M.L. Hernandez-Olalla, C. Valor, C. Abril. Organic line extensions: do they make sense for brands?. British Food Journal. Vol. 125, nº. 8, pp. 2785 - 2802, July 2023. [Online: January 2023]

DOI: 10.1108/BFJ-06-2022-0519

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Journal:	*British Food Journal*
Manuscript ID	BFJ-06-2022-0519.R2
Manuscript Type:	Research Paper
Keywords:	Line extensions, Organic products, Grounded Theory, Perceived fit, Brand schema, Organic Schema

Organic Line Extensions: Do They Make Sense for Brands?

Abstract

Purpose – Past work on the role of brands in the acceptance of organic products is partial and inconclusive. Research has failed to examine the consumer sense-making process underpinning fit assessment, despite the centrality of this assessment in the acceptance of line extensions. This study reconceptualizes the fit construct, showing the relationship of the fit dimensions (noncompensatory) and contributes to the literature with a deeper understanding of the role of a brand's association in the assessment process, which has been poorly examined in the past.

Design/methodology/approach – Grounded theory was used to unearth the process followed by consumers to assess the fit of organic line extensions. The study was based on 14 in-depth interviews.

Findings – The findings show that the dimensions of fit that consumers consider in assessing organic line extensions depend on the schema used in the assessment process. Moreover, it demonstrates that these dimensions have disparate structural relationships with one another, depending on consumers' previous commitment to organic products. Finally, the paper identified three possible behavioral reactions by consumers toward organic line extensions.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the literature by studying the impact of brand association on assessing an organic line extension and reconceptualizing the fit construct by showing the dimensions and the relationship between them that are not additive to the overall fit, as shown in past literature. Additionally, it provides a guide to brands wishing to launch an organic product using a line extension strategy and the potential implications for the parent brand that should be considered.

Keywords Line extension; Organic products; Grounded Theory; Perceived fit; Brand Schema; Organic Schema

Paper type – Research paper

1. Introduction

In 2018, retailers' organic food sales in Europe yielded 97 billion euros (Willer and Sahota, 2020), with an expectation of continuous growth. This growth is primarily motivated by the perceived superior benefits of organic products, such as healthiness, food safety, better taste, animal welfare, and less environmental impact (Aarset *et al.*, 2004; Jose and Kuriakose, 2021).

The increased consumer appetite for organic goods is prompting brands, and notably, leader brands (Bezawada and Pauwels, 2013), to add organic products to their portfolio, either under new brand names or as line extensions with the same brand name. We are witnessing an increasing number of organic line extensions by famous brands. To illustrate, Nestlé launched an organic version of their leading cereal brands (e.g., Fitness Bio); in the baby food category,

Hero launched Hero Solo, a range of organic baby food; or Mondelez is commercializing Suchard Bio in the chocolate category.

Line extensions, or the introduction of a new product under the parent brand in the same product category with different quality, feature, or price points (Kim, C. *et al.*, 2001), is widely considered a sound strategy to enter new markets or reach new consumer segments (Munthree *et al.*, 2006). By extending current brands, companies leverage their brand equity while establishing synergies in their portfolio and saving on communication investments (Aaker and Keller, 1990). Moreover, line extensions can help brands segment the current customer base further and attract new consumers by providing them with additional benefits by responding to competitors' offerings or new market demands in the product category (Munthree *et al.*, 2006).

The proliferation of organic line extensions seems to rest on the idea that the inclusion of an organic version adds value to existing products since it provides additional benefits (Bauer *et al.*, 2013). However, a closer look at the literature on line extensions and organic products reveals limitations in understanding the role of brands in supporting organic claims.

Specifically, two significant limitations have been identified in past research. First, the process underpinning the acceptance of an organic line extension has not been studied comprehensively. The literature on brand and line extensions agrees that the most critical driver of brand extension success is the perceived fit between the parent brand and the extension (Aaker and Keller, 1990; Völckner and Sattler, 2006). Consumers evaluate an extension based on the congruity of the new attribute of the product (e.g., nonadded sugar) and the parent product (Lee *et al.*, 1996). Whereas this fit assessment may be relatively straightforward when the line extension is based on a simple benefit or attribute (such as the nonadded sugar example), for organic line extensions, the assessment of fit is more involved due to the complexity of the meaning of organic (Yiridoe *et al.*, 2005), which covers various aspects from healthy attributes to hedonic aspects (taste) or environmental protection (Hemmerling *et al.*, 2015). As work on the perceived fit of cause-related marketing has shown, the assessment of the fit between multivocal constructs is based on the evaluation of different dimensions (Zdravkovic *et al.*, 2010); therefore, to understand how consumers assess the fit of organic line extensions, it is fundamental to identify the dimensions used by consumers that cannot be inferred or have not been provided by past research.

Second, the role of brands in accepting organic products has been overlooked in past research. Brands are a set of associations of the attributes and benefits of a product (Keller, 1993) that

belongs to the brand schema (Halkias, 2015). However, research on organic goods and brands has not studied brands as associations but rather brands as signals or cues of a category (Ngobo, 2011). For instance, past research has examined how consumers react to organic products sold by retailers' or manufacturers' brands or between global or local brands (Bauer *et al.*, 2013; Bezawada and Pauwels, 2013; Ngobo, 2011). Few studies have adopted the brand-as-schema perspective; at most, they have examined one of the associations comprising the brand schema, such as the influence of brand credibility on purchase intentions of organic food (Sekhar *et al.*, 2021) or the brand familiarity impact on the willingness to pay for organic food (Krystallis and Chryssohoidis, 2005). There is a lack of research that fully acknowledges the complexities of the schemata involved in organic line extensions; capturing this complexity demands comparing or contrasting the schema held about a brand and the schema held about organic goods.

Other work has focused on brand equity, "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand" (Keller, 1993, p.8), but the results are inconclusive. For example, Larceneux *et al.* (2012) demonstrate that low equity brands benefit more from the association of an organic label than high equity brands; since it is easier to change attitudes toward low-equity brands, and the organic label may help boost the perceived quality of the product. Nevertheless, Reinders and Bartels (2017) show that brand equity positively influences organic brand consumption for private and manufacturer labels, regardless of brand equity.

In sum, past work on the role of brands in the acceptance of organic products is partial and inconclusive. Research has failed to examine the consumers' sense-making processes underpinning the fit assessment, despite the centrality of this assessment in the acceptance of line extensions. This research addresses the described limitations, controversies, and omissions by providing new insights into consumer assessment processes related to accepting branded organic line extensions.

Given the limited research on the topic, a theory-building approach is appropriate (Morse *et al.*, 2016). Specifically, a grounded theory approach was adopted, as this method is recommended for the study of processes, specifically for those that are based on consumers' sense-making (Charmaz, 2014), as is the case here. Drawing from schema theory of brands (Halkias, 2015) and line extension theory (Aaker and Keller, 1990), this paper contends that a consumers' disposition to accept or reject organic line extensions depends on an a priori assessment of the

fit between the schema held of organic goods and the schema of the specific brand launching the organic product. Because these schemata are comprised of various associations (Halkias, 2015), the assessment of fit is expected to be decomposed in the evaluation of fit of particular dimensions or subassociations (Deng and Messinger, 2021). Identifying these dimensions is, then, a primary objective of this research.

However, whereas past work has assumed that these decomposed assessments linearly or additively combine to produce an overall fit assessment, assuming compensatory relationships among the dimensions (Park *et al.*, 1991), our study rejects this assumption and contend that noncompensatory relationships may occur among these dimensions so that lack of fit in one dimension may be sufficient to produce an overall perception of nonfit and, thus, to reject the organic line extension. There is some evidence to support this assumption; in the case of green extensions, a lack of moral fit (when consumers incorporate environmental sustainability of the brand in the brand schema) is sufficient to explicate low fit assessments and reduced intentions to purchase (Kim, H. and Hall, 2015). Thus, a second objective is to identify the structural relationships among dimensions vis-à-vis the overall fit assessment.

This paper proposes a conceptual model grounded on data to explicate consumers' acceptance (or rejection) of organic line extensions. In particular, the model shows that the fit assessment between the brand and the organic product is based on manifold dimensions comprising the brand and organic schema. Moreover, the model shows that the primacy of the dimensions depends on which schema takes precedence in the assessment, which, in turn, depends on the consumers' environmental concern/previous commitment to organic purchasing. The model also unveils the noncompensatory relationships among the dimensions of these schemata so that extensions that lack fit at the category dimension are not accepted by low environmentally concerned consumers; similarly, extensions that lack fit at the company dimension are not accepted by high environmentally concerned consumers, regardless of the fit in other dimensions. Finally, the model shows three possible consumers behavioral dispositions (reverse cannibalization, cannibalization and rejection) toward organic line extensions. Whereas past literature has assumed that perceived fit is linked to acceptance of the extension, our findings show that even when consumers assess fit, they may not purchase the organic extension, instead turning to the parent brand (reverse cannibalization). These findings raise important theoretical and practical implications for the literature on organic goods and line extensions.

The remainder of the current study is organized as follows. The next section establishes the conceptual framework used for the study. Then the methodology and findings are explained. Finally, there is a discussion of the theoretical contributions, managerial implications, future research proposal and limitations of this study.

2. Conceptual framework

Line extensions involve launching new products under the familiar brand name from the same product category (Nijssen, 1999, p.450) as a strategy to reach new market segments (Caldieraro *et al.*, 2015) and to revitalize a brand in a market-changing context (Munthree *et al.*, 2006).

Research on line extensions has repeatedly demonstrated that acceptance of extensions depends on the consumers' perceived fit between the parent brand and the new product (Aaker and Keller, 1990; Deng and Messinger, 2021; Nijssen, 1999). Specifically, the fit is assessed by comparing or contrasting the associations and attributes of the parent brand and the extension; in other words, fit is assessed by comparing and contrasting the schemas held by consumers about the parent brand and the new product.

A brand schema is a mental representation of the brand associations in consumers' minds (Halkias, 2015; Low and Lamb, 2000). Schema are, thus, phenomenological, since each consumer will hold his or her own brand schema based on the differences of the associations in terms of importance, complexity, and salience (Halkias, 2015). The more brand associations the consumer has, the more complex the brand schema is (Low and Lamb, 2000). Typically, there are four types of associations that are similar across consumers: (a) product-related attributes (e.g., ingredients or product category), (b) nonproduct-related attributes or external aspects of the product (e.g., price, packaging, user imagery, and usage imagery), (c) brand image or benefits (functional, symbolic and experiential) (Halkias, 2015; Keller, 1993; Urde, 2003), and/or (d) information about the corporation of the brand (Keller and Aaker, 1998).

Similarly, the notion of organic can be assimilated into a schema comprised of manifold associations related to the benefits, production methods or product categories. The organic schema is complex, and the specific associations held vary across consumers, depending on their knowledge and previous experience with organic products (Vega-Zamora *et al.*, 2014). Our study proposes to conceptualize the organic schema as the combination of the benefits provided by organic goods and the associations of the production methods, with the most common associations with organic goods being health (Aarset *et al.*, 2004; Bauer *et al.*, 2013; Drejerska *et al.*, 2021; Juhl *et al.*, 2017; Van Doorn and Verhoef, 2015; Yiridoe *et al.*, 2005),

taste (Lusk, 2011; Thøgersen *et al.*, 2012), higher quality (Hemmerling *et al.*, 2015; Yiridoe *et al.*, 2005), naturalness (Roman *et al.*, 2017), feeling good about yourself (Chintakayala *et al.*, 2018; Van Doorn and Verhoef, 2015), being environmentally friendly (Aarset *et al.*, 2004; Juhl *et al.*, 2017; Yiridoe *et al.*, 2005), local production, small producers and traditional production methods (Rana and Paul, 2017).

Consistent with the scholarship on line extensions, to assess the fit of an organic line extension, consumers compare and contrast their brand schema with the organic schema. Given that these two schemata are complex, comprising manifold associations, the comparison will be made for each of the subdimensions or associations comprising the schemata so that the assessment of fit is multidimensional. This notion of multidimensional assessment of fit is exemplary in research on sponsorship and cause-related marketing. These studies, when using interpretative methods, identified many dimensions upon/against which fit is assessed. For instance, in the sponsorship literature, fit is based on sponsor product relevance to the sponsored organization or event, target audience similarities and image/symbolic similarities (Olson and Thjømøe, 2011). In cause-related marketing, however, Zdravkovic *et al.* (2010) identified ten dimensions that contribute to the assessment of overall fit, from the message of the campaign to the colors of the slogan or the involvement of the consumer needed in the cause.

The multidimensionality of the assessment begs the question of how consumers combine or integrate these different subassessments of fit to eventually make an overall fit assessment (Deng and Messinger, 2021). Past work has studied the fit dimensions assuming that the relationship between them is linear and additive, so each separate fit assessment contributes to the overall fit, albeit with a different weight (Carter and Curry, 2013; Czellar, 2003; Park *et al.*, 1991; Riley *et al.*, 2015; Völckner and Sattler, 2007). This work assumes that the assessment of fit at each subdimension has compensatory relationships with the overall fit assessment. Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that there may be noncompensatory assessments of fit. For example, research on green line extensions in the fashion industry has shown that moral fit conditions the overall fit assessment; thus, if consumers do not perceive that the green clothing line fits with the company's environmental values, there is no perceived overall fit between the green line extension and the parent brand schema. As a result, the green extension is rejected without even considering the fit in the other dimensions (Kim, H. and Hall, 2015). Further evidence for the noncompensatory relationships among dimensions of fit is found in studies on consumers' reactions to organic products in the vice and virtue categories. Consumers are unwilling to pay the premium price of an organic product in the vice category

because of the perception that being organic will reduce the enjoyment of its consumption (Van Doorn and Verhoef, 2011). Reinterpreting this finding from the notion of fit; our argument is that lack of fit with the category associations of vice products and the organic schemata leads consumers to reject organic vice products without considering the fit in other dimensions.

In view of these arguments, it is defended that the acceptance of organic line extensions will be based on the assessment of the fit between the brand and the organic schemata held by consumers. This fit assessment is decomposed or multidimensional, as fit is assessed for each of the dimensions of the schemata. Moreover, it is expected that there could be two relationships among the fit dimensions. Noncompensatory relationships can occur when a lack of fit in one dimension leads to overriding (and not considering) the fit in other dimensions. This would lead consumers to reject the extension. In contrast, compensatory relationships can be observed when the perceived fit in one dimension encourages consumers to accept the extension, even with a low fit perception in the other attributes. Understanding the dimensions by which consumers assess the fit and the structural relationships between these dimensions is the objective of this study, as explained next.

3. Method

3.1 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory, a method particularly suitable for theory development (Charmaz, 2014), was chosen as the appropriate technique for this study since the aim of this research is to create a conceptual model grounded on data that unveils the psychological processes leading to the acceptance of an organic line extension and, more precisely, the dimensions of the fit mechanism used and the structural relationships involved (Glaser, 1978). This approach seems appropriate for theory construction, not description, of processes that otherwise remain invisible (Charmaz, 2014) and is particularly suitable to study sense-making processes, as is the case here (Charmaz, 2014). Another advantage of this method is that it allows the researcher to simultaneously unearth many variables or categories (the fit dimensions in this study) and to identify their interrelationships. Following the Straussian version of Grounded Theory, the model will be based on an iterative analysis of previous literature and data analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

3.2 Interviews

Fourteen semistructured interviews with a reflexive focus, tailored to each interviewee (Arsel, 2017), were conducted with the person responsible for household grocery shopping.

Following the tenets of purposive sampling (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), variability was sought based on gender (White *et al.*, 2019), family life cycle stage (Chintakayala *et al.*, 2018; Thøgersen *et al.*, 2012), previous consumption of organic food (Schäufele and Hamm, 2018; Thøgersen *et al.*, 2012) and level of environmental concern (Prada *et al.*, 2017; Wang *et al.*, 2021). A description of the informants is provided in Table 1. Informants were contacted using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling (Parker *et al.*, 2019). Interviewees lasted between 45 and 120 minutes and were held online or face to face at the informants' request. Saturation was achieved in interview 11. The Ethical Committee of the University approved the method design.

Table 1: Informants' profile

Informants	Gender	Age	Family life cycle	Purchase Organics	Environmentally concerned
1	Male	41	Married, 5 children under 9	No	No
2	Male	31	Single	No	Yes
3	Female	41	Single	No	No
4	Female	56	Widow	No	Yes
5	Female	23	Single	Yes	Yes
6	Female	32	Dinky*	Few	Yes
7	Male	41	Married, 3 children under 12	Few	Yes
8	Female	43	Single	Yes	Yes
9	Female	30	Married, a child under 2	No	No
10	Male	30	Married, a child under 2	No	No
11	Female	35	Single	Yes	Yes
12	Female	35	Dinky	Yes	Yes
13	Female	37	Married, 3 children under 10	No	Yes
14	Female	44	Married, 2 children under 7	No	No

** Dinky: Double Income No Kids Yet*

3.3 Interview guide

Before the interview, informants were asked to complete a questionnaire about the food product categories and brands they regularly bought. Their answers were used to customize the interview guide that followed a three-part structure so that each respondent talked about their preferred brand for different food categories. First, informants were asked about their general

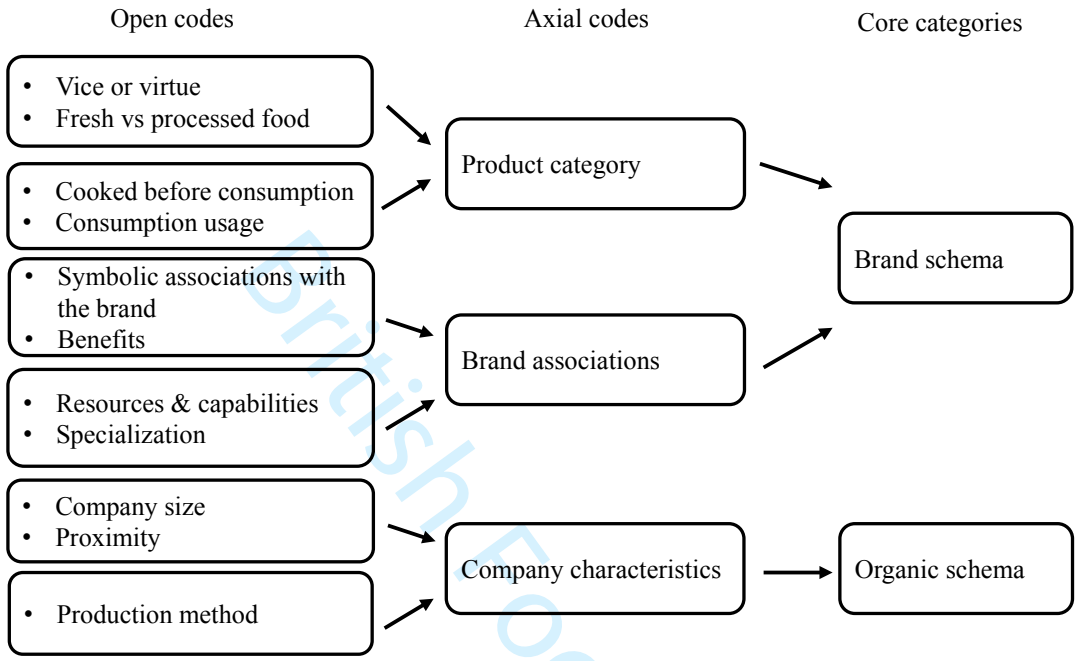
knowledge of sustainable products and, more precisely, organic food products and their understanding of various organic labels available in the market (showing them different pictures or organic logos, including the official European Organic Logo). Additionally, they were asked about their recycling habits and grocery shopping routine, e.g., whether they brought their shopping bags, as this has been found to correlate with organic product purchases (Karmarkar and Bollinger, 2015). This first part of the interview also served to assess their environmental concerns. Second, they were shown a set of images of different product categories, selected to match their responses based on the preinterview questionnaire; these scenarios described the organic line extensions launched by their favorite brands. These organic extensions could be real ones (e.g., Nestlé Chocapic Bio) or fictional (e.g., Orlando tomato sauce), depending on whether they existed in the market. In this latter case, the first author created a product prototype using the European Organic logo and included an organic claim in the packaging picture. Finally, to obtain higher quality and more profound information on the processes underpinning the assessment of the organic line extension (Wei and Yeik, 2022), beyond their knowledge and attachment to a specific brand (Grønhøj and Bech-Larsen, 2010), two types of vignettes were used. Vignettes were used to illustrate situations in which a person is about to purchase a food product and finds a new organic line extension on the shelf (see the vignettes in Appendix 1).

3.4 Data Analysis

The transcripts of the interviews were analyzed in three sequential phases (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). First, transcripts were read several times, and preliminary codes of the cues used for the assessment of the fit between the parent product and the line extension were identified, such as vice or virtue category, healthier product, naturalness, better taste, nonprocessed product, environmentally friendly, company's degree of specialization, firm size, and proximity (see Figure 1). Second, these preliminary codes were aggregated into second-order categories. This procedure identified fundamental categories that explained the dimensions that consumers used for the fit assessment. In this step of the analysis, we discovered that some dimensions were noncompensatory (e.g., large company size unfit with organic production methods, so that organic products launched by large companies are rejected). Third, the constant comparison among respondents (Gambetti *et al.*, 2012; Leite *et al.*, 2021) allowed us to identify that the noncompensatory dimensions differed according to the prevalence of the schema used for the fit assessment; in turn, this prevalence is closely associated with the consumers' environmental concern. Thus, environmental concern seems to act as a moderator of the processes of fit

assessment. As a result, two paths for the fit assessment are identified, as shown in the proposed model in Section 4.

Figure 1: Data coding



Finally, the interviews were analyzed to identify the declared consumers' intentions concerning the potential line extension. This analysis identified three possible outcomes: increased loyalty or consideration of the parent brand (reverse cannibalization); a switch from the parent product to the extension (cannibalization); and a negative impact on the parent brand and extension (rejection). Whereas the cannibalization effect (Reddy *et al.*, 1994) and the negative impact on the parent brand image (Martinez and De Chernatony, 2004) have already been identified in past studies, reverse cannibalization has emerged as a new possible outcome that has not been identified in previous studies.

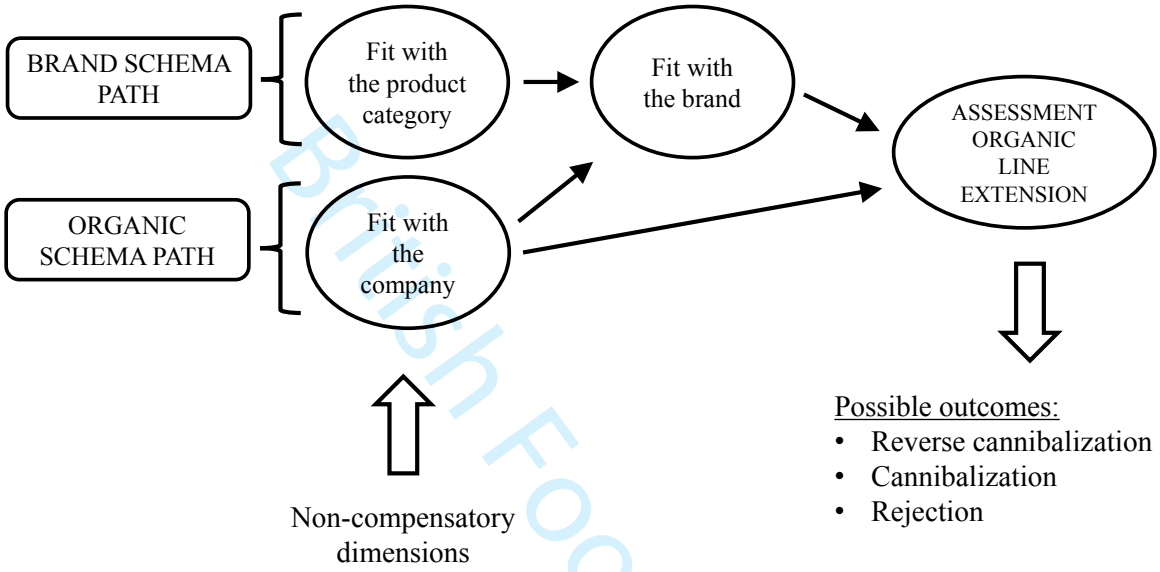
Qualitative studies were recommended to triangulate the data for the study's validity. For this reason, the second and third researchers reviewed the analysis performed by the first researcher after each step of the process. When the interpretations differed from each other, the researchers analyzed the data together to reach an agreement (Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016).

4. Findings

The findings show that the assessment of an organic line extension can follow two paths, depending on the schema primacy used for the assessment. The brand schema path is observed

among low-environmentally concerned consumers, and the organic schema among high-environmentally concerned consumers. During this assessment process, various dimensions are evaluated, some of which are noncompensatory for the consumer. The emerging model for the assessment of an organic line extension and the possible outcomes are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Representation of the conceptual model



Three dimensions are key in the assessment process of an organic line extension: fit with the product category, fit with the brand, and fit with the company launching the product. Additionally, we identified different cues used to assess each dimension. These cues are related to the benefit expected with the consumption of organic products and the schema path used for the evaluation. The cues are shown in the following table:

Table 2: Exemplary cues for fit dimensions

Fit with the product category	Fit with the brand	Fit with the company
Vice or virtue	Symbolic associations of the brand	Company size & proximity
Fresh vs. processed food	Benefits associated with the brand	Production methods
Cooked needed before consumption	Resources and capabilities	Packaging

Consumption usage	Specialization of the brand	Specialization of the company

4.1. Assessment of the fit based on the "brand schema path"

Low-environmentally concerned consumers and not used to consuming organic products have two salient associations with the organic schema: healthiness and tastiness. To assess fit with the brand schema, first, they examine the fit between these associations and the product category of the extension, and second, they examine the fit with the brand associations embedded in their brand schema.

Four aspects are especially relevant for the consumer to assess the fit at the product category subdimension. The category being vice or virtue, the perception of fresh vs. processed food, the necessity to cook the product before consumption, and how the product is consumed**.**

To evaluate the fit at the category level, those who expect an improvement in the organoleptic attributes of the product (hedonic benefit) find better fit with organic extensions in virtue and less processed food products categories; thus, extensions in virtue or nonprocessed food categories are assessed as having a better fit and, thus, are more accepted. This assessment of fit is based on the associations between natural, artisanal and tastiness often held by consumers (Richetin *et al.*, 2021), as I7 pointed out:

"I imagine the production of the coffee more handcrafted; they would roast the coffee without industrial ovens, with wood, for example. Therefore, the coffee should be a bit different and with a better taste".

In contrast, consumers reject organic line extensions in processed food categories, as they interpret processed food as contrary to naturalness, a common attribute identified with organic products (Roman *et al.*, 2017). The incongruity or limited fit between the organic benefit of naturalness and a processed food product explains why informants are not inclined to accept the organic line extension: *"The ketchup is an artificial product; it is a mixture of many ingredients with the tomato… it makes no sense to have it organic"* (I3).

Moreover, consumers make a similar unfit assessment of nonprocessed products that require food preparation before consumption (e.g., a can of fresh crushed tomato for preparing tomato sauce). To illustrate, I10, who claims to be a very "rational buyer," refuses to buy organic products or nonprocessed food when this food is cooked at home:

"If you buy a can of crushed tomatoes that are used for cooking something else, you cannot notice any better taste, so buying an organic version is not worth it".

According to his interpretation, the organic benefits of better taste will dissipate once the product is cooked. Similarly, consumers evaluating the extension based on better taste reject the product if it is consumed with something else (e.g., pasta with any kind of sauce), as they will not be able to notice any taste difference.

Comparably, fit assessments at the category level are found among consumers buying organic food for health benefits. These consumers assess a greater fit when organic extensions are launched in virtue categories. This fit may explain why greater sales of organic food are found in health-related brands, as reported in other studies (Bezawada and Pauwels, 2013). Conversely, informants assess incongruent organic extensions in vice categories. Even when one of the ingredients is organic, this does not help to override the unhealthy perceptions of the other ingredients (*"The beer has alcohol, so it remains unhealthy anyway, why would you prefer an organic beer?",* I8).

The model shows that fit at the category level seems necessary but not sufficient since consumers report that the extension first needs to "*make sense*" or "*be congruent*" with the product category. Fit at this dimension is, thus, noncompensatory. Consequently, only when consumers assess fit at this dimension do they proceed to assess the fit between the meanings of taste and health embedded in the schema of organic products and the brand's associations; precisely, consumers evaluate the fit between the organic meanings and (1) the symbolic associations of the brand that make consumers perceive a real commitment of the brand with consumer's health, (2) the resources and capabilities of the brand and (3) the benefits expected of the brand.

Consumers report a greater fit with the health benefit associated with organic products with brands perceived as caring and healthy. To illustrate, I5 does her grocery shopping at a retailer reputed for its commitment to health. She recognizes that it makes sense that they launch an organic line extension with their private label brand:

"If I see that they [referring to the retailer's brand] now have an organic pasta, I am sure it is healthier; they are very conscious of the health of the people. I liked the idea" (I5).

The second element used by consumers to assess fit at the brand level is the perceived ability to produce the organic product. The literature on line extensions has demonstrated a greater

acceptance of the line extension when consumers perceive this ability (Desai and Keller, 2002). For I2, a brand that is used to launch many extensions can also produce an organic line extension because the brand has the expertise to launch new products: *"[The brand] is always launching new variants of beer; I am sure they can have an organic one"*.

Another cue about the company's ability is the leadership position of the brand in the specific category. Consumers attribute the ability to produce according to organic requirements to leading brands, usually produced and sold by large companies. Additionally, they value the effort to develop this kind of product. They believe that well-known brands have greater environmental impact and, for this, they have the responsibility as well as the resources to innovate and adapt to consumers' needs. Thus, organic line extensions launched by large companies are considered congruent with the parent company. This is the case for I14, who perceives the organic claim of added value to the product and expects leading brands to invest in products that meet consumers' new needs and demands: *"It is more logical that leading companies developed this type of product. They need to work on their image with the consumers (...). They have the responsibility and the tools to do it"*.

For the positive evaluation of the fit between the brand's benefits and the organic claim, the organic version needs to fit with the brand associations. For example, I14 chose a specific pasta brand for its texture and expected that the organic version would maintain the texture of the nonorganic product: "*the texture after boiling needs to be the same"*.

In summary, for consumers looking for hedonic and healthy benefits in the organic line extension, fit at the product category level emerges as a noncompensatory dimension. This assessment is a necessary but insufficient condition for the overall fit assessment. If there is no perceived fit at the category level, the extension will be rejected by consumers even if it fits in with any of the other dimensions. Once there is perceived fit at the product category dimension, consumers evaluate the perceived fit at the brand dimension.

4.2. Assessment of the fit based on the "organic schema path"

For high-environmentally concerned consumers and those who regularly buy organic products, the organic schema takes precedence in evaluating the organic line extensions. In particular, the attribute of "environmentally friendly", in addition to "healthy" and "tasty", is more salient for these consumers. For them, the framework of the assessment process is the organic schema.

The first dimension of fit evaluated is the company's feasibility of launching an organic product. This feasibility is assessed by the ability of the company to launch the product and the motives behind doing it. When consumers believe that company behavior is motivated by benevolence rather than self-interest (Chernev and Blair, 2015) and that the company has demonstrated community involvement (Keller and Aaker, 1998), the perception of fit increases. Past work has referred to this dimension of fit as "moral fit" (Kim, H. and Hall, 2015). To assess moral fit, consumers use different cues, such as (a) company size or proximity location, (b) production methods, (c) packaging and (d) company product specialization.

Consumers believe that organic products are from small and local companies (Sanders, 2013), and both associations conflate in consumers' minds. Therefore, organic line extensions launched by large companies are negatively assessed because the associations of large companies are not congruent with environmentally friendly production. Informants shared two reasons to support this statement. First, large companies need to produce large quantities that are incompatible with organic requirements, as the company needs to add unhealthy additives (e.g., preservatives) to have an extended expiration date. I11, a habitual buyer of organic products, has the experience of purchasing organic pasta with a shorter expiration date than the regular pasta: "*I purchase organic pasta, from a company in my town, the expiration date is shorter than others you find in the supermarket; also, the flour of the pasta is not so processed, you can notice the difference"*. Second, large companies are thought to produce outside the OECD countries, which seems to be less healthy because consumers assume that the regulation is more permissive (Benard Oloo and Oniang'o, 2018). I6, for whom the organic product is synonymous with healthy products, is concerned with legislation:

"There are some pesticides that in the European Union are forbidden, as they are considered carcinogenic (...). Additionally, there is a higher impact on transportation".

An organic product is seen as free of the whole complex model of treatment and manipulation (Vega-Zamora *et al.*, 2014), so it is assumed to be produced using traditional methods. Consumers believe that local companies also have a traditional production system that is more environmentally friendly, so there is a perceived fit between the organic benefit and the company launching the extension when this company is small: *"There is a young couple in my town that produces organic apple juice with traditional methods (...) I believe their juice is more sustainable, natural and healthier than an organic juice from a big, well-known company"* (I12). Additionally, the necessity of significant quantities of raw material to meet

demand means that the company uses production methods that are necessarily not (or less) environmentally friendly: *"If there is a plague, they need to treat the trees… they cannot accept losing so many olives"* (I11).

Another cue used for consumers to infer the environmental responsibility of the company is packaging. If the packaging is deemed unsustainable or not green enough, consumers infer that the company's environmental commitment is limited, which negatively impinges on fit perceptions (*"They cannot be selling an organic product in a plastic packaging"*, I9).

The specialization of the company in producing organic food is congruent with the associations of organic production, so if the consumer perceives that the company is specialized in producing organic goods, the size of the firm is not as important, and there is a greater acceptance of the extension even if the company is large. For the consumer, specialized organic firms have a real commitment to eco-friendly production: "*I don't know how big it is, but as it is specialized on an organic product, I would choose it before the others [referring to the mainstream line extension shown in the vignettes], it gives me more credibility"* (I12).

As explained, the fit dimension of the company is noncompensatory for highly environmentally concerned consumers. If consumers perceive fit at this dimension, they continue the evaluation of the fit between the extension and the brand associations similarly to the low-environmentally concerned consumers. In summary, for more environmentally concerned consumers, the organic schema is the framework for the assessment. Specifically, the dimension of "environmentally friendly" takes precedence in the assessment. To infer whether there is fit with the extension, consumers use some characteristics of the firm launching the product to make a determination, in particular, the size of the company. This dimension emerges as a noncompensatory dimension, with the rejection of the extension if launched by large companies. Once there is a perceived fit at this dimension, consumers evaluate the fit between the organic line extension and the brand's associations.

4.3. Impact of the organic line extension on the parent brand

The analysis unveils three possible behavioral responses toward an extension. As already identified in the literature, findings show that organic line extensions may lead to the cannibalization of the parent product (Reddy *et al.*, 1994) and have adverse effects on the parent brand's image (rejection) (Martinez and De Chernatony, 2004).

Complementing these already-noted consumer responses, we also observe a reinforcement of parent brand image, a behavioral response not identified in past studies that we call reverse cannibalization. Consumers believe that if the brand has launched an organic variety, they are using organic production for the entire product line, as they do not think it is possible to compartmentalize production methods for different products in the portfolio. Thus, they consider it is not worth buying the organic version since it is usually sold with a premium price and has no superior benefit over the parent product, which they also believe is produced organically.

"The milk is a healthy product, so if they sell organic milk, it is due to the feeding of the cows… so I imagine they feed all the cows in the same way, so everything they produce would be organic. Selling milk as regular and organic is just the company's strategy to reach different types of consumers. I will keep buying the same milk with the satisfaction of thinking that it is also organic." (I13)

The cannibalization effect occurs when consumers perceive the organic line extension as an improved version, with superior benefits, over the original product. Once there is perceived fit and, consequently, acceptance of the organic line extension, informants report their intentions to switch between the parent product and the organic line extension: *"I would purchase the organic coffee instead of the regular coffee, and go home feeling I am bringing a great product"* (I7).

The third implication is a negative impact on the parent's product image. When consumers perceive that the reason for launching the extension is to increase sales, they will not switch to the new product, even if there is perceived fit between the product and the organic associations. For example, for I2, if the company can produce the organic version, all the products should be organic for the benefit of society: "W*hat is the reason for not producing all organically when it is more environmentally friendly? It makes me think that they are not truly committed and just want to increase sales".* Thus, the attribution of intention to the firm seems relevant to explain the acceptance of the product; even if there is perceived fit, the consumer could still reject the extension.

5. Discussion and managerial implications

The contribution of this paper to the literature is threefold. First, it identifies the manifold dimensions involved in the fit assessment as well as the structural relationships that these dimensions have with the overall fit assessment. Second, it shows the complexity of the

assessment process of an organic line extension, with two frames of evaluation (brand schema and organic schema). Finally, it shows three possible behavioral responses toward the parent brand and the extension (cannibalization, reverse cannibalization and rejection). Each is explained in turn.

First, previous literature on line extensions studied the perceived fit as an evaluation process of different dimensions that sequentially or simultaneously contribute to form the overall fit (Deng and Messinger, 2021, p.4). This research contributes to the literature by showing the specific dimensions considered in the assessment of an organic line extension (product category, brand associations and company). Additionally, these findings complement past work by showing the structural relationships of these dimensions with the overall fit assessment, showing that some of them are noncompensatory. These dimensions are the product category for the low-environmentally concerned consumers and the company launching the extension for the high-environmentally concerned consumers.

Second, this study demonstrates the complexity of the cognitive process involved in the assessment, as consumers' level of environmental concern dictates the frame used for the assessment process. Low-environmentally concerned consumers evaluate the fit between the brand schema and the most salient associations of organics (taste and health). In contrast, for high-environmentally concerned consumers, the environmentally friendly association is the most salient association in the organic schema, and for this, they assess the fit with the company launching the extension.

Third, our study illuminates the potential repercussions of launching an organic line extension for the parent brand. It cannot be assumed that a positive fit assessment of the extension will necessarily lead to an increase in sales, as there can be reverse cannibalization or rejection of the new product as punishment of the company for having both the regular product and an organic product (instate of only the organic one). This new knowledge can serve practitioners to decide between launching an organic line extension under the parent brand name or under a new brand name.

This study also provides some implications for practitioners considering launching an organic line extension. Although past studies implicitly suggest that launching an organic line extension may be a successful strategy, as it could be perceived as an improved product (Bauer *et al.*, 2013), our work reveals more aspects that should be considered, such as the brand's target

consumer profile. Moreover, the influence of the activity of a brand's competitor should be considered and needs further investigation.

The findings of this research provide insights into how to segment the target of the new product based on the differences in the assessment process between high- and low-environmentally concerned consumers. Previous literature has demonstrated that knowledge about organic consumption and production positively influences the intention to buy organic food (Testa *et al.*, 2019). Our research supports this evidence but also points out that these knowledgeable consumers are stricter in the assessment process of organic line extensions. Thus, unless the company launching the extension is perceived as local, environmentally friendly or specialized in organic production, high-environment consumers will reject leading brands launching an organic product. In contrast, low-environmentally concerned consumers are more likely to accept the organic line extension if it belongs to a product category whose benefits are congruent with the associations of organics (e.g., virtue categories).

6. Conclusions and future research

The findings of this study show that there are two types of consumers who follow different assessment processes of organic line extensions, subject to the use of a brand schema or organic schema for the evaluation. Low-environmentally concerned consumers accept brand extensions based on category fit, whereas high-environmentally concerned consumers accept brand extensions based on company fit. This knowledge highlights the need for firms to analyze consumer targets, the product category, and the company's and brand's associations to decide the best strategy for launching an organic product (e.g., which target is the focus; how "organic" is the category perceived; how large the company is viewed). Additionally, reverse cannibalization and rejection implications need to be considered by practitioners, as they may cause an undesirable, and unexpected, impact on the parent's product image. In conclusion, launching an organic line extension may not be the best strategy for all leading brands.

The main limitation of this research concerns the settings in which it was developed. Therefore, and as stated by Strauss and Corbin (1990) the model applies to the situation analyzed and not to others. Future research could study if there are cultural differences in the assessment process of an organic line extension. Moreover, the contribution presented in this paper needs further empirical testing; specifically, the configuration of dimensions needed to accept an organic line extension and the relationship among dimensions.

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APPENDIX 1

1st vignette: Mary

Mary is a large family mother. She works in a bank branch, so she works only in the mornings (but Thursdays). Usually, she does the grocery shopping in the Carrefour Market next to her house. It is very convenient as it has parking and it is not a big store, so she can do the shopping when she finishes work and before going to school to pick up her children. Moreover, in Carrefour, she can find many brands that she likes, including the private label of Carrefour, at a reasonable price. There is also big packaging, which is excellent as they are five at home.

She usually does the grocery shopping on Mondays or Wednesdays (on Tuesday, she does Pilates, and on Thursday, she has to work). She organized herself to shop every three weeks, but she purchases fruit and vegetables weekly from a traditional market where she finds high-quality products at a reasonable price.

Mary is worried about giving her children a healthy and balanced diet.

Lately, she has been thinking about breakfast products for his second child, Peter. Peter doesn't eat very well; he is slow and gets bored eating the same things. Mary is aware of the importance of breakfast, so she wants to find something healthy and quick to have (we all know that in the morning, everything is rushed)

Mary decided to go to the breakfast aisle. She remembers being a kid and eating Chocapic from Nestlé; she loved them. When Mary gets to the aisle, she finds out that there is Chocapic, Chocapic bio, a private label from Carrefour (regular and bio), and Ecocesta (just a chocolate bio-option)

Once Mary picked up the cereals, she decided to go for milk. While walking down the aisle, she remembers something she read in the newspaper about the best milk brands on the market. Once in the aisle, she noticed that Pascual (the milk she used to buy) had launched an organic extension. Also, it captures her attention Carrefour milk, available regular and organic; and El Buen Pastor organic milk (that was on the report she read)

2nd vignette: John

John is a 25-year-old man, just independent. He works as a consultant on an exciting and demanding project. He is very sportive, likes to run, and has been running a marathon every year for the last three years. Doing that much sport allows him to eat whatever he wants without

worrying about gaining weight. He is happy to be able to run the office's gym three times per week in the mornings before starting to work. Now that he lives alone, he is getting more interested in the products he purchases to eat, although he is not organized and goes to the grocery store just when the fridge is empty.

On weekly days he has lunch at the office and many days dinner. On weekends, one day, he used to go for lunch at his parent's house, so there was just one day that he needed to cook.

Next Sunday he is having a new marathon. He wants to cook some pasta the day before, which will help him prepare for the run. He leaves the office earlier and stops by Lidl to purchase all the ingredients needed. Lidl is a convenient option as it is next to his house and very cheap.

When John arrives at the pasta aisle, he focuses on three brands. Gallo, a well-known brand and the one his mother buys; Barilla, which seems to be more authentical; and Garofalo, which is organic and has excellent packaging. He notices that there are the standard option and an organic version for Gallo and Barilla.

Once John has chosen the pasta, he moves to find a tomato sauce. He pays attention to two brands: Orlando, the most famous, and Lidl Organic. There are also the traditional tomato sauce and the organic extension for Orlando.

Table 1: Informants' profile

Informants	Gender	Age	Family life cycle	Purchase Organics	Environmentally concerned
1	Male	41	Married, 5 children under 9	No	No
2	Male	31	Single	No	Yes
3	Female	41	Single	No	No
4	Female	56	Widow	No	Yes
5	Female	23	Single	Yes	Yes
6	Female	32	Dinky*	Few	Yes
7	Male	41	Married, 3 children under 12	Few	Yes
8	Female	43	Single	Yes	Yes
9	Female	30	Married, a child under 2	No	No
10	Male	30	Married, a child under 2	No	No
11	Female	35	Single	Yes	Yes
12	Female	35	Dinky	Yes	Yes
13	Female	37	Married, 3 children under 10	No	Yes
14	Female	44	Married, 2 children under 7	No	No

* *Dinky: Double Income No Kids Yet*

Figure 1: Data coding

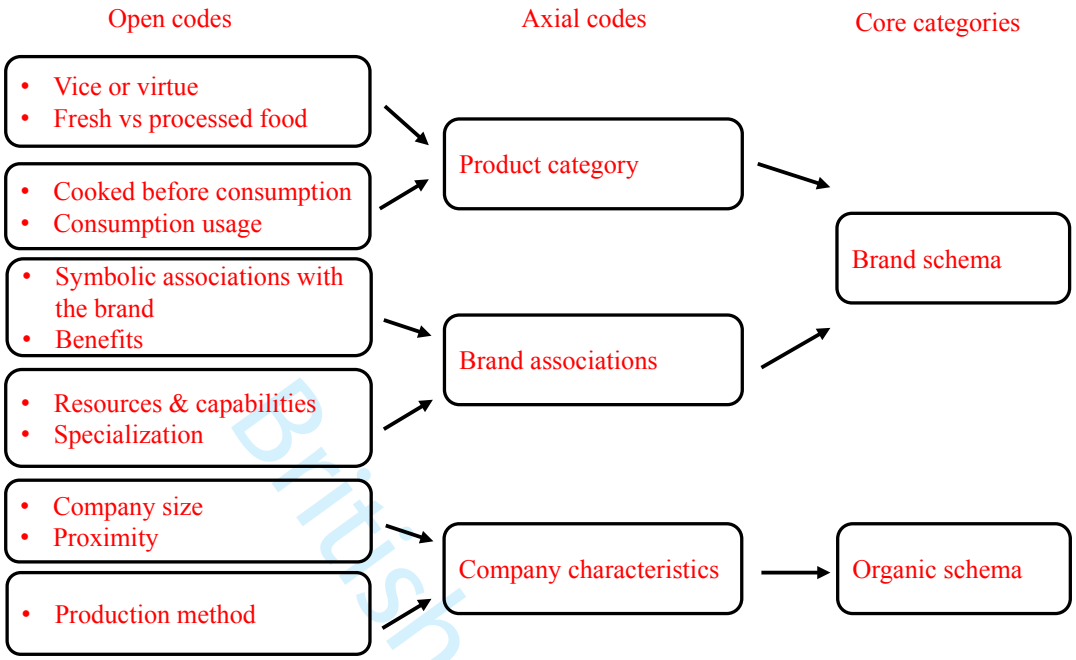

Figure 2: Representation of the conceptual model

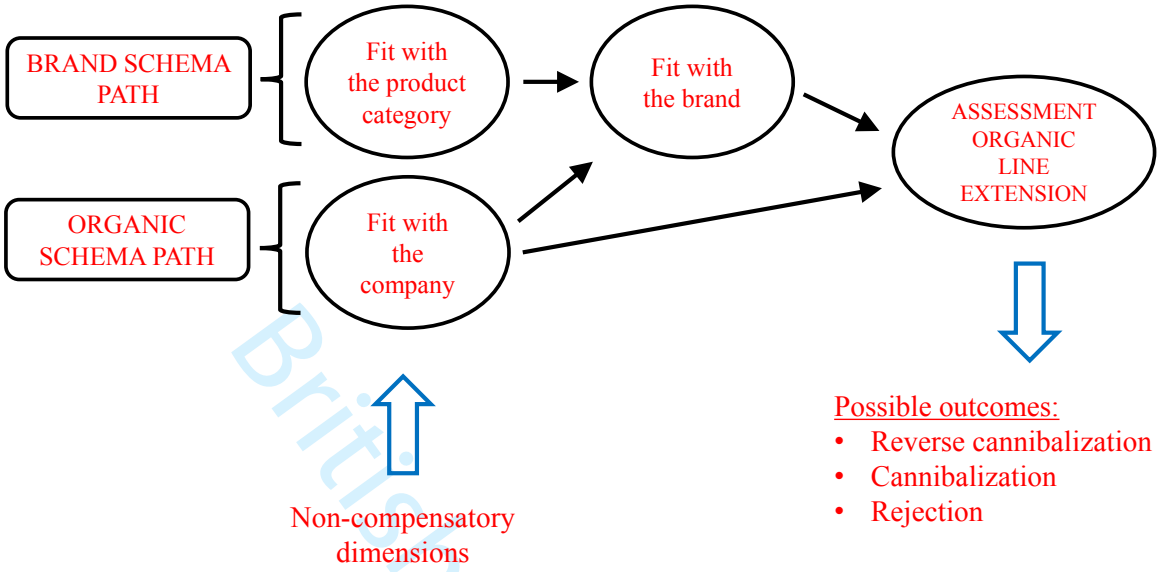

Table 2: Exemplary cues for fit dimensions

Fit with the product category	Fit with the brand	Fit with the company
Vice or virtue	Symbolic associations of the brand	Company size & proximity
Fresh vs. processed food	Benefits associated with the brand	Production methods
Cooked needed before consumption	Resources and capabilities	Packaging
Consumption usage	Specialization of the brand	Specialization of the company

Logos are shown at the begging of the interview to discuss about the organic products and their knowledge and associations to them

Example of the pictures shown using the consumers brands (real or depicted ones)


Orlando
tomate natural
triturado extra


Orlando
Ahora BIO
tomate natural
triturado extra


GALLO
PLUMAS
Nº6


GALLO
BIO
100%
450g

Example of the pictures shown when using the vignettes

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