequately familiar (Tabassi et al., 2012). Country-of-origin may act as a rescue anchor when

evaluating foreign products and firms. An abundant literature on the country-of-origin effect (Bannister and Saunders, 1978; Tan and Farley, 1987; Papadopoulos et al., 2013) seems to leave no doubt that the country-of-origin of a product represents an extrinsic cue, on a par with price and brand, capable of influencing the perceptions and behaviour of foreign consumers.

Positive emotions and sympathy aroused by a specific country may reduce the risk associated with the purchase of a specific product or brand. Consequently, consumer purchase intentions are in some way prejudiced by perceptions and emotional factors. However, when consumers are exposed to products from a certain country, they usually correlate them with certain memories and feelings concerning both the foreign country and their attachment to their own culture of origin (Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999; Matarazzo et al., 2016). Therefore, elements such as religiosity, animosity and ethnocentrism are components of consumer emotions capable of affecting product purchases (Ahmed et al., 2013).

Consumer ethnocentrism is a dimension that can explain the preference for domestic products and the refusal to buy foreign ones. It may be interpreted as the set of normative beliefs that buying national products is more helpful to the national economy than purchasing imported goods (Luque-Martinez et al., 2000). The literature on consumer ethnocentrism shows that consumers who display high ethnocentrism express unreasonably favourable evaluations of domestic products in comparison with imported ones (Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2004; Laroche et al., 2005; Shankarmahesh, 2006). Hence, studies in this field have demonstrated that ethnocentric consumers formulate negative judgments regarding foreign product quality and advertisements of foreign companies, and they also display negative attitudes toward buying foreign products. Positive connections are instead evident with respect to the preference for domestic goods and the willingness to purchase them. Animosity, instead, embodies feelings of hostility and anger toward a country due to economic, political or military tensions (Klein et al., 1998: 90). Unlike consumer ethnocentrism, past studies have shown that animosity may impact behavioural intentions but not foreign product judgements. Moreover, the related literature emphasises the importance of religion and ethnicity for social identity and individual preferences. For example, Ahmed et al. (2013) highlighted the importance of investigating the role played by consumer ethnocentrism in multi-cultural countries like Malaysia, where ethnocentric tendencies may be more affected by religious issues. Religion is a powerful factor in shaping consumption decisions. Past evidence has shown that religion influences consumer attitudes and behaviour in general (Pettinger et al., 2004), together with food purchasing decisions (Rezai et al., 2012) and eating customs (Mullen et al., 2000; Just et al., 2007). Few authors, like Essoo and Dibb (2004)

have fully recognised its role in consumer behaviour studies by clarifying its impact on consumer attitudes toward particular products and services. Moreover, Huneke (2005) investigated the role of religion and spirituality in producing anti-consumption behaviour associated with a desire to simplify routines.

The impact of religion on consumer behaviour depends on the extent to which individuals observe the teachings of their own religion. In this sense, Islam is a doctrine that globally permeates the way of life through rules and practices constructed around five principles (witnessing, prayer, charity, fasting, and pilgrimage) that every Muslim must follow. Islam proposes a system of life called *Sharia'h*, the Islamic law which guides Muslims in every aspect of their life. According to Islamic doctrine, activities and relations should comply with the constraints of "Halal" and "Haram" as set forth in the Islamic Shariah. Halal items refer to permitted actions and consumptions whereas Haram indicates forbidden behaviours and consumptions; thus, Muslim consumption behaviour is subject to prohibited and allowed activities and products (Golzaz et al., 2012a). As a result, the use and consumption of products and services are guided by the presence of the Halal logo, as this sign ensures the conformity to and the respect of Shariah law. Halal certification has become a standard in Islamic countries. Halal labelling can create a distinctive product positioning compared to its non-Halal alternatives by helping Muslim consumers in their choice of products and services.

Following this perspective, the Islamic marketing literature has devoted great attention to the Halal issue, focusing on the Halal market features (Boroeei and Asgari, 2014), the Halal supply chain (Tienam, 2011), Halal certification (Shafie and Othman, 2006), Halal branding (Boroeei and Asgari, 2013), and the non-Muslim perception of Halal (Golzaz et al., 2012b). Recently, some researchers have investigated Muslim consumers' acceptance of different categories of Halal-labelled products and their alternatives in the market (Ali, 2012). For example, Alserhan (2010a, 2010b) stated that Shariah-compliance (certification by an Islamic authority) and Muslim markets as a target audience are two necessary requirements of a Halal brand, along with the country of origin. From this standpoint, Shariah-compliant products made in a Muslim majority country and addressed to a Muslim audience can be classified as a "true Halal brand" whereas such a product coming from a non-Muslim country is considered as an "inbound Halal brand" (Ali, 2014). Research shows that some Muslim consumers may express doubts about the trustworthiness and authenticity of the Halal certification from non-Muslim majority countries. The juxtaposition between a "true" and "assumed" Halal brand may inexorably generate a different persuasive role for the Halal logo. This issue has become increasingly relevant due to the growing importance of international trade, which has allowed non-Muslim

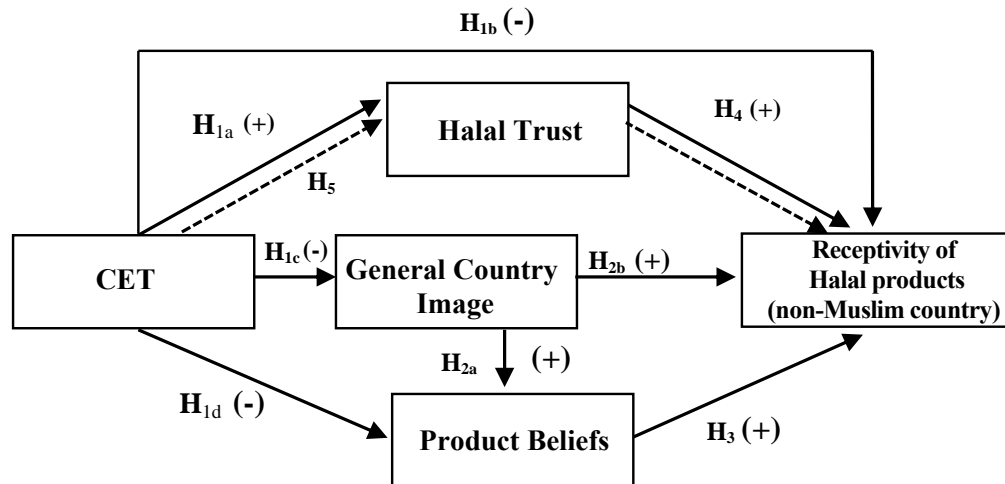


Figure 1. Conceptual model and hypothesised relationships.

countries to gain positions in the Halal global market. Despite the seeming relevance of such issues, empirical studies that investigate the impact of culture, religion and country image on consumer responses toward foreign products are still inadequate.

The present study contributes to this call for research by examining, from a unitary perspective, the relations existing simultaneously among consumer ethnocentrism, Halal trust, country image and behavioural intentions.

From the theoretical point of view, the research model proposed in this study integrates common issues, drawing from three streams of research: consumer ethnocentrism (CET) (Sharma, 2014; Shankarmahesh, 2006; Klein, 2002; Balabanis et al., 2001; Shimp and Sharma, 1987), Halal trust (Hanzaee and Ramezani, 2011; Zainalabidin et al., 2008), and product-country images (Knight and Calantone, 2000; Laroche et al., 2005; Martin and Eroglu, 1993; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999), which have dealt more extensively with the effect of product-country images on consumer behaviour. The model builds on studies on the influences of consumer ethnocentrism and Halal trust, and their interactions, on judgements and intentions to buy foreign products from countries with different religious beliefs. The structure of the model is as shown in Figure 1. The main assumption is that consumer ethnocentrism has a positive influence on Halal trust, while negatively affecting general country image, product beliefs and the receptivity of Halal products (non-Muslim country). Moreover, it is assumed that Halal trust has a positive influence on the receptivity of Halal products (non-Muslim country). Finally, based on the country image studies, it is hypothesised that general country image positively influences both product beliefs and the receptivity of Halal products. Similarly, product beliefs can exert a positive impact on product receptivity.

Through an extensive review of the relevant literature of the main research streams, it was possible to identify the most robust constructs and choose the most suitable ones in terms of theoretical relevance and expected predictive validity. As a result, five constructs have been included in the model:

- (a) *Consumer ethnocentrism (CET)*, defined as the shared judgment about the moral appropriateness of preferring domestic products over goods from foreign countries (Shimp and Sharma, 1987);
- (b) *Halal trust*, interpreted as the tendency of Muslim consumers to rely on Halal certification to make purchases allowed under the principles of Islam (Zainalabidin et al., 2008);
- (c) *General country image*, defined as the set of generalised images associated not only with the most representative productions but also with the degree of economic and political development, historical events, cultural heritage, and the level of technological growth and progress (Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009: 727);
- (d) *Product beliefs*, resulting from the cognitive judgments that individuals own with respect to foreign products (Elliot et al., 2011);
- (e) *Product receptivity*, defined as the implicit or explicit propensity to accept foreign goods (Dhar and Kim, 2007).

Influence of consumer ethnocentrism on Halal trust and the receptivity of Halal products (non-Muslim country)

The consumer-specific construct of CET is linked to the main concept of ethnocentrism, interpreted as a tendency of an individual to be ethnically rooted to the point of rejecting everything that is not culturally similar

to the group (country) of origin (Sumner, 1906: 17). The international marketing literature has paid great attention to consumer ethnocentrism (Moon, 2004; Saffu and Walker, 2005), considered as a significant cultural dimension within the broader context of the country-of-origin effect framework capable of moderating product-country image (PCI) effects.

As theorised by Shimp and Sharma (1987), consumer ethnocentrism, or "CET" describes consumer predilection for domestic products not only because such behaviour is judged to be morally right but also because, more importantly, ethnocentric consumers consider those goods to be superior. Such consumers show a physiological aversion to most foreign products. In addition, consumer ethnocentrism focuses on the responsibility and morality of purchasing foreign-made products and the loyalty of consumers toward national production. Ethnocentric consumers believe that purchasing imports is wrong, in part because it is injurious to the economy, causing a loss of jobs in national industries. This danger causes individuals to stop purchasing imported goods and to push other compatriots to do the same (Huddleston, 2001). The construct can, therefore, be considered an antecedent to an aversion to buy foreign products in general. Though the negative impact of CET on intention to buy foreign products is supported by previous studies (Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2004; Watson and Wright, 2000; Lantz and Loeb, 1996; Herche, 1992, 1994), some recent empirical investigations have revealed the opposite results. The contribution of knowledge gained in this field has not yet been replicated from a cross-national perspective. In particular, there is still a dearth of research aimed at evaluating whether such ethnocentric influences can also be validated in Muslim countries, characterised by strong links between social behaviours and religious norms. The resurgence of Islam has led to an increased consciousness in Islamic markets on the contents, processes, sources, and other determinants of consumption choices. Consumer choices are strongly influenced by religious devotion. In this sense, Muslim consumers will evaluate buying new products if they do not violate their sacred values (Said et al., 2014). Religious commitment shapes consumption patterns. It can be assumed that a highly devoted person will see the world (other countries and cultures) through religious schemas (Mokhlis, 2006). Recently, Islamic marketing literature has emphasised the understanding of interactions between religiosity and ethnocentrism and their combined effects on the purchasing behaviour of Muslim consumers toward foreign products (Tabassi et al., 2012). Through a survey on Malaysian Muslim consumers, Ahmed et al. (2013) found that religiosity plays a significant role in directly influencing the ethnocentric tendencies of consumers and in indirectly impacting intentions to buy foreign products via animosity. Moreover, a study by Tabassi et al. (2012),

again for the Malaysian market, showed a significant and negative relationship between ethnocentrism and religiosity and Malaysian consumers' intention to buy European products. Therefore, there is quite unanimous agreement that the interactions between religious issues and ethnocentrism may impact the evaluation of and attitudes toward foreign products. However, up to now studies have neglected the evaluation of the role exerted by religious brands, like Halal (Alserhan, 2010a), within the aforementioned framework. It appears evident that such issues need to be further investigated by expanding the action range of ethnocentrism to Halal issues. As already highlighted, Halal can be seen as a quality feature that cannot easily be verified by a consumer prior to purchase. Therefore, consumers must rely only on the reliability of Halal certification in conferring a guiding role to the external elements, namely the Halal logo. In fact, the Halal certification brand enables customers to balance the lack of knowledge and information. Such a condition inevitably calls into play the concept of brand trust, interpreted as feelings of security by the consumer in his/her contacts with the brand, to the point of making the consumer view it as reliable and with confidence in terms of his or her interests and expectations (Munuera-Aleman et al., 2003: 12).

Following this perspective, and considering the growing relevance gained by the Halal certification as a tangible tool capable of directing Muslim consumer choices, we have decided to investigate the potential impact exerted by consumer ethnocentrism on Halal trust, defined as the tendency of Muslim consumers to rely on the Halal logo to make purchases in accordance with the principles of Islam, and by the effects of this on purchasing intentions toward Halal products coming from a non-Muslim country.

Based on these arguments, it was hypothesized that:

H1a: The higher the level of ethnocentric tendencies of consumers, the higher their Halal trust;

H1b: The higher the level of ethnocentric tendencies of consumers, the lower their intention to purchase foreign Halal products.

Influence of consumer ethnocentrism on the evaluation of general country image and product beliefs

Consumer ethnocentrism has a distinctive and unique effect on the evaluation of purchasing intentions. Consumers who judge the purchase of foreign products to be immoral also tend to formulate negative evaluations of the quality of those goods and to evaluate domestic ones more favourably (Han, 1988; John and Brady, 2011; Klein et al., 1998; Shimp and Sharma, 1987). Most empirical studies have focused on the negative influence of CET on different consumer outcomes,

such as purchase intention (Han, 1988), attitudes toward foreign products (Sharma et al., 1995), and the preference to buy domestic products (Olsen et al., 1993) or foreign products (Klein et al., 1998). These relations have been investigated with the help of mediating variables, comprising the perceived quality of the product (Klein et al., 1998) and the national identity, which embodies the feelings of affinity and empathy for employees of national companies (Klein et al., 1998; Shankarmahesh, 2006).

An empirical study by Brodowsky (1998) highlighted that consumers with a low level of ethnocentrism are inclined to use the beliefs related to the image of a foreign country as an "objective" index for the assessment of the choice between domestic and foreign goods. On the contrary, high ethnocentric consumers use the same beliefs to link patriotic implications to their purchasing choices. Through a survey on the Indian market, Haque et al. (2015) found that both ethnocentrism and religiosity can negatively impact the intention to purchase imported products.

However, although these findings have received great attention, supporting the assumption that the country-of-origin effect cannot be examined by neglecting consumer ethnocentrism, later contributions on the subject do not seem to have provided sufficient evidence on the interactions between ethnocentrism, country image and the behaviour regarding consumer purchases. In fact, although past studies have confirmed the negative influence of CET on the evaluation and receptivity of foreign products (Li et al., 2012; Kaynak and Kara, 2002), there is still a dearth of research on whether such ethnocentric feelings can also impact the general reputation of a foreign country. Moreover, as mentioned before, previous research has focused attention on limited geographic areas, mainly located in developed countries (USA, Canada, Europe), neglecting Muslim countries and compromising the cross-national validity of the theoretical assumptions.

Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

H1c: Consumer ethnocentrism negatively influences general country image;

H1d: Consumer ethnocentrism negatively influences product beliefs.

Influence of general country image on the product beliefs and product receptivity of Halal products

The effect of a product's country-of-origin on consumer perceptions is one of the most researched topics within the international marketing literature. Most scholars agree that the image of a country is a set of beliefs, ideas, expectations and emotional feelings a person holds about a specific country. This strand of research has particularly focused on attitudes toward products made in (or associated with) a foreign country on the basis of

a three-dimensional attitude framework (cognitive, affective and conative dimensions) (De Nisco et al., 2016). Past studies have provided reliable empirical evidence that country image may impact perceptions of foreign products and brands (Martin and Eroglu, 1993). With reference to product-country images, in the early 80s Papadopoulos et al. (1988) proposed separate scales for the measurement of country image and product beliefs, confirming the existence of a direct causal link between the two constructs. Such a relation was also demonstrated in subsequent studies (Knight and Colantone, 2000; Heslop et al., 2004; Laroche et al., 2005) which highlighted the moderating roles played by product knowledge and familiarity (Bilkey and Nes, 1982). Therefore, the general country image can be interpreted as a sort of broader (superordinate) level in the perceptive categorization of environmental information processed by the consumer, whereas the image of national (foreign) production may represent a narrower (subordinate) level originating from the main construct (McNamara, 1986).

PCI research shows that origin may influence the evaluation of foreign products considered both in general or with respect to specific categories (Felzensztein and Dinnie, 2008; Chryssochoidis et al., 2007; Piron, 2000; Kaynak et al., 1983). Likewise, origin biases exist for advanced, less advanced and emerging countries (Wang et al., 2012; Hamzaoui and Merunka, 2007; Kaynak et al., 2000) and for both end-users and industrial buyers (Insch, 2003; Dvezer and Quester, 1999; Ahmed and d'Astous, 1993). Furthermore, scholars have also underlined the impact of country image on consumer purchase intentions in general (Kalicharan, 2014) and with respect to specific productive sectors, that is, the fashion industry (Abedniya and Zaeim, 2011; Patterson and Tai, 1991; Parkvithee and Miranda, 2012), luxury products (Aiello et al., 2009), technological devices (Prendergast et al., 2010), and food products (Berry et al., 2015).

Moreover, theoretical contributions from the literature demonstrate that country-of-origin might imply normative connotations related to the fact that the consumer's final decision whether or not to buy products originating from a specific foreign country can be interpreted as a signal in favour or against the politics or actions of a country (Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999). Recent studies also highlight the importance of religious beliefs in shaping perceptions toward a foreign country and its products (Ahmed et al., 2013). However, the country-of-origin literature has completely neglected the analysis of the impact exerted by country image and product beliefs on intention to buy products from countries showing a different system of religious beliefs. There is a specific lack of research on the effect of country-of-origin on the purchasing of Halal brands (Borzooei and Asgari, 2015). Only a recent study by Rios et al. (2014) has demonstrated that country reputation can impact the trustworthiness and receptivity of Halal

products from Muslim countries. It appears evident that such issues need to be further investigated by expanding the cultural boundaries of the constructs' domains, for example, toward religious certifications, which undoubtedly may represent a necessary guide in the decision-making process of the end-consumers.

Therefore, in the present model, general country image plays a significant role in influencing both the product beliefs and product receptivity of Halal products from a non-Muslim country. In line with the mentioned observations, it was hypothesised that:

H2: General country image has a positive effect on product beliefs (H2a) and on the receptivity of Halal products (non-Muslim country) (H2b).

The effect of Halal trust on the receptivity of Halal products (non-Muslim country)

The Halal logo on products has become a global sign that can reassure devotees, but also customers, in terms of quality assurance and lifestyle needs. As already stated, Halal is usually used to indicate something that a Muslim is allowed to engage in. Muslim consumers are demanding in terms of health and quality products that, at the same time, must conform to Sharia requirements. The Halal religious certification is a typical trust process where consumers expect specific quality characteristics that, however, can hardly be verified or recognised even upon or after consuming the product. Concerning product features, Halal refers to the source, the materials (ingredients) and the processing method, very similar to what occurs with organic food or products, and is equally sensitive to animal welfare and sustainability concerns. These features are not visible and cannot be predetermined by the customer, thereby creating potential quality uncertainty during the pre-purchasing stage. Therefore, consumers must rely on extrinsic cues to compensate for the lack of knowledge (Renazi et al., 2012). Thus, the Halal certification, manifested by the Halal logo, can play a key role in assuring consumers that the product satisfies the necessary requirements to be marked with the certified logo. Previous studies have shown that trust plays a significant influence in shaping consumer behaviour within the Halal food market. A study by Wan Omar et al. (2008) found that marketing-related factors, ingredients and a certified Halal logo have a significant impact on Malaysian consumers' attitudes toward Halal food products.

Recently, the Islamic marketing literature has focused attention on the antecedents behind the intention to buy Halal products, adopting the framework of the theory of planned behaviour (Lada et al., 2009). A recent study by Omar et al. (2012) demonstrated that the planned behaviour theory is a valid model to predict consumer confidence and the intention to choose Halal products.

Except for the study by Omar et al. (2012), in this area there are no empirical studies analysing the effect the trust in Halal certification can exert on the intention to buy Halal products. Although it considers the relationship between confidence and the receptivity of Halal products, the study by Omar et al. (2012) does not provide an integrated framework that highlights the actual role played by Halal trust on the receptivity of Halal products, even considering offers from non-Muslim countries. It is thus hypothesised that:

H4: Halal trust positively influences the receptivity of Halal products (non-Muslim country).

Mediating hypothesis

Consumer perceptions of the quality of a product may be guided by informational cues associated with a brand or a logo (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2010). Consumer trust in what is offered on the marketplace is mainly revealed through their concerns about labels, the certification process that product has to pass, and the use of standards. When seeing a certified label on a product, consumers consider it safer and better in terms of quality and raw materials (Essoussi and Zahaf, 2008). Past studies show that trust in certified logos can act as a mediator between the brand image and consumer choices (Zanoli et al., 2015). Such a mediating role also appears to be significant in the context of religious certifications. For example, with respect to the Halal Muslim certification, consumer trust toward the Halal logo might mediate the perception of Halal certification and intentions to buy (Zakaria et al., 2015). However, research is yet to investigate the potential mediating role of Halal trust between consumer ethnocentrism and the receptivity of Halal products.

Based on these arguments, besides the direct effects of independent consumer ethnocentrism, the present study aims at testing the role of Halal trust in mediating between ethnocentrism and product receptivity of Halal products. Thus, it is hypothesised that:

H5: Halal trust mediates the influence of consumer ethnocentrism on the receptivity of Halal products (non-Muslim country)

METHODOLOGY

Sample and procedure

To verify the hypothesised relationships of the model, a survey was carried out on a sample of Moroccan consumers between September and November 2017. This choice was motivated by the willingness to investigate Muslim consumers' perceptions toward a non-Muslim country characterised, however, by a high attractive image for many national products even in Muslim markets. The survey tool was a questionnaire including the following subjects: the trust in Islamic precepts, ethnocentric orientation, perceptions

toward Italy and its products, and consumer attitudes toward Halal products from a non-Muslim country (Italy). The study addressed face validity issue with a panel of Arab culture experts (two Italian Arabic academics and one Moroccan marketing academic) called to assess the clarity of the questions and, above all, the appropriateness of the questions asked. They first evaluated the English version and then the Arabic one. Thanks to this evaluation stage, the questionnaire was revised, with some items being removed and others rephrased to improve the correct translation of meanings. The procedure was completed with the back-translation from the Arabic to the English version.

During the survey, a team of Moroccan interviewers approached more than 500 Moroccan citizens at public places and shopping centres in the cities of Casablanca and Rabat. At the end of the fieldwork we obtained 350 usable responses after removing incomplete questionnaires, representing a response rate of 70%. This size is well above the minimum of 200 observations recommended by Hair et al. (2006) for SEM studies.

A descriptive analysis of the sample showed that it was quite balanced by gender (56% men, 44% women). With respect to the age of the respondents, 9% of the sample was between 15 and 24 years of age, 33% between 25 and 34, 35% between 35 and 44, 17% between 45 and 65, and 6% of the sample exceeded 65 years of age. Most of the interviewees were resident in Casablanca (42%), Rabat (39%), Kenitra (11%), and Temara (8%).

Measures and confirmatory factor analysis

Seven-point Likert scales derived from similar studies (Table 1) have been used in order to evaluate the perceptions of the respondents. Consumer ethnocentrism was measured through a reduced version of the scale proposed by Shimp and Sharma (1987); general country image and product beliefs were operationalised through items provided in a study by Papadopoulos and Heslop (2000) and Elliot et al. (2011); product receptivity was assessed through a seven-point Likert scale built on items provided in a study by Dhar and Kim (2007); and Halal trust was measured based on a study by Zainalabidin et al. (2008).

Following Anderson and Gerbing (1988), the measurement model was first confirmed and then tested. The first step assessed the internal consistency and reliability of measurement scales (Cronbach's alpha, construct reliability and average variance extracted). The main indicators showed satisfactory goodness of fits (Table 1): CFI=0.96 (recommended value ≥ 0.9); AGFI=0.88 (recommended value ≥ 0.8); NFI=0.95 (recommended value ≥ 0.9); and RMSEA=0.07 (recommended value ≤ 0.07).

The test suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981) and Bagozzi and Yi (1981) was used to assess the reliability and validity of measurement scales. As highlighted in Table 1, each scale was close or above the recommended values for Cronbach's Alpha (≥ 0.7), construct reliability (≥ 0.7) and AVE (≥ 0.5). Discriminant validity assessment was established based on the procedure proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981), requiring that AVE for each construct must be greater than the highest squared correlation between all pairs of constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The results confirmed that discriminant validity was satisfied in this study (Tables 1 and 2).

Finally, to reduce possible common method variance, preliminary solutions were adopted in the questionnaire design stage. First, due to an introductory description of the survey, the questionnaire assured respondents of the anonymity of their replies (Chang et al., 2010). Second, the questionnaire was pre-tested on a small sample of Moroccan respondents to verify the clarity of wording and content validity (Chang et al., 2010). Third, to avoid respondents becoming conscious of the conceptual model, questions related to the dependent and independent variables were not placed close to each other. Finally, the research instrument also comprised

questions on familiarity with Italian products and brands. Through this expedient, respondents could not easily associate items with topics, thus reducing the chance of generating the correlation needed to produce a common method variance.

RESULTS

The structural model has been tested through a system of structural equations using the maximum likelihood estimation method (maximum likelihood). The analysis was conducted with the statistical software LISREL 8.80. The structural model showed good fit overall with Chi-square (d.f. 84) = 206.386 with $\chi^2/df = 2.456$ $p < 0.001$, below the cut-off of 3 (Kline, 2011). RMSEA was 0.07, CFI 0.95, NFI 0.95, and AGFI 0.88 (Table 3). Concerning the first set of hypotheses, the results show that consumer ethnocentrism positively affects Halal trust ($\beta = 0.39$, t -value = 4.08), thus confirming H1a. Ethnocentric tendencies can reinforce the value attributed by customers to the Halal certification. Halal is judged as a way of identifying "in-group" products that one automatically associates with the culture-of-origin. Moreover, confirming previous studies on interactions between CET and the evaluation of foreign products (De Nisco et al., 2016), the findings report a negative impact of CET on product beliefs (H1d) ($\beta = -0.01$, t -value = -1.98). The strong sense of identity nurtured by ethnocentric feelings can lead to negative stereotypes for the "outgroup" (Verlegh, 1999). Conversely, H1c is not verified, thus highlighting that ethnocentrism is not able to directly affect general country image. Similarly, with respect to behavioural outcomes, consumer ethnocentrism does not exert any significant influence on the intention to buy Halal products from non-Muslim countries; thus, H1b is not verified. Such results seem to disconfirm previous studies on consumer ethnocentrism (Shimp and Sharma, 1987; Javalgi et al., 2005). However, the findings of the study move in the direction of recent theoretical attempts to extend the cross-national validity of the CET construct by also investigating more in-depth its impact on perceptual and behavioural outcomes (Bi et al., 2012; Siemieniako et al., 2011; Torres and Gutiérrez, 2007). In fact, the results of some recent empirical investigations are inconsistent with much of the existing literature. For example, Siamagka and Balabanis (2015: 78) showed that consumers might be emotionally attached to domestic products but discouraged by other factors, for example, quality. Similarly, ethnocentric consumers may be cognitively devoted to domestic products but might prefer foreign products, since they view these as more familiar. Through a survey on the Chinese market, Bi et al. (2012) showed that Chinese consumers may feel but not express ethnocentric feelings through negative product judgments or anti-consumption behaviour toward imported products.

Regarding the interactions between general country

Table 1. Measurement scales, confirmatory analysis, Cronbach's alpha, construct reliability and AVE.

Parameter	Mean (Std. Dev.)	λ Scores (Stand. Coeff.)	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Consumer ethnocentrism			0.71	0.78	0.72
Only those products that are unavailable in home country should be imported	6.95 (0.22)	0.639			
It is always better to purchase national products	6.82 (0.45)	0.791			
I should always buy national products to let my fellow citizens work	6.91 (0.32)	0.864			
There should be more limits on imports	6.73 (0.61)	0.617			
General country image			0.87	0.70	0.65
High quality of life	6.18 (0.65)	0.647			
Friendly population	6.35 (0.65)	0.814			
High technological level	6.31 (0.73)	0.795			
Advanced education level	6.43 (0.68)	0.727			
Ideal country to live	5.28 (0.94)	0.701			
Halal trust			0.86	0.80	0.74
I trust the Halal logo	5.58 (1.60)	0.657			
I rely on the Halal certification	6.93 (0.32)	0.886			
Certified Halal products are safe	4.10 (1.30)	0.676			
Product beliefs			0.75	0.71	0.66
High quality products	6.16 (1.18)	0.728			
Innovative products	6.39 (1.01)	0.858			
High value products	5.68 (1.01)	0.802			
Receptivity of halal products (non-Muslim country)			0.74	0.74	0.65
I would recommend the purchase of Italian Halal products to relatives and friends	5.25 (1.40)	0.609			
I would pay a higher price to buy an original Italian Halal product	5.60 (1.20)	0.743			
In the next six months I am going to buy an Italian Halal product	5.85 (1.08)	0.897			

Fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 206.386$ (d.f. 84; $p < 0.001$); CFI=0.96; NFI=0.95; AGFI=0.88; RMSEA=0.07.

image, product beliefs and receptivity, the findings showed that a positive perception of a country's general image positively impacts product evaluations ($\beta = 0.62$, t -value = 7.02). Moreover, the relationship between product beliefs and Halal product receptivity was also confirmed (β

= 0.27, t -value = 2.12). These findings show an indirect influence of general country image on the receptivity of Halal products through product beliefs, but not any direct impact. Therefore, the results supported H2a and H3, but not H2b.

Finally, with respect to the mediation hypothesis,

we tested whether Halal trust mediates the effect of consumer ethnocentrism on the product receptivity of Halal products. For the mediation analysis, we adopted the approach suggested by MacKinnon et al. (2002) by testing the indirect effect of the exogenous variable using the

Table 2. Average variance extracted and squared correlations among constructs.

Parameter	AVE	1	2	3	4	5
1. Consumer ethnocentrism	0.72	1.000				
2. General country image	0.65	0.037	1.000			
3. Halal trust	0.74	0.065	0.015	1.000		
4. Product beliefs	0.66	0.049	0.011	0.265	1.000	
5. Receptivity of Halal products (non-Muslim country)	0.65	0.032	0.122	0.019	0.154	1.000

Table 3. The hypothesized relationships: standardized coefficients and fit statistics.

Hypothesis	hypothesized relationships	Standard coefficients (t-values)		Results
H _{1a}	CET-Halal trust	0.39 (4.08)		Supported
H _{1b}	CET-Receptivity of Halal products	-0.11 (n.s.)		Not supported
H _{1c}	CET-General country Image	-0.01 (n.s.)		Not supported
H _{1d}	CET-Product beliefs	-0.01 (-1.98)		Supported
H _{2a}	General Country image-product beliefs	0.62 (7.02)		Supported
H _{2b}	General country image-receptivity of Halal products	0.02 (n.s.)		Not supported
H ₃	Product beliefs-receptivity of Halal products	0.27 (2.12)		Supported
H ₄	Halal trust-receptivity of Halal products	0.79 (4.32)		Supported

Indirect effect tests (mediation)		β^a	SE ^a	MacKinnon PRODCLIN		Supported
				LLCI	ULCI	
H ₅	CET → Halal trust → Receptivity of Halal products	0.32 ^b	0.02	0.12	0.34	Supported

Fit Statistics: $\chi^2 = 354.686$ (d.f. 127; $p < 0.001$); $\chi^2/d.f. = 2.79$. CFI = 0.95; AGFI = 0.88; NFI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.07. ^aEmpirical 95% confidence interval does not overlap with zero. ^bThese values are based on unstandardized path coefficients.

procedure proposed by Sobel (1982). Statistical analysis was conducted through the PRODCLIN (MacKinnon et al., 2007) software, which tests the significance of the mediation path by means of the weighted unstandardized coefficients using MacKinnon (2008)'s asymmetric distribution of product test (MacKinnon, 2008; Shrout and Bolger, 2002). The results show that Halal trust fully mediates the effect of consumer ethnocentrism on the receptivity of Halal products (non-Muslim country) ($\beta = 0.32$, $SE = 0.02$, $LLCI = 0.12$, $ULCI = 0.34$) (Table 3). The direct effect is not significant while the indirect effect is, according to MacKinnon's ab product distribution test (MacKinnon et al., 2007) $p < 0.05$. This result is consistent with hypothesis H5. This condition has a powerful meaning as it can be assumed that foreign offers, coming from a non-Muslim majority country, can counteract ethnocentric tendencies if they satisfy the requirements of Halal processes and certification.

DISCUSSION

The study explored the relationship between consumer ethnocentrism, Halal trust and country-of-origin effect through the proposal and empirical analysis of a research

model investigating these three perspectives regarding a Muslim country asked to assess Italy and its Halal certified products. The main motivation at the basis of the study was the need to gain more knowledge about the influences exerted by the cultural dimensions of the country-of-origin effect on the behavioural intentions of Muslim consumers. While past studies have tested most of the relations theorised here, this research proposes a single integrated framework with the aim of extending the cross-national validity of the main constructs, namely, consumer ethnocentrism, country image and product beliefs, to Islamic contexts. Moreover, other aspects differentiate the present framework from those suggested previously. The Islamic literature recognises that the Halal issue is affected by religiosity, but so far research has not focused attention on CET as a potential antecedent of Halal trust. Therefore, from a theory-building perspective, the proposed model enables us to advance knowledge in the areas of consumer ethnocentrism and Halal trust by integrating the concepts. Moreover, most of the consumer ethnocentrism literature investigates foreign consumers' evaluation and intention to buy foreign goods as dependent variables. This work includes the evaluation of the general country image considered as a macro-level. The country-of-origin literature supports the distinction between country image

and product-country images, with general country image components that directly affect product judgments and indirectly affect intentions to buy foreign products (Elliot et al., 2011; Laroche et al., 2005). Consequently, the research model examines how consumer ethnocentrism impacts the general perception of a foreign country's image and, sequentially, product beliefs and the receptivity of Halal products. Finally, to our knowledge this is the first study to analyse the potential influence of Halal trust on the product receptivity of Halal products from a non-Muslim country.

Findings from the empirical survey carried out on a sample of Moroccan consumers support the results of previous studies showing that CET negatively influences product beliefs. Conversely, CET does not seem to affect both general country image and product receptivity. Such a finding adds support to recent evidence (Siamagka and Balabanis, 2015) that shows the inconsistency of CET influences on intentions to buy foreign products. In this respect, Halal trust plays a dual function as it is capable of transforming the ethnocentric feelings into positive attitudes toward Halal-certified products. In particular, Italian Halal products seem to overcome potential negative stereotypes related to non-Muslim majority countries.

Halal certification expressed by a logo is fundamental for Muslim consumers because they do not have other tools by which to verify whether a manufactured good is Halal. This is even more true if the object of analysis is a foreign good, perhaps one coming from a non-Muslim country. The respect of the Halal regulation by the foreign company reduces the perceived psychic distance, increasing the chance of creating a cognitive space where source and target audience can share the same experience field.

Managerial implications

From a managerial point of view, the integration of ethnocentrism, Halal trust and product receptivity can provide meaningful insights into the effects exerted by ethnic-religious issues on the part of Muslim consumers. The need for studies addressing this issue seems even more critical if we consider the growing economic relevance of the Halal market and the consequent need to provide research frameworks able to support practitioners and companies with a clearer understanding of the related cultural issues. The expanding Halal market represents a relevant opportunity for international companies, not only in Muslim countries but also in Western markets with a significant presence of Islamic communities among whom Halal observance is on the increase. Halal certification appears a key element in consumption patterns related both to domestic and foreign products. Companies coming from non-Muslim majority countries cannot neglect Halal issues if they are willing to invest in profitable relations with Islamic

markets. Of course, this suggestion should not be interpreted only in terms of a rigid satisfaction of Halal requirements, but above all in terms of cultural sensitivity. Halal certification appears to be a key element in the consumption patterns of foreign products, capable of countering ethnocentric trends. Hence the need for international companies to identify ways of enhancing the supply and image of the country which are not separated from ethnic-religious precepts and, in the case of Halal certification, to know how to incorporate this in their international marketing strategy. The "Halalness" of the product should also be reinforced in a more explicit way, for example, by using an Arabic name for the product and Arabic letters on the packaging (Maison et al., 2018). However, international companies must identify international marketing strategies capable of exploiting both country image and supply features, integrating ethnic and religious precepts. The findings are especially interesting for made in Italy companies engaged in the construction of solid and profitable relations with emerging Islamic markets, which are still too distant from a cultural point of view. In fact, thanks to the respect of Halal certification, companies from a country with an appealing image (like Italy) can reinforce in a unique way the impact of product-country image and, consequently, the positive attitudes toward their products on the part of local demand. Moreover, companies should emphasise the authenticity of the Halal logo due to an increase in counterfeit Halal products, which is making Islamic customers more sensitive and demanding toward genuine Halal certified products.

Limitations and directions for future research

Based on the findings of the study, several directions for future research can be suggested. The research assesses respondents' general attitudes toward Halal products from a non-Muslim country. Prior research on country-of-origin effect has shown that product categories might affect quality assessments. Consequently, product judgments can be attribute-specific. Further research could investigate specific product categories by comparing, for example, food products with other product categories. Moreover, since the research examines consumers' beliefs regarding Italian products, the results may be biased by the reputation and visibility of Italy as a source of high-quality products (De Nisco et al., 2016). Such a condition might also explain the rejection of H1c, where CET was supposed to have a negative effect on general country image. Future research may involve countries with different reputations as sources of goods in order to improve the external validity of the proposed research model.

As a consequence, new research examining countries with different levels of reputation as sources of products would certainly contribute to a better knowledge of the phenomenon, thereby increasing the external validity of

the proposed framework. Moreover, future research would do well to compare Muslims living in Islamic countries with those who live in non-Islamic countries.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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