

# Sustainability perception of local Extra Virgin Olive Oil and consumers' attitude: a new Italian perspective

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## 1. Introduction

In Italy, each region has its own behaviour on food, traditions, sustainability, and food production (Di Vita *et al.*, 2013). Especially for Extra Virgin Olive Oil (EVOO), the regional cultural identity is very important, even if it is widely considered one of the most important foods to improve health, and it is a pillar of the Mediterranean diet. The aim of this research is to analyse if the attitudes, habits, and behaviours about local EVOO, influence the opinion of consumers on the sustainability of its production, relatively to the three dimensions of sustainability (environmental, socio-cultural, and economic). In brief our research question is:

*RQ. Does consumption habits, purchase choice, and beliefs affect the consumers' opinion about:*

- a) The environmental sustainability of local Extra Virgin Olive Oil production?*
- b) The cultural and social sustainability of local Extra Virgin Olive Oil production?*
- c) The economic and ethical sustainability of local Extra Virgin Olive Oil production?*

EVOO it is one of the most traditional Italian products, and its local production creates a virtuous circle, both for social and economic sustainability (Menozzi, 2014). As Menozzi says in his paper,

economic conditions for sustainability refer to supporting viability of local economies, the capacity to improve producers' incomes and the quality of life. The local production and consumption thus become elements of sustainability, also due to the significance they have among consumer: the interest for the region, the tradition, and socio-economic welfare (Ilbery, B.; Maye, D., 2005; Galli, F., & Brunori, G., 2013). In fact, environmental sustainability is not the only concept on the basis of this issue, but cultural identity, food heritage, and rural integration are also taken into consideration (Forssell, S., & Lankoski, L., 2015; Hinrichs, C. C., 2000; Sage, C., 2003). In Italy, although Extra Virgin Olive Oil is perceived as a pillar of the traditional Italian diet, the convictions, knowledge and cultural background vary widely from region to region, and obviously from consumer to consumer. Therefore, our research tries to evaluate whether consumption habits and purchasing choices throughout the country would affect the opinion on the sustainability of local EVOO, in order to understand how this issues is perceived and faced by Italian consumers. This is important to evaluate how policies can be more useful for the development of sustainability and to strengthen local consumption of EVOO.

Past literature has addressed environmental issues (Cappelletti G., *et al.*, 2014), the relation between regional production and quality perception (Dekhili, S., & d'Hauteville, F., 2009), or social aspects and cultural issues related to the local production of olive oil and tourism (de Salvo, P., *et al.*, 2013). Regarding the Italian EVOO, most studies focus on the link between quality perception, sustainability and certifications (such as PDO and GI) (Di Vita, G., *et al.*, 2013; Menozzi, 2014). All these researches show that certifications and local production are linked to a perception of superior quality, creating a virtuous circle for sustainability. Our research moves in a different way, trying to evaluate how the behaviour and attitude towards EVOO affect the consumers' opinion about sustainability of this product and its production. In this work we will discuss all the declinations of sustainability (environmental, social, economic), for EVOO as well for other local products, with several considerations on consumers' purchase drivers for this product.

### 3. Methods

The data was collected through a questionnaire distributed throughout Italy, where consumers were asked about their purchasing habits for EVOO and their opinion on the three declinations of sustainability for its production. The collected data was analysed through a Logit model, using STATA software, in order to evaluate, given the behaviour, attitude, and purchase habits for EVOO, the probabilities of opinions on the three declinations of sustainability for this product and its production.

## 4. Results

Through the analysis of data collected, also due to the literature, we expected a relation between quality certifications and at least one declination of sustainability, and it is so. However, there are also interesting relations with purchasing habits, drivers, and attitudes towards major brand and private labels. These phenomena should be evaluated taking into account the Italian background about Extra Virgin Olive Oil.

## 5. Discussions and Conclusions

The results highlight several factors, which can be related to consumers' opinion on sustainability for local EVOO, and differ for each declination of sustainability. The implications of this information are especially political, because these can be useful for assessing how EVOO's local production can be developed, taking into account the opinion and attitude of consumers towards this product. In her paper, Sodano tries to shed light on which one of two divergent innovations process could contribute to increasing sustainability in the agri-food sector (Sodano, V., 2019). In her paper she states that there are two regimes: one driven by the innovation, based on agribusiness, and another guided by the trajectory of agro-ecology innovation. Sodano calls them: environmental-corporate food regime (ECFR) and agro-ecology food regime (AEFR). The former would maintain the power of the large corporations, retaining the characteristics of the neoliberal regime, modifying the structure, the firms' strategies and the power relations due to technological innovations. The second is tied to the socio-cultural aspect of sustainability, ensuring the right to local communities to decide of use of the natural resources from their territory. In her paper Sodano says (Sodano, V., 2019) (p.15): "The AEFR has the chance to succeed in contexts and conditions in which the concept of sustainability becomes deeply rooted in culture and society". Therefore, although this paradigm presents several weak points, it is worth studying consumers' interest for the sustainability of local food, because consumer opinion is one of the first drivers for the success of this paradigm, which could be one of the most important in Italy, considering its possibilities and the cultural background.

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