



# The influence of country-of-origin stereotypes on consumer responses to food safety scandals: The case of the horsemeat adulteration



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## ABSTRACT

Food safety scandals are recurring events in the food industry worldwide and companies are not immune to these incidents. However, there is a paucity of studies that examine how consumers evaluate and respond to brands involved in food crises and how consumers' prejudicial views about brands may bias these responses. Following attribution theory, the current study analyzes the psychological mechanisms through which consumers form judgments about a brand's culpability in the aftermath of a food safety scandal. Furthermore, this study assesses how the dimensions of a brand's country-of-origin (perceived competence and perceived warmth) affect the mechanism of blame attribution.

A real food crisis, the 2013 European horsemeat adulteration scandal, provides the framework for an experimental study with 816 Italian consumers. The results show that perceived country-of-origin warmth diminishes consumers' perceptions of internal locus, stability, and controllability of the food incident, thus decreasing consumers' attributions of blame toward the faulty brand. Perceived competence increases consumers' perceptions of the controllability of the harmful behavior which leads to higher attributions of blame. Higher blame attribution leads to lower intentions to buy the brand in the future. Furthermore, when consumers perceive the food scandal as highly severe and when they are highly ethnocentric, perceived competence diminishes consumers' perceptions of internal locus and stability of the food incident.

The theoretical contribution of the study and practical implications for food brand managers are addressed.

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## 1. Introduction

Food safety incidents – well-known events related to food safety issues or harm associated with some food brands – are recurring occurrences in the food industry worldwide (Food Sentry, 2013; European Commission, 2015; New York Times, 2016). Nestlé's contaminated milk powder (The Guardian, 2013b), the *Escherichia coli* outbreak in Taco Bell's lettuce (CNN, 2006), Sanlu's melamine-contaminated baby formula (BBC, 2008), the European horsemeat adulteration (BBC, 2013) and the Caraga candy poisonings (ABS-CBN, 2015) represent a few examples of food safety scandals. Food safety incidents not only result in serious injuries to people's health (Röhr, Lüddecke, Drusch, Müller, & Alvensleben, 2005), they also represent threats to brands because they can dramatically damage consumers' confidence in the safety

and quality of their products (Berg, 2004; Liu, Pieniak, & Verbeke, 2014) and affect consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions toward the faulty brands (Verbeke, 2001).

The severity of these negative effects calls for a deep understanding of consumers' responses to food crises, and especially of the psychological processes through which consumers attribute responsibility to the agent brands and blame them for the negative event (Bánáti, 2011). However, there is a paucity of studies examining how consumers perceive and respond to food crises and what variables may influence the psychological process of blame attribution (Regan et al., 2015). Consumers' prejudicial views about a brand may indeed bias consumers' attributions of blame and subsequent purchase behaviors (Barnett et al., 2016). In this regard, a limited number of studies have specifically examined how consumers' pre-existing predispositions toward a brand's country-of-origin may influence their attributions of blame in ambiguous food crises (Laufer, Gillespie, & Silvera, 2009; Xu, Leung, & Yan, 2013). These studies have investigated how brands

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associated with a negative (positive) country image receive harsher (more favorable) evaluations in case of product failure.

Our study attempts to extend this research by (i) analyzing the psychological mechanisms through which consumers form judgments of blame – and subsequent behavioral outcomes – toward brands involved in food safety scandals, (ii) assessing whether consumers' cognitive and affective predispositions toward a company's country-of-origin (i.e., perceived competence and perceived warmth) influence the psychological mechanism of blame attribution, and (iii) exploring boundary conditions under which these mechanisms occur. More specifically, drawing from the stereotype content model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) and the attribution theory (Folkes, 1984; Weiner, 2000), we analyze how perceived country competence (i.e., consumers' perceptions of a country's efficacy and efficiency) and perceived country warmth (i.e., consumers' perceptions about a country being friendly, cooperative and well-intentioned) influence consumers' perceptions of the locus, stability, and controllability of the food incident, consumers' overall attribution of blame and, ultimately purchase intentions toward the faulty brand. Additionally, we explore how this mechanism is moderated by consumer characteristics such as consumer perceptions of the severity of the food incident and consumer ethnocentrism.

To this end, we present the results of an experimental study conducted in Italy, investigating consumer responses to brands – with different, manipulated countries-of-origin – involved in the 2013 horsemeat adulteration scandal, a real, well known product-harm crisis that has spread to thirteen European countries and has impacted several international leading companies (Ranker, 2015; The Guardian, 2013a). Foods advertised as containing beef were found to contain undeclared horsemeat (BBC, 2013; The Guardian, 2013a). In addition to religious and ethical issues (horsemeat is considered a taboo food in many countries), the scandal revealed potential food safety concerns because of a major breakdown in the traceability of the meat supply chain and, therefore, some risk that sports horses could have entered the meat supply chain, and with them harmful ingredients which are banned in food animals (BBC, 2013; Euractiv, 2013; The Times, 2013).

This study provides scholars and brand managers operating in the food industry with answers to relevant questions such as “How do consumers form attributions of blame toward brands involved in a food scandal?”, “Do consumers' prejudicial views about a brand's country-of-origin competence and warmth affect their evaluations and behaviors toward the brand?”. Knowledge gained from this study is essential for academics because it sheds light on the psychological mechanism through which consumers consider a brand blameworthy for a food incident. These insights are also essential for brand managers operating in the food industry because it informs on specific brand's attributes (i.e., brand's origin dimensions of competence and warmth) that can be leveraged to build more effective post-crisis communication strategies, and obtain more favorable consumer responses in the aftermath of a food scandal (Coombs, 2007; Laufer et al., 2009; Xu et al., 2013).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. We first review the literature and develop our research hypotheses. We then outline the research methodology. Next, the research results are described and discussed. Finally, theoretical and practical contributions of the research are presented, and conclusions are drawn.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Consumer responses to food crises and attributions of blame

In this section, we present theoretical work on how consumers judge brands involved in food crises (Barnett et al., 2016; Berg,

2004; Bánáti, 2011; Yamoah & Yawson, 2014). Consumers' evaluations of brands involved in a food crisis are based on attributions of blame (Folkes, 1984), that is, the process through which consumers spontaneously construct attributions of responsibility to harmful brands (Gupta, 2009; Regan et al., 2015). Weiner's (2000) model is widely used to analyze consumers' reactions in product-harm crisis settings (for a review, see Weiner, 2010). Weiner's model conceptualizes three causal dimensions of attribution that lead to an overall judgment of blame: the (i) locus, (ii) stability, and (iii) controllability of the harmful behavior (Lei, Dawar, & Gürhan-Canli, 2012). *Locus* refers to the extent to which consumers perceive that the brand (i.e., internal locus), rather than other parties (such as suppliers, trade associations, organizations, government regulators – i.e., external locus), is the direct source of the food crisis. When the undesirable act is perceived as being caused directly by the brand, consumers are more likely to blame the company, with the opposite being the case when consumers consider the undesirable action to be associated with an external actor (Gupta, 2009). *Stability* refers to the extent to which consumers perceive the cause of the negative event to be temporary or permanent, that is, whether consumers perceive the negative event to be ascribed to a stable cause. When consumers perceive that the brand's involvement in the food crisis is an isolated event, they are less likely to blame the brand, with the opposite being the case when consumers perceive that the brand is recurrently involved in a series of irresponsible behaviors (Klein & Dawar, 2004). *Controllability* points to consumers' evaluations of the undesirable outcome as attributed to causes that the brand can or cannot control (Weiner, 2010). When consumers perceive that the company could have predicted the incident, they tend to assess more blame to the brand, with the opposite being the case when consumers perceive that the food incident is unpredictable and uncontrollable. Hence, the more consumers perceive the locus of a food crisis to be internal and the company's behavior to be stable and controllable, the more they tend to attribute responsibility to the agent company and blame it for the food scandal (Fig. 1).

In addition, the theory of cognitive consistency (Abelson, 1968) posits that individuals seek to maintain congruity between thoughts and actions. Empirical findings offer compelling evidence that consumers' overall judgment of blame affects their consumption behaviors. When individuals perceive that a brand is blameworthy, they are less likely to purchase the faulty brand in the near future (Klein & Dawar, 2004; Laufer, Silveira, & Meyer, 2005). Hence, consumers' judgments about whether the company is culpable affect their willingness to purchase the products of the company in the future (Fig. 1).

### 2.2. The roles of a brand's country-of-origin

Previous research posits that consumers' judgments about the culpability of a brand involved in a product-harm crisis are also influenced by their pre-existing beliefs about the brand (Laufer & Gillespie, 2004). This section analyzes how consumers' cognitive and affective predispositions toward a brand's country-of-origin influence their evaluations of and responses to the company when it is involved in a food scandal (Laufer et al., 2009; Xu et al., 2013).

In accordance with Verlegh and Steenkamp (1999), country-of-origin is a mental network of cognitive and affective associations connected to a specific country. Hence, consumer predispositions toward the country-of-origin of a brand include both cognitive and affective dimensions (Bennett & Hill, 2012). This perspective is grounded in social psychology theories such as Fiske et al.'s (2002) stereotype content model, which maintains that consumers' attitudes about a nation are based on two dimensions: perceived competence and perceived warmth. Competence refers to consumers' perceptions of a country's efficacy and efficiency,

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